

Factors Influencing Public Policymaking Process in Bangladesh: A Comparative Study of Recent Public Policies

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ABSTRACT

Public policymaking is not just a bare of administrative actions taken by the government but a series of activities that are driven by various social and political factors. Public policymaking in developing nations like Bangladesh is influenced by a complex socio-political context and experiences a variety of difficulties and obstacles. This attempt seeks to understand the policymaking process in Bangladesh taking into account factors of 'change' and 'stability' in policies and to explore the issues working behind policy formulation. This study adopts a qualitative research approach through case study analysis following different theories of policymaking. The findings reveal an interactive policy process where each policymaking process varies depending on its nature. The type of policy, interests of the stakeholders, calculation of resource gain (political and financial), organizational and political interests and utility of the policy have played key roles in the formulation of policy in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Public Policy, Bangladesh, Policymaking, Interests, Stakeholders

INTRODUCTION

Politics includes a wide range of public decisions in addition to the study of elections, parties, and how politicians behave. In democratic political systems, public offices make decisions about things like how budgets are spent, how laws are enforced, and how new technologies are introduced. A policy, in its most basic form, is a broad statement that specifies future goals and objectives and provides directions for achieving those objectives. Hill (1997) says that policy is the result of political influence, deciding what the government can and cannot do. To be more explicit, public policy is when the government takes a choice or selects a course of action to

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address a social issue and employs a specific strategy to plan and implement it (Anderson 1975). Public policy studies help people to explain how and why society adopts the policies it does, as well as why policy outputs and outcomes vary from place to place and through time. It helps us describe and explain what the government does and why it is done (Dye 2013).

Policy scientists say that the best way to think about public policy is as a process (Jenkins, 1978, Rose 1976, Anderson 1978). This is because policy decisions are fluid and constantly changing rather than being something that can only be made at the top level of an organization or the beginning of a process (Gilliat 1984). Thus, policymaking is best explained as a process, not as a one-time event (Rose 1969). This procedure has a political flavor because it involves the discussion, negotiation, and conciliation of numerous contending interests. These political interactions take place within the system that governs decision-making, plan creation and implementation, and inter-organizational links and ties. Therefore, public policymaking is not a simple process but it is part of a large, complicated system with many different actors and interests. It entails political acts such as adopting decisions on behalf of a group, establishing obligations and responsibilities that are compatible with them, and establishing fairness norms to control how resources are allocated (Anderson 1975). The policymaking process has generally been viewed according to various approaches or models like institutional theory, group, elite, rational choice, system model, and many policy frameworks such as advocacy coalition and multiple streams. The policymaking process in Bangladesh is more or less followed by rational choice and coalition framework, sometimes by other policy models like elites and group models. In Bangladesh, policymaking was primarily a supply-push function rather than a demand-pull activity throughout the British colonial and semi-colonial periods. Policies are taken according to their context and calculation of stakeholders' interest in the policy process. In the later sections, this study aims to explore the policymaking process in Bangladesh and tries to find the questions of how the policy issue was identified, who participated in the process, and how this policy came into being. The Female Stipend Policy, Chittagong Hill Tracts Policy, and National Agriculture Policy were taken as policy cases to understand the policy settings and how these policies came into being following the policymaking process in Bangladesh.

PROCESS OF PUBLIC POLICYMAKING: A THEORETICAL VIEW

Anything a government decides to do or not do is considered public policy (Dye 2013). The significance of Dye's formulation lies in the emphasis it places on the deliberate actions of the government. The formulation of policies often takes place in a series of actions or phases. These could include- (1) the formation of an issue, (2) the formulation of an agenda, (3) the assessment of potential policy options, (3) decision-making, (5) the implementation, and (6) evaluation (Jordan & Adelle 2012).

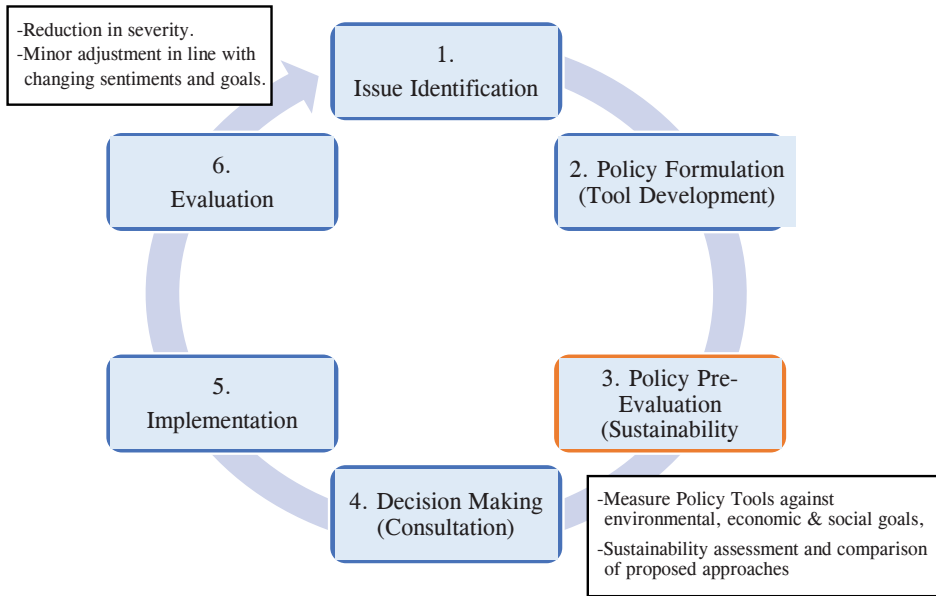


Figure 1: Phases in the Policymaking Process.

Making policies is not a one-off process; rather, it involves a vast and complicated system with a range of actors and interests (Aziz 2008). The government accommodates multiple interests by striking a balance among them and this is important for efficiency of policymaking. Furthermore, the utilization of networks and engagement with different stakeholders can assist in overcoming barriers and improving the policy-making process (Yalmanov 2021, Abdullah & Afandi 2021). The policymaking process follows some specific procedures. Models work well to describe the procedure. There are various policy models such as institutional theory, group, elite, rational choice, and system model, and many policy frameworks such as advocacy coalition, multiple streams, elite behavior, and institutional analysis in policy formation.

Multiple factors in the policy process define the nature of the policymaking model or framework. Interest of the people, policymakers, and program performance are among the factors that have an impact on how public policies are made (Yuslizar et al. 2022). Political power, preferences, responsibility, and reason are additional important characteristics that influence policy decisions (Yalmanov 2021). In addition, negotiations have a significant impact on the selection and application of policies. The "Window of Opportunity," focal circumstances advocacy coalitions, venue shopping, and coalitions of policymakers are additional variables that affect whether problems are given top priority on the agenda for making decisions (Osee 2019, Xhixho 2015). The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) provides a concise narrative of policy

activity within a complex policymaking system. Politics is a means by which people can transform their opinions into laws. As policy actors, they form advocacy coalitions with other actors who have similar beliefs, and these coalitions regularly compete with one another. Analyzing related stakeholders, their interests, and competing for policy preferences show us Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Treaty has come into being following ACF. A rational policy posits ‘maximum social advantage’, which means that governments should opt for programs that benefit society more than they cost, and should forgo measures if benefits outweigh costs. Actions that are appropriate for achieving a specific set of goals in light of the limits imposed by the circumstances are referred to as ‘rational conduct’ (Wittek 2013). The affiliated interests, institutions, and ideas in the National Agriculture Policy and Female Stipend Policy exhibit that these were formed through a rational policy process in Bangladesh.

According to the elite theory, the public is indifferent to and ignorant of public affairs, and elites have a greater influence on public opinion than the general population (Dye 2013). Society is divided into a ruling minority and a majority, the elite theory holds, with the majority always holding political power—the ability to make decisions and enact laws that affect the entire society. Under formal or constitutional appearances, it raises the important question of ‘who governs’, having a significant impact on discussions about democracy and how it works (Dahl 1956, 1971, 1989, Schumpeter 1942). Kingdon (1984) claimed that policy change occurs when the three streams of problems, politics, and policies interact. The development of a policy requires the cooperation of all three streams, even if they may each operate independently (Beland & Howlett 2016). An Institutional Framework for policymaking contributes to the existing literature in the domain of ‘new institutionalism.’ It examines the role of coercive power in public policy and provides insight into the effectiveness and relevance of national plans in modern governance (Gonen 2008).

In the context of Bangladesh, if we ask the question of why some policies are changed and some remain unchanged over time, we need to look at how the policies are formulated, who the interest groups belong to, affiliated actors in the policy formulation, and the implications of the policy on both interest groups and the national economy. The methods used in formulating the policies have an impact on their ‘stability’ or ‘change’ in Bangladesh (Shahan & Jahan 2020). Rashid (2014) argues that the interlinked roles of bureaucrats and politicians in the policymaking process are often difficult to discern and distinguish from one another, while Aminuzzaman (2013) opines that in Bangladesh, policymaking is considered the result of incentives established by patronage politics rather than a requirement for the government to perform a viable developmental role. The genre of policymaking dynamics is determined by the degree of democratization and the level of political institutionalization (Zafarullah & Huque, 2021). The active participation of a wide array of stakeholders, including coalitions, policy networks, and affiliated individuals,

is crucial for effective deliberative policymaking. The act of participating in such activities has the potential to facilitate the exchange of ideas and discussions among organizations with opposing views on significant and controversial policy matters. Additionally, it can enhance the efficacy of the policymaking process at every phase (Howlett et al. 2020). However, difficulties remain in the policy cycle, such as partisanship, bureaucratic red-tapism, non-participation, and insufficient policy review and impact assessment (Zafarullah 2016). The highest level of political commitment is a significant factor in policy development as well as execution in Bangladesh.

METHODOLOGY

This study follows a case study approach, often known as a small-n, comparative, or qualitative methodology (Eckstein 1975), to comprehend the current policymaking process in Bangladesh. The case study is a method for investigating a real problem in a specific setting by combining multiple types of information (Baxter et al. 2008). The case study method is especially useful in situations where context examination and comprehension are essential to knowing how processes or phenomena occur. The above-mentioned three public policies from three policy divisions of the Bangladesh government, namely Economic, Development, and Education, were chosen to ensure the authors' policy neutrality. While collecting background information, the authors relied on published articles on Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, Research Gate, newspapers, and government ministries' websites.

PUBLIC POLICYMAKING PROCESS IN BANGLADESH: CONTEXTS, FACTORS AND STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVEMENT

Several policy choices in Bangladesh greatly affect people's lifestyles by guiding activities with policy aims and objectives, such as education, human resource development, economic development, environment, and relations with other countries, among others. Part II of the Bangladesh Constitution lays forth the country's governmental policies as well as its aims, purposes, and development plans (Fundamental Principles of the State Policy: Article numbers 8–25). Part II of the Constitution has up to 25 provisions that set forth the fundamental rules for how the government should function.

According to Rahman (1986), the policymaking process in both the British and Pakistani eras can be characterized as a supply-push activity rather than a demand-pull one. This approach resulted in limited opportunities for incorporating the perspectives and experiences of stakeholders. Since gaining independence, both elected and military-led governments have implemented a variety of governmental policies that academics have largely characterized as clientelist and opportunistic. In the 1990s, donors were a crucial component of the policymaking process. In the past four decades, Bangladesh has performed well in comparison to some other emerging

nations. The public policies of Bangladesh during the last few decades demonstrate the influence of elite groups on decision-making. Additionally, the current policy trend shows that while many decisions are made after careful consideration, others are influenced by coalitions.

Cabinet members, ministries, lawmakers, political parties, bureaucrats, civil society groups, businesses, journalists, foreign donors, non-government organizations, and the media are all major players in Bangladesh's policymaking process. Despite being the main decision-making bodies, the National Economic Council (NEC) and the Planning Commission. Bangladeshi policymaking cannot be characterized as a linear process. A retired civil servant said the following: Policy "is frequently found to have been made after the decisions have been made or other possibilities are removed through political positioning of important individuals" (Aminuzzaman 2013). There are numerous kinds of significant issues at practically every point in the policy cycle. Through studying four public policy-making processes of the Bangladesh Government, this study has shown that policies were formulated following rational choice and advocacy coalition policy process. The Female Stipend Policy, Chittagong Hill Tracts Policy, and National Agriculture Policy were taken as policy cases.

Female Stipend Policy: Rational Policy Process

In 1971, Only 17.6% of the infants were literate (Banglapedia 2021), and the female literacy rate was extremely measurable compared to the overall rate. To prepare females for 'enlightened motherhood', Bangladeshi governments have prioritized education since the country's independence and have focused particularly on girls' education (Raynor & Wesson 2006). No government has ever rescinded this policy to this point. The Qudrat-e-Khuda Education Commission made the first attempt in 1974, asserting that "women's household life" was connected to education. The Female School Stipend Program (FESP) was initially piloted (as pre-evaluation) in two Upazilas of Bangladesh in 1982 to enhance the goal of enhancing women's social and economic empowerment while also enhancing girls' access to secondary education. With funding from the US Agency for International Development, a local NGO carried out the project. Later, the third and fourth Upazila was added by 1986 in this stipend policy. The outcomes of this approach maintained some gains in female education.

As part of a second FESP initiative, 453 Thanas in grades six to eight received free tuition in 1990. Further, it was declared that beginning the same year, primary school would be obligatory and available at no cost to the student. The funding for FESP was transferred to the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) in 1992 adding a new Thana. With help from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, the Bangladeshi government expanded the FESP stipend program in 1994 to include girls in grades six to nine in 452 Thanas (Khandker et al. 2021). These Thanas received the addition of grade 10 in 1995, and grades 7 and 8 in 1996.

Up until 1997, when NORAD took over, the government financed 12 more Thanas.

Hong & Sarr (2012) found that FSSAP increased the average age of marriage for women by 1.4 to 2.3 years while increasing the involvement in the workforce among married women with at least 5 years of schooling by 2.4 to 5.4 percent. Enrolment, attendance, perseverance, and performance of primary and secondary school-age children from low-income households in both urban and rural locations are some of the policies that have expanded their policy scope. According to Asadullah & Chaudhury (2009), the female stipend program has probably contributed to narrowing the gender gap in educational attainment. More than 187,384 students currently receive Tk187 core scholarships each year through this initiative from the Ministry of Education (UNB, June 22, 2020)

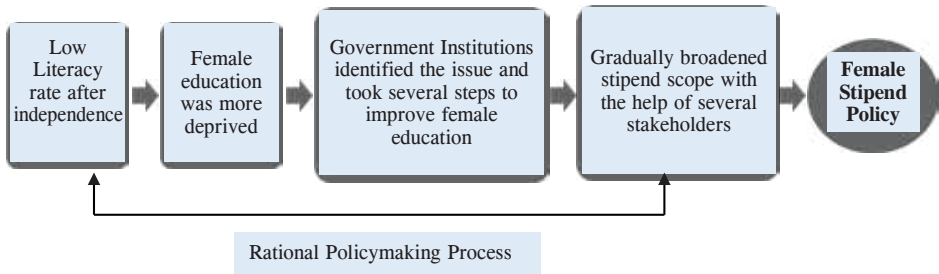


Figure 2: Rational Policymaking of Female Stipend Policy

When it comes to formulating policy, all parties involved act rationally, as shown in the Female Stipend Policy instance. As the female education situation was facing severe challenges in post-independent Bangladesh, the government took this issue as an important policy concern. Then policymakers emphasized financial support as the dropout rate was high due to the financial inability of the school-going children’s families. Year by year, the scope of this policy has been expanding because of its positive impact on female education.

Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Policy: Coalition Influence

The government of Bangladesh and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (United People's Party of the Chittagong Hill Tracts) signed the Chittagong Hill Tracts Pact, a political settlement and peace treaty, on December 2, 1997. The accord recognized the rights of the Chittagong Hill Tracts region's peoples and tribes and effectively ended the long-running insurgency between the Shanti Bahini and government forces.

As soon as Bangladesh gained its independence in 1971, the debate over the indigenous people's identity erupted. To oppose government policies, the armed wing PCJSS was established in 1973. Their initial assault was on a convoy of the Bangladesh Army in 1977. Several initiatives were taken for the inclusion of these

people by the government of Bangladesh. However, instability did not decrease. In 1996, new negotiations with Awami League Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina were launched. The political elites from both sides negotiated and tried to reach a peaceful situation. On one side, the power elite of indigenous people bargained as they could. On the other hand, the power elite of mainstream politics negotiated as peace might be established in this economically significant area. On December 2, 1997, the peace agreement was completed and officially inked.

Following the peace treaty, the government has taken different inclusive steps in the CHT area such as giving a special administrative system for three districts-Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Bandarban. Several national and international human rights watchdog organizations, e.g. Odhikar, Bangladesh Adivasi Forum, Kapaeeng Foundation, Indigenous Women’s Women Network (BIWN), Oxfam, ADB, UNDP, UNPO, and many others have released several reports on this issue. Indigenous people had also been united under their local umbrella organizations. These organizations try to draw attention to forming coalitions among them the policy makers for effective implementation of the treaty. The human rights organizations played the role of policy brokers to unite and negotiate among coalitions. In the last year, the Parliament passed the newly reformed CHT Development Policy following this accord. This policy shows us the coalition framework in the policymaking process. The policy issue was first identified immediately after independence and the power elite, from mainstream politics and the indigenous side negotiated and reached a solution in 1997 through a peace treaty. Though decades have past, the full implementation of pledges in the treaty is yet to occur (The Daily Star 2022, Karim 2021). Real development in the economic, communication, and education sectors has happened, but it has a deficiency in what is pledged in the peace treaty. For this reason, they are being organized and creating coalitions to pressure the government for full implementation of the treaty.

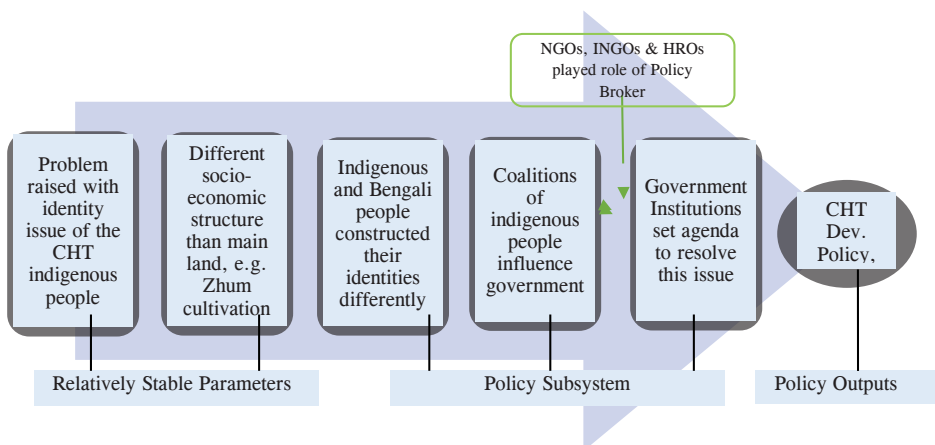


Figure 3: Graphical Presentation of Coalition Framework in CHT Development Policy

National Agriculture Policy, 2018: Rational Policy Process

The 1996-enacted New Agriculture Extension Policy (NAEP) can be used as a foundation for the National Agriculture Policy. The Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) implemented the new agricultural extension policy (NAEP) in 1996, in accordance with the agricultural priorities and strategies outlined in the 15-year perspective plan 1995–2010. The NAEP has eleven policy components or measures such as effective extension services, decentralization, extension driven by demand, collaboration with groups of all kinds, and support for all types of farmers through extension (Karim et al. 2009). International consultation institutions like the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) admonished the government about the climate impact on Bangladesh's agriculture. Immediately, Bangladesh saw several natural floods and calamities, e.g. Nargis, Foni, and long-lasting floods in the Northern part, particularly, which heavily affected agriculture. Later, the government realized it and revised the policy in 2013 aiming to tackle other challenges including the adverse impact of climate change in this sector. The policy was designed to integrate scientific methods to tackle climate change challenges and have more production. Technology was being used more and more in agricultural production throughout the days. All interested parties considered leveraging technology in this significant economic area.

The government updated the 2013 NAP to create the New Agriculture Policy (NAP) towards the end of 2018. The overarching objective of achieving secure food and nutrition is covered by the major objectives of the new strategy (Subash 2019). Research on agriculture development, technology transfer, mechanization, ICT, marketing of agricultural goods, women's empowerment, and nanotechnology are some of the new concerns that have been incorporated into the design of the new policy. According to the Cabinet Secretary, the primary uses of nanotechnology in the agriculture industry will be to diagnose crop illnesses, gauge demand for generic nutrition, and improve the efficiency of nutrition collection (The Daily Star 2018). So rational thinking was the main reason behind the formation of a more inclusive agriculture policy. In the National Agriculture Policy, every government tries to improve it for the time being owing to the betterment of agriculture. The policymaking process is entirely rational (Figure shows), considers the socio-economic background and then sets the policy agenda, involves related stakeholders, and finally, the policy comes out following a rational policy process.

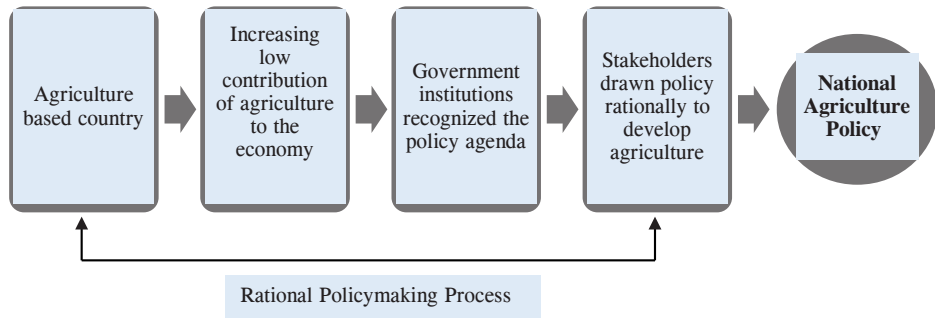


Figure 4: Graphical Presentation of Rational Policy Process in NAP, 2018

EFFECTIVE POLICYMAKING IN BANGLADESH: PATHWAYS TO FORWARD

Public policies in any country could have some shortcomings varying in level in any way. Developing and underdeveloped nations experience more difficulties than wealthy ones. In developing countries like Bangladesh, governmental programs are frequently implemented but lack in producing the expected outcomes. This is because the dominance of affluent elites over government is to blame for the ineffectiveness of policies in these nations. Aminuzzaman (2013) argues that favoritism, patron-clientelism, and lobbying (popularly called Tadbir) are very much part and parcel of the governance and policymaking process in Bangladesh. Political parties cannot ignore the pressure of outsiders due to fear of losing their vote banks. The main reason for all challenges in the public policy formation process is the sharing of resources and their controls among the stakeholders. The government has to explicitly and implicitly depend on pressure groups, elites, coalitions, and donor agencies many times for either political causes or economic causes. As the policy processes become faulty, policy implementation remains out of commission.

Despite these challenges, Bangladesh has achieved speedy economic growth and significant advancements in social development metrics. The government has contributed to raising awareness through effective social mobilization initiatives and the implementation of low-cost, affordable alternatives. To maintain this improvement, additional public social investment and enhanced public service delivery quality are required. Government policy on education development is looking sunshine with a high literacy rate and low school dropout. Policymaking will be improved if the policy process adheres to a correct understanding of the policy agenda and the importance of stakeholder interaction for effective policy creation. Following the creation of a policy, its execution, assessment, and effectiveness are needed to be closely watched.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

From the above discussion, we have seen that public policymaking in Bangladesh is not linear. It may vary from context to context. Multifarious actors are involved in the policymaking process which does not display only the 'iron triangle' of policymaking as Adams (1981) described. Public policies do not follow only one policy framework in the policymaking process in Bangladesh; rather it depends on a triangular convergence of interests, institutions, and ideas of the policy. Since the policy process remains faulty, policy outcomes after implementation cannot reach the expectations many times. Bangladesh has been crossing its golden jubilee. We need to invest more time now on how to improve this situation in the coming future. It sounds ill at ease that we are in colonial legacy to date. To have effective public policies, the policy process ought to be fair enough. Political will is the first and foremost important issue here. If a healthy political culture is created, other institutions will function well automatically. Besides, the government should lessen its dependence on foreign donors. It should also check discrimination arises in the country. Last but not least, people in this country need to be informed of their rights and responsibilities and raise their voices if any irregularities happen.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There has been no conflict of interest among the authors regarding the materials or authorship incorporated in this paper.

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