

**Human Rights Programme, UNDP**  
**Minutes of the Eighth Programme Advisory Board Meeting**  
**12 September 2021**

**Introduction:**

The 8th Programme Advisory Board (PAB) meeting of the Human Rights Programme (HRP), UNDP was held virtually on 12 September 2021. The meeting was co-chaired by **Ms. Nasima Begum, ndc, Hon'ble Chairman, National Human Rights Commission, Bangladesh** and **Mr. Sudipto Mukerjee, Resident Representative, UNDP Bangladesh**.

**Ms. Nasima Begum, the Hon'ble Chairman of NHRC** welcomed all board members and delivered a speech. She mentioned:

- The world is facing a very challenging time due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has adversely affected a wide range of basic human rights. The Commission believes that human rights is key in shaping the pandemic responses including health emergencies and people's lives and livelihood. NHRC has made timely interventions by recommending the relevant authorities to take necessary actions to uphold human rights standards during the pandemic thus reminding all that it is not a time to neglect human rights but to navigate this crisis in a way that allow us to promote, protect and ensure human rights for all.
- The present Commission has completed two years of term. In the meantime, the Commission has introduced e-filing system to expedite its activities which resulted in continuity of its regular activities even during the pandemic. Also, for quick decision-making, a WhatsApp group has been created and necessary arrangements have been made for NHRC staff and Commissioners so that all can continue working from home.
- At the outbreak of COVID-19, the Commission monitored emerging trends of human rights violations and, with support from the HRP, developed a database based on which it made recommendations to relevant authorities to take appropriate actions in compliance with their legal human rights obligations. We believe this step has had positive impact on the protection of human rights.
- NHRC has long been concerned about levels of violence against women and girls in Bangladesh and the lack of a systematic response to this problem. As we have seen, reports have increased enormously during COVID-19 and NHRC decided to act decisively by conducting a National Inquiry into Violence Against Women and Girls with a focus on rape. A National Inquiry is a good means to address complex human rights situations that are historical and systemic in nature and that require comprehensive examination and reporting.

**Mr. Sudipto Mukerjee, RR, UNDP**, in his speech thanked all participants despite the COVID-19 pandemic. In his speech, he stated that:

- UNDP has had a vital and long-standing partnership with NHRC for more than 10 years now. UNDP is delighted that this partnership has helped NHRC to grow, to expand its interventions, and to strengthen its ability to deliver its mandate.
- Due to Covid-19 pandemic there is a negative impact on the sustainable development everywhere which is playing role in declining global human rights development, creating socio-economic

havoc, increased inequality and crumbling social security nets have been exposed. The need for change has become evident.

- Through the online MyCourt platform, HRP was able to train judges, lawyers and court officials on the system, which led to a reduction in the prison population of almost 12% as well as reducing the risk of COVID-19 infections in prisons, which allowed thousands of absent family members to return home to provide support and reduce economic hardship at a crucial time.
- Since last year, the UN in Bangladesh has engaged in an intensive research, analysis and drafting process to articulate a United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for 2022 – 2026 as well as UNDP's Country Programme Document, which are aligned to the Government's Five-year plan and the SDGs. He mentioned that these are excellent documents based on well-argued analysis and theories of change. Both these documents reflect a strong commitment to continuing work in the area of human rights and justice. With its trusted and enduring relationships with NHRC, institutions of justice and the police, and a growing network of CSOs, the HRP is uniquely positioned to pursue a human rights agenda with even greater ambition and success.
- HRP has functioned as a foundation programme which we shall build upon. In this regard, UNDP has already been reaching out to development partners seeking continued support as well as support from new sources so that we may increase our institution-oriented human rights work to support the NHRC, the judiciary, and the police and at the same time ensure continued support for HRP's work with civil society and those left behind, which complements and intersects with UNDP's governance work with institutions.

The meeting then proceeded with the following agenda:

Sl No.	Agenda
1.	Adoption of minutes of the 7 <sup>th</sup> PAB meeting and follow up
2.	Key results achieved in 2020
3.	2021 planned activities
4.	The Way Forward
5.	AoB

**Mr. Andrew MacGregor, Chief Technical Adviser (CTA), Human Rights Programme, UNDP** presented: HRP's Key Results of 2020 and Key Activities of Annual Work Plan 2021 and estimated budget; HRP's response to the COVID-19 pandemic; budget and expenditure by activity in 2020; estimated budget for 2021; lessons learned; and proposed ways forward.

#### **Open Discussion by PAB Members:**

In the open discussion, **Ms. Nasima Begum, Hon'ble Chairman, NHRC** appreciated the support of HRP in making the NHRC office management system digitalised and advised to complete the process at least the digitalization of complaint handling system within a shortest possible time. She also inquired on the progress of NHRC new Strategic Plan. In response, **Ms. Taslima Islam, National Programme Coordinator, HRP** said that the integrated digital office management system consists of 10 modules - 5 modules are already completed and are under trial including the complaint handling system. A process to hire a firm has been initiated for the remaining 5 modules. Regarding NRC Strategic Plan, she reported that the ToR is under review by NHRC and once cleared and confirmed, HRP will go for advertisement for hiring a consultant.

**Mr. Amal Krishna Mandal, Joint Secretary, ERD** inquired into the delivery status and suggested to fix some measurable units in setting targets for the year 2021 and to demonstrate the percentage of achievement based on the targets. He also raised question about the rationality for the inclusion of the representative

from justice institution in PAB since the project will end very soon. In response **Ms. Taslima Islam** said that, regarding the financial expenditure, the deliver rate in 2020 was 60% while it is nearly 50% in 2021. She said that, since the justice component has been included in the extension phase of the project, i.e., in 2021 and the current PAB meeting is the first meeting after the extension, there was no scope to raise the issue earlier.

**Dr. Fauzia Moslem, President, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP)** opined that there has been an increasing trend of early marriage during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, emphasis should be given to prevent the early marriage through small grant supports in order to retrieve and rehabilitate the victims. She also suggested sharing news bulletins or reports with the PAB members and publish them through websites so that the visibility and dissemination of the HRP's interventions are increased. She emphasised on the need to provide training to the human rights lawyers. In response, **Ms. Nasima Begum, Hon'ble Chairman, NHRC** said that, there has been some interventions from NHRC on early marriage. The issue on early marriage is also included in the National Inquiry of NHRC. **The Co-Chair** also suggested involving BCS Women Network in the programmatic interventions in addition to Policewomen Network and Bangladesh Women Judges Association.

**Mr. Nazmul Haque, Director (UN), MoFA** said that there has been a long collaboration between NHRC and MoFA while the Ministry has been playing a positive role in submitting reports to UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies. On the other hand, he discouraged the project's use of specific terminologies, like "indigenous people" since the Constitution of Bangladesh does not include such term. He also requested HRP to support MoFA in international reporting. **Ms. Nasima Begum** mentioned that the Constitution in its Art 23A stated that the State shall take steps to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities. So, the issues related to ethnic minorities is embedded in the Constitution. **Mr. Sanjeeb Drong, General Secretary, Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples' Forum (BIPF)** expressed gratitude for including indigenous peoples and their issues in the programme and appreciated HRP's intervention since its inception. He mentioned that the term "indigenous people" has been included in different state documents including the recent 8<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan. The Education Policy 2010 and the Small Ethnic Minority Cultural Institute Act 2010 also refer to the term "indigenous people". He also said that the term "indigenous peoples" used by UN refers to the same groups, such as Garo, Chakma, Marma, and Santal who are termed as the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities. The point, he continued is that these people lag behind in the enjoyment of basic human rights, therefore, importance should be given in promotion of their rights.

**Ms. Rehana Khan, Senior Programme Officer, Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA)** said that it is necessary to build coordination and synergies in the areas of justice and legal aid related interventions since both Swiss and Swedish Embassies are working on this. She also said that, since the project is going to end soon, it is the time for consolidating the results achieved and any normative changes that are evident from the years of collaboration which will help to evaluate the project. **Ms. Taslima Islam** reported that during the extension phase, HRP has started working with National Legal Aid Services Organization (NLASO) and building the linkage with NLASO and CSOs to better support the referral mechanism. She also mentioned that there is a plan to consolidate the results achieved and lessons learned by the project.

**Ms. Sabina Yasmeem Lubna, Programme Manager, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)** said that the delivery in 2021 is still low and there is uncertainty that whether the planned activities could be completed within 2021. She asked whether the final evaluation of the project will be done independently, or by UNDP. She suggested HRP to have an exit plan. Ms. Lubna mentioned that the workshops arranged with CSOs and relevant stakeholders on UPR were very useful, but no discussion was

held thereafter on developing UPR action plan. She also raised a query on the acquiring the “A” status of NHRC and whether the necessary steps for this upgrading of NHRC is ready or not.

Regarding the low delivery rate, **Ms. Taslima Islam** said that, due to the strict lockdown resulting from the pandemic, the activities were hampered for at least four months which caused the delays in executing the planned tasks. She informed that the final evaluation will be done by UNDP and the ToR has already been already approved. **Ms. Islam** said that the exit plan is already placed in the project document, though its relevance needs to be checked since it was developed prior to 2016. She opined that, not only the digitalization of NHRC, but some other big-ticket items cannot be completed within the three months to the end of the current year, in particular the NHRC integrated office management system; research under NHRC Thematic Committees; formulation of NHRC Strategic Plan; Rules under NHRC Act; online course for Police and implementation of CSOs activities under low value grants. **Ms. Islam** also informed that the UPR discussion and development of an action plan has been coordinated by UN RC Office since 2018.

**Mr. Andrew MacGregor** said that as there are some big-ticket items of the project which cannot be completed by December 2021. In drawing attention to this, and sought advice from PAB.

**Mr. Md. Golam Rasul, MDS, Police Staff College Bangladesh, Dhaka** said that due to the pandemic some of the activities, including field work for the three pieces of research and seminars, could not be completed by Police Staff College under the LAO signed with UNDP. Therefore, he sought three months extension for their project. In response to a query made by **Ms. Nasima Begum** regarding inclusion of human rights in police training curriculum, he informed that the basic training for police includes a course on human rights and he also promised to include the NHRC Act as a content in future.

**Ms. Jesmin Ara Begum, Honorary Member, NHRC** said that in terms of access to justice, attention should be given not only to the criminal offenses, but also to the civil cases by UNDP. She also suggested to include interventions on women’s right to property in 2022.

**Mr. Md. Asaduzzaman Nur, Joint Secretary, Legislative and Parliamentary Affairs Division, Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs** opined that awareness raising initiatives should be undertaken not only for the domestic owners of RMG sector but also for the ultimate buyers in terms of corporate social responsibilities. He also requested involving officials from the Legislative and Parliamentary Affairs Division in NHRC events. In response, **Ms. Nasima Begum** said that NHRC is an independent institution, therefore it functions independently. However, the officials from Legislative and Parliamentary Affairs Division are also involved in relevant programmes of NHRC.

**Dr. Kamal Uddin Ahmed, Full Time Member, NHRC** said that due to the pandemic there have been many problems and obstructions in implementing planned tasks, including research works under the NHRC Thematic Committees; awareness raising initiatives on different human rights issues, SDGs Monitoring Tool namely SDGs into Action and its associated activities with government ministries. He said, proper coordination and monitoring should be in place with HRP regarding the execution of the pending tasks. **Dr. Kamal** said that a decision needs to be taken so that the important but incomplete activities can be accomplished. He drew attention of the Co-Chairs in this regard.

In response, **Mr. Sudipto Mukerjee** proposed to have an extension of the project for 6 months until June 2022 saying that many of the important activities will otherwise be in vain if the project is discontinued. He committed to allocate internal resources to continue with HRP’s activities, if necessary. **Ms. Nasima Begum, ndc**, said that HRP team should organize a meeting with her on the AWP revision while after three months she will review the progress of implementation of the AWP.

The development partners agreed in principle to extend the project till June 2022 and requested HRP to submit a proposal for extension with justification.

**When asked by the Chair, Mr. Amal Krishna Mandal** said that if the PAB members thinks it necessary to extend the project for 6months (January – June 2022), ERD, he saw no procedural problem in doing so.

**Key Decisions:**

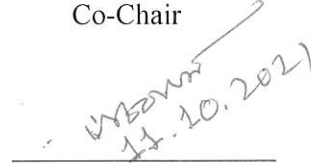
1. The minutes of 7<sup>th</sup> PAB meeting was approved.
2. HRP will be extended for 6 months (January – June 2022) in order to complete all its pending activities.
3. A formal request/proposal from UNDP will be sent to SDC and SIDA for extension.
4. Final Evaluation of the project will be done by UNDP.
5. The exit plan will be based on the project document. The exit plan included in the project document should be examined to check its relevance and measures will be taken accordingly.
6. After three months of the AWP revision, the Co-Chair, Ms. Nasima Begum, ndc, will review the progress of implementation of the AWP

Co- Chair



Sudipto Mukerjee

Co-Chair



Nasima Begum

**Participants (not in order of seniority):**

1. Ms. Nasima Begum, ndc, Chairman, National Human Rights Commission
2. Mr. Sudipto Mukerjee, Resident Representative, a.i., UNDP Bangladesh, UNDP
3. Dr. Kamal Uddin Ahmed, Full-Time Member, National Human Rights Commission
4. Ms. Jesmin Ara Begum, Hon'ble Member, National Human Rights Commission, Bangladesh
5. Mr. Nazmul Haque, Director (UN), Ministry of Foreign Affairs
6. Mr. Amal Krishna Mandal, Joint Secretary, ERD Economic Relations Division
7. Mr. Md. Asaduzzaman Nur, Joint Secretary, Legislative and Parliamentary Affairs Division, Ministry of Law
8. Mr. Abu Hena Mostofa Zaman, Joint Secretary, Public Security Division, Ministry of Home Affairs
9. Mr. Narayan Chandra Sarkar, Secretary, National Human Rights Commission
10. Mr. Md. Golam Rasul, MDS, Police Staff College Bangladesh, Dhaka
11. Ms. Corinne Henchoz Pignani, Deputy Head of Cooperation, Embassy of Switzerland, Bangladesh
12. Ms. Sabina Yasmin Lubna, Programme Manager, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

13. Ms. Rehana Khan, Senior Programme Officer, Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA)
14. Mr. Sanjeeb Drong, General Secretary, Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples' Forum (BIPF)
15. Dr. Fauzia Moslem, President, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP)
16. Mr. Abdus Shahid Mahmood, Director, Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum
17. Mr. Ashekur Rahman, Assistant Resident Representative (Governance Portfolio Manager), UNDP
18. Mr. Andrew MacGregor, Chief Technical Adviser (CTA), HRP, UNDP
19. Ms. Taslima Islam, National Programme Coordinator, HRP, UNDP.
20. Mr. Kazi Arfan Ashik, Director (Admin & Finance), National Human Rights Commission

**Observers:**

1. Mr. Shankor Paul, Ethnic Minority and Vulnerable Communities Expert; HRP, UNDP
2. Mr. Md. Mahbulul Haque, Data Analysis Expert, HRP, UNDP
3. Mr. Mong Sing Neo, Programme Officer, HRP, UNDP
4. Ms. Bithika Hasan, Gender Expert, HRP, UNDP
5. Ms. Lubna Yasin, Investigation & Human Rights Expert, HRP, UNDP
6. Ms. Shahreen Srabon Tilottoma, Project Officer, Engaging with Institutions (EI) Project, UNDP
7. Mr. Mollah Sayedur Rahman, Monitoring and Evaluation Expert, HRP, UNDP
8. Ms. Sungeun Choi, Business and Human Rights Specialist, B+HR Asia Project
9. Ms. Mehruna Islam Chowdhury, Business and Human Rights National Specialist, B+HR Asia Project
10. Mr. Mujin Lee, Democratic Governance Analyst, UNDP.