

Final Report

End-of-Project Review Aparajita Project Report

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Swisspeace Report

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List of Abbreviations

AL	Awami League
BDT	Bangladesh Taka
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EBA	Everything But Arms
EC	Election Commission
EU	European Union
GSP	Generalised Scheme of Preferences
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NWDP	National Women's Development Policy
OECD DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Development Assistance Committee
RPO	Representation of the People Order
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
UP	Union Parishad
V-DEM	Varieties of Democracy

1 Background and methodology

1.1 Background and objective of the end-of-project review

Switzerland has been supporting the political empowerment of women project (Aparajita) since the end of 2011 with three project phases. With the start of the third phase in 2018, the project was slightly redesigned for the remaining third project phase. The third phase started in 2018 and lasted until June 2024. In view of termination of this flagship project, the Embassy of Switzerland commissioned an external end-of-project review to assess its relevance and achievements based on the OECD DAC evaluation criteria. Furthermore, the review exercise was meant to identify the lessons learnt and formulate recommendations for a possible future engagement of Switzerland on the topic of “gender and governance”.

The review findings will inform the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation’s (SDC) decision-making and contribute to its thinking and design of a new project that fits the Swiss priorities and complements SDC’s portfolio in Bangladesh.

The Embassy of Switzerland in Bangladesh engaged Matthias Boss from swisspeace and Nazly Qumrunnessa, an independent consultant, to conduct this external review.

The hereby presented report is based on (i) a desk study of relevant documents and (ii) one-week in-country research, which took place from 5 to 13 June 2024. This included interviews with 98 persons representing different actors in Dhaka and Barishal district. (for a list of actors interviewed, see Annex 1). These interviews included central and local government actors, development partners, the project’s direct and secondary stakeholders, and meetings with the Aparajita project management in Dhaka and Barishal; and (iii) analysis of data and drafting of the report. The review was concluded before the student-led revolution toppled Bangladesh’s increasingly repressive prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, on 5 August 2024. These developments are only considered for what the authors of this report suggest for a future Swiss engagement on the topic of women and governance in Chapter 5.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the Embassy of Switzerland in Bangladesh team, the Helvetas team, and its partners who helped organize the in-country research mission, provided insights, and constructively reflected on their preliminary findings with the authors. Thanks also go to all the people met for the information they provided and their reflections.

Disclaimer

This is an external and independent review. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily represent those of the Embassy of Switzerland in Bangladesh. The authors are responsible for any errors.

2 Relevance & coherence

2.1 Context

Changes that occurred since the review was concluded:

The context has changed drastically since the review was conducted. Bangladesh has experienced significant political upheaval. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was forced to step down on August 5, 2024, following weeks of student-led protests and civil unrest. Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus was appointed as the chief advisor of an interim government on August 8, 2024. The interim government, supported by the military, aims to stabilize the nation and implement key reforms. The political landscape remains uncertain and tense. Conservative religious movements like Jamaat-e-Islami, Islami Andolon Bangladesh, and Hefazat-e-Islam have been gaining significant influence and have been capitalizing on the political vacuum left by the weakening of traditional parties. The rise of these movements has led to increased radicalization and a shift towards more conservative views in society. Their aim of capturing power remains a critical issue for the nation's future in general and women's empowerment in particular.

While the country has been witnessing impressive economic growth, it has experienced democratic backsliding and shrinking of civic space. Bangladesh's economy recorded an average growth rate of 6.5% in the past decade, above the 4.3% average for the Asia-Pacific region. Despite this impressive growth, income inequality remains a significant challenge. Bangladesh seems to have taken an authoritarian turn. It has slipped from 136th to 147th position in V-Dem's liberal democracy index between 2015 and 2022 and is categorized as a hybrid democracy and a dominant party system.

Justifying democratic backsliding by citing rapid economic growth may become increasingly difficult as it may not be easy for Bangladesh to sustain rapid economic growth. Bangladesh will soon graduate from the Least Developed Country category and subsequently lose many trade advantages. Given the new status, OECD countries may also become less willing to ignore human rights violations, adversely impacting Bangladesh's exports.

The 'zero duty' access under the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) Everything but Arms (EBA) scheme will only continue for three years after the official announcement of the graduation as 'developing country'. Bangladesh will need to qualify for the GSP+ scheme to preserve its competitiveness in the export market. This scheme is a 'special incentive arrangement for Sustainable Development and Good Governance' for vulnerable developing countries and grants complete removal of tariffs on more than half of the EU tariff lines. To qualify for this, Bangladesh has to ratify different international conventions and comply with human rights and good governance standards. Adjustments are particularly necessary to the labor law, the elimination of child labor, the registration of trade unions, and other shortcomings related to international treaties. The GSP+ scheme contains, hence, considerable incentives for Bangladesh to improve its human rights and democratic governance record.

Despite the authoritarian tendencies, Bangladesh is still termed a 'hybrid democracy.' **The ruling party shows signs of allowing limited pluralism within and beyond the party.** The parliamentary election in January 2024 cemented Bangladesh's transition to a 'dominant-party' political system¹. However, the ruling party has come under certain international pressure in terms of the dire state of democracy in the country, with the US playing an important part. The AL seems to recognize the harm

¹ A 'dominant-party' political system can be described as a political system in which a single party dominates politics, parliament, government and policymaking over an extended period of time.

Bangladesh's opposition-less politics are doing to the government's international reputation and domestic legitimacy. In response to this, the AL attempted to give the appearance of not dominating the elections with their official candidates and encouraged candidates – though affiliated with the AL – to participate in the Upazila elections as independent candidates.

There is a significant decline in interest in political participation, as shown by low voter turnout and less contestation for political positions. Despite the attempts to allow a certain level competition, the electorate has remained unconvinced. This is illustrated by the historically low voter turnout in the parliamentary elections and the most recent third round of Upazila elections. Furthermore, the number of persons contesting for elected government positions has drastically reduced, which is only partly due to the significantly increased costs for filing nomination papers with the election commission.

The country, including the (ruling) party, operates along complex clientelist systems and remains highly centralized. While Bangladesh has formal structures for local governance, in practice, it is highly centralistic. So are the political parties. Nominations for political positions usually happen top-down and are influenced by patron-client relationships, which stretch down to the Union and village level. This allows powerful family groups to combine economic power with political influence. It is not surprising that this, in combination with the largely absent political competition, leads to nearly 90% of Bangladeshi citing that there is a large gap between political elites and the people².

The influence of Islamist political parties/movements is evident. Political parties have contradictory positions with respect to religion. With the rise of political Islam, religious parties and ulema³ have gained significant veto power, which comes from their legitimacy in deciding what is religiously permissible. Political parties, hence, have to balance being 'modernizers' who promote the inclusion of women and being conscious of not seeming 'anti-Islamic' or upsetting traditions in order to secure their votes.

The women's movement finds it difficult to counter the influence of religious parties and ulema on issues of women's empowerment. This is most apparent with their influence on the content of the National Women's Development Policy. The Shamajik Protirodh Committee was formed by different women's organizations and NGOs in 2001 and was used to protest the changes made to the NWDP in 2004, 2008, and 2011. While the government recognized the coalition's strength, it was not successful in its advocacy efforts because of the political costs for the government associated with its demand (equal inheritance). Politicization and donor dependence of the CSOs/NGOs, political affiliation of the academia and intellectual society, and above all lack of support of the male groups for women's rights issues and shrinking civic space weakened home grown women's movement in the country.

Barriers to active citizenship are both pervasive and deeply entrenched, particularly for its poor citizens and women. This is due to socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors. Poor citizens often lack the financial resources necessary to engage in civic activities since their primary focus tends to be on meeting basic needs. They also often face social exclusion, which reduces their ability to participate in community and political activities. The economic inequalities are huge and create a power imbalance where the wealthy have more influence and access to decision-making processes. The patriarchal society linked with the prevalence of gender-based violence also discourages women from participating actively in civic and political activities. The political patronage system that favors the wealthy and well-connected makes it further difficult for women and marginalized groups to have a voice. Finally, the underrepresentation of women in political offices reduces their influence on policy-making.

² <https://www.iri.org/news/survey-research-for-bangladesh-2023-dissatisfaction-with-countrys-direction/>

³ Religious scholars

Gender-based discrimination in Bangladesh stems from interconnected issues related to the patriarchal system and hierarchical social structure. These issues also have a negative impact on women's political participation.

It is, therefore, not surprising that a limited number of women appear to be politically active.

Our understanding of political participation encompasses the participation, representation, and leadership in organized citizen's groups (CSOs), political parties, and state institutions.

Several policies and legal provisions are conducive to women's political participation. These include the constitutional guarantees for equal rights for men and women, the reserved seats provision in sub-national and national governance structures. It also includes the mentioned NWDP and the Representation of the People Order (RPO), which mandates political parties to nominate at least 33% women in all committee levels, including the central committee. Their implementation remains a challenge. This is illustrated by the fact that political parties were not complying with the mandatory 33% women in committee requirement by 2020 and as a consequence the Election Commission (EC) just extended the deadline for fulfilling this requirement to 2030.

Progress has been made in Bangladesh concerning women's access and presence in politics over the years but not yet much concerning their influence.

2.2 Relevance

Aparajita project objectives:

Overall Goal: Aparajita project contributes to equal participation, representation and leadership of women within local governance.

Outcome 1: Potential and elected women representatives effectively participate in local government institutions and local governance processes in the selected districts

Outcome 2: Influential, men and local institutions support effective inclusion of women in local political life in the selected districts.

Outcome 3: Improved policy and legal framework and attention to hindering and enabling factors at national level accelerates political empowerment of women.

The relevance of the Aparajita project is uncontested. Women's political empowerment and democratic (local) governance are highly important topics in Bangladesh and are aligned with Switzerland's international cooperation strategy objectives. Women remain highly underrepresented in politics at all levels and institutions. This pertains particularly to the local government level, where only 45 Union Parishad (UP) Chairman out of 4,058 are women. The number of women holding general seats at the UP are also very low. Only 14 women were elected from general seats in 530 unions of the Aparajita working areas indicating the poor representation of women in the UP general seats. It also applies to women's representation in political parties. All parties fall short at all levels to have 33% women in their committees. Despite Bangladesh having a rich history of women's rights movement and women led CSOs, women are highly underrepresented in leadership position in mainstream civil society organizations. Promoting democracy and/or countering further democratic backsliding is also highly required. Since the space for working on this at the higher levels has become difficult, the strategy of working on this topic at the local level represents SDC's recommendation as expressed in its policy note on governance in authoritarian contexts.

The project's overall and three specific objectives are relevant, and so are the actors on which it focuses. Working both with potential and elected women representatives to participate in local

governance processes effectively is important as this looks at women's political empowerment as a journey including eligible women, those who aspire to take on a political leadership role, those who decide to run for office, and finally those who become elected representatives. There is also empirical evidence that women's political empowerment depends to a large extent on the support of elites and influential groups, men in general as well as men and in-laws in the family, and local institutions like the local branch of the respective political party and local government institutions to support for effective inclusion of women in local political life. Finally, it is highly relevant to simultaneously work on an improved policy and legal framework and put attention to hindering and enabling factors at the national level in order to accelerate the political empowerment of women. An improved policy and legal framework generally has the potential to promote social change not only by using sanctions but also more subtly by channeling behavior through default rules and "nudges."

Given the main opposition party's boycott of the elections and subsequent absence from (local) government institutions, it is highly relevant that the project sought ways of including the opposition in activities and fostering political plurality. In the highly polarized and hostile political environment such an approach can also contribute to building bridges between people from different political parties, acknowledges the importance of political pluralism and uses women's political empowerment as an important aspect which any political party should take seriously.

Focusing on the RPO provisions of 33% of women represented in political parties' committees is highly relevant, as is focusing on women contesting for general seats. There is empirical evidence that the numeric increase and the increase in women's political influence in political parties generally result in higher representation and influence of women in politics. By addressing, encouraging, and supporting political parties to meet the 33% requirement the project was able to work on a topic that has long been a priority for Bangladesh's women's organizations and CSOs/NGOs.

A flaw in the project design was the assumption that with a main focus on women at the Union level and only a secondary focus on institutions, elites, and men (and in-laws), and even less focus on (national level) advocacy the project could contribute to equal participation, representation, and leadership of women in local governance. Women as a whole and women at the Union level specifically are socially, economically, and politically marginalized. Given the patriarchal society and the political patronage system the project should have been designed to give equal priority of outcome 2 and 3. These two outcomes focus, on the one hand, on gaining the support of influential men and local institutions to support the inclusion of women in local political life and, on the other hand, on improving the policy and legal framework as well as addressing the hindering and enabling factors at the national level to accelerate political empowerment of women.

Stakeholders interviewed/consulted during the field level data collection, including government officials, representatives of the political parties, CSOs, media personnel, both male and female representatives of the local government institutions, recognized the relevance of the Aparajita interventions, particularly in capacity building of women on political participation and raising awareness of the secondary stakeholders on political participation of women.

3 Effectiveness

3.1 General considerations related to effectiveness

The project has achieved most of the contractually agreed targets at the level of outcomes and outputs. This is remarkable given that the project operated in a challenging context with the COVID-19

pandemic; the elections and the discontinuation of one partner NGO (Steps for Development) slowed down project activities.

More headway could have been made on outcome 2 and 3. While the most contractually agreed targets were achieved, the evaluators, based on interviews with different stakeholders, concluded that while progress on outcome 1 is truly impressive, more headway could have been made on outcome 2 - particularly regarding working with political parties - and outcome 3, which involves supporting advocacy through networks at national and district levels.

Overall project goal: *Contribute to equal participation, representation, and leadership of women in local governance.*

At the impact level, there are five key indicators against which the project's progress is measured. However, the project could generate data only for two indicators⁴ which can be found below:

- **%/# of elected seats held by women in local government:** Women held 23.1% of the seats in local governments in 2021, a slight decline from 25.21% in 2018⁵. Only one woman holds the position of city corporation mayor. 102 out of 4,701 municipal corporation positions were held by women in 2021. One transgender woman was elected as vice-chairman in a Paurashava election in 2019⁶.
- **#/types of legal reforms improving the enabling environment for women's political participation:** The Eighth Five-Year Plan (2020-2025)⁷ includes a gender strategy comprising five interconnected areas of strategic objectives, such as improving women's human capabilities; increasing women's economic participation and benefits; enhance women's voice and remove constraints on women's agency; enhance/strengthen enabling environment for achieving gender equality; and enhance mother and child benefit programme. The action areas identified by this planning document include enhancing women's access to and control over diversified economic opportunities and resources; increase participation and decision making at all levels; establishing conducive legal and regulatory environment for gender equality; and promoting positive social norms. This document specially stressed on the capacity building support to women and orientation of the community members to support women's political participation and increase women's participation in the general seats. It also emphasizes on the issue of direct election of women Parliamentarians in reserved seat and assigning them specific constituency, and removing all discriminatory provisions in laws and policies in consistency with CEDAW.

Tenure of the reserved seats for women at the National Parliament has been extended for another 25 years through 17th amendment of the Constitution passed by the Parliament on 8 July 2018. However, in 2023, security deposit of the candidates for the reserved seats has been increased to

⁴ The other indicators are the following:

- *%/# increase of women in decision making in local government institutions, political and civic institutions*
- *% increase in satisfaction of constituents (women, men, disadvantaged groups) in the service delivery/inclusiveness of local government services*
- *% increase in amount of LG budgets spent on community interests/demands actively supported by EWR* and voiced by their constituencies*

⁵ GoB (2022). Sustainable Development Goals Bangladesh Progress Report 2022

⁶ <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEAAsia/Docs/Publications/2021/12/bd-Advocacy-Brief-s.pdf>

⁷ The Eighth Five-Year Plan is not a legal document per se, but it plays a significant role in shaping the legislative landscape. By setting goals that require legal and regulatory adjustments, it acts as a blueprint for legal reform across various sectors.

20,000 BDT from 10,000 BDT through an amendment to the Women Reserved Seat Election (Amendment) Act 2023. Registration of Political Parties Act-2020 (Draft) included provisions that political parties seeking registration must ensure that committees at all levels, including the central committee, reserve at least 33% of their membership for women by 2030, and report to the EC about fulfilling the reservations annually. This proposal came as the previous deadline provided by the EC in 2008 to ensure 33% representation of women in committees of the political parties ended in 2020. However, this draft is yet to be enacted by the parliament.

With the aim of preventing all forms of discrimination in light of the constitutional guarantee of equal rights, a draft bill titled as Anti-Discrimination Act 2022 was placed in the parliament and the bill is now with the parliamentary standing committee of the respective ministry for further review. Though there has been concerns on different aspects of the draft law, this law once enacted would offer opportunity to address the challenges faced by women participating in public life.

The project has shown measurable results in all of its six clusters and 540 Unions in 62 Upazilas spread over 16 districts in 6 divisions⁸. Progress has been uneven across the working areas, which is natural given the varying levels of interest, will, and different contexts. All interviewees at the local and national levels attributed the project to playing an important role in Bangladesh regarding women's political empowerment - a topic no other donor project addresses so specifically.

3.2 Outcome 1 – Women's effective participation in local governance

[Results achieved on outcome 1](#)

Outcome 1: *Potential and elected women representatives effectively participate in local governance processes in the selected areas.*

The majority of the targets related to Outcome 1 have been achieved, according to the project team's self-assessment, despite the serious challenges posed by the pandemic and the discontinuation of one project partner NGO. Various factors contributed to these achievements, and the project can confidently claim to have significantly increased the number of women becoming politically active at the local level. These accomplishments include the following⁹:

Increase of women contesting for general seats (37 to 103) and Chairman (6 to 26) and reserved seats (increase 21%). With this remarkable increase, the target of a 30 percent rise was significantly exceeded. While women have long been accustomed to competing for reserved seats, many of the women involved in the project found it novel to aspire to general seats or even Chairperson positions. It is remarkable that in the project's working area 12 women won on UP Chairperson seats out of a total 45 women winning on such seats across the country.

The example set by these women, who contested for general seats and Chairperson positions, has become an inspiration for other women in their locality and beyond. Nevertheless, it remains a long journey before it becomes commonplace for women to compete for these positions as naturally as men do.

Increase in participation in local governance processes by 60% in decision-making in general¹⁰.

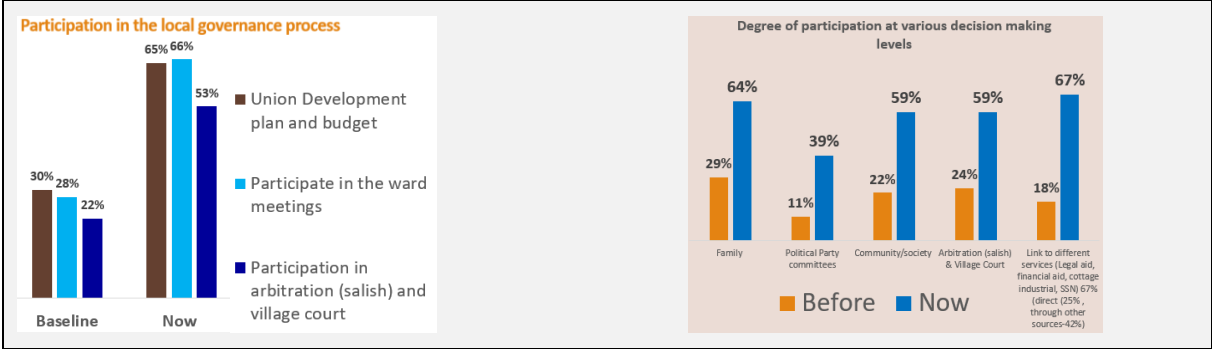
The women (Aprajitas) who have been part of the project have experienced a major change in their political participation, which some of the interviewed persons described as transformative. Their

⁸ The specific figures can be found in the project's final report.

⁹ The achievements related to other indicators are documented in the project's monitoring and progress reports.

¹⁰ The target was set at 50% for this indicator

participation in decision-making in families, communities, political parties, and local governance affairs has seen a stark increase over the last six years.



The fact that more local government decisions are now taken in favor of the interests of constituencies represented by women leaders indicates that women participate more effectively in local governance processes. The project team reported that the UP Chairmen and Secretaries perceive that Aparajitas’s influence on improving services and making them more gender-sensitive has increased from 22%/23% in 2018 to 47%/54% in 2024¹¹. This tendency was also mentioned by the persons the review team interviewed during the visit to Unions in Barishal district.

“We used to think that women can only be elected from reserved seats. We now know that women can contest in general seats. We have become aware of the issue of 33% representation in committees of political parties. We are now confident and can speak up for our rights.” – Aparajitas of Upazila Aparajita Network.

Lessons learned concerning “Women’s effective participation in local governance”

Women cannot be empowered by others. ‘Real’ empowerment is something that women can only do for themselves. Partner NGOs and their staff had to remind themselves of this as project activities were implemented. At times, deeply ingrained patriarchal and paternalistic attitudes stood in the way. While women cannot be empowered by others, the project rightly realized that the self-empowerment of women is limited by conditions that are not of their own choosing. In other words, very few women – if any - the project worked with can make independent choices and follow those through. Such ‘structures of constraint’¹² restrict women’s ability to choose their own paths. Staff working on such a project need to be aware of this and refrain from implementing a project as a set of quick fixes to meet targets set in a project log frame. They must be aware and act accordingly that the very nature of women’s political empowerment is something far more contingent and contextual, and ultimately far less predictable than development NGOs and donors often expect.

Work with those who want to be politically empowered while considering the constraints. The project rightly focused on women with the motivation and drive to initiate change and included women who were genuinely committed to addressing societal issues. Like this, the project brought passionate and dedicated women together who were able to self-advocate for their issues and inspire other women and men. The project also worked with women who were eager to become more politically active but lacked the economic resources that would allow them to invest significant time into political activities

¹¹ The target was set at 50% for this indicator

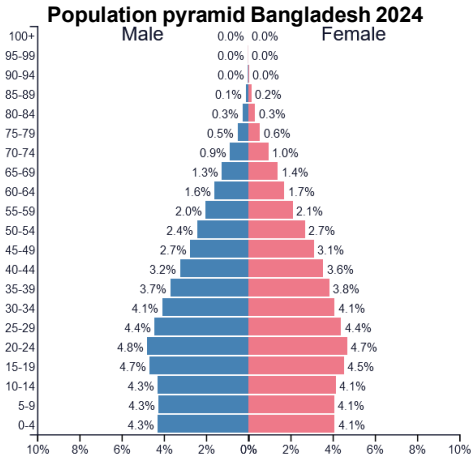
¹² See Rowlands, J. (1997) Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras

that were not remunerated. This left the project in a dilemma as it could not respond to these women's economic empowerment challenges.

Aparajita networks as a crucial source of mutual encouragement, learning, counselling, and inspiration. Over the course of the implementation, Helvetas and its partners realized how important it is that women are encouraged to come together in networks of like-minded women. The 540 Union, 62 Upazila, 16 District, 6 Division, and 1 National network that were formed during the last years of this project phase were considered by all involved as a key success factor for achieving the project's objectives. The Union level networks are considered the most important concerning the imminent empowerment of women to participate in local governance effectively. These networks operate at the grassroots, and this proximity makes these networks particularly effective for understanding and addressing the unique challenges women face in local governance. The Union level networks are also more accessible and allow women to build leadership skills and confidence gradually. They can also support advocacy efforts directly related to women's empowerment and gender equality at the community level. They are probably also the most likely to be utilized and nurtured beyond the project's life.

Membership of Aparajitas in different committees, the Union Parishad, Upazila Parishad, etc. has given them the possibility to exercise their 'power' and learn on the way. It is evident that people usually grow when they can assume and exercise functions, which is also the case with the women the project worked with. Access to these committees and local government bodies is also crucial for exercising influence, as shown in the achievements of the Aparajitas in influencing local government decisions in their favor. Membership in such local political bodies allows Aparajitas also to learn about political processes, how resources are allocated, and projects implemented, which are important skills for political leadership. Finally, being part of these committees and government bodies allows women to interact with persons they would usually not interact with and helps them to extend their network that can support in turn again their political aspirations.

Engagement of young women is seen as a promising feature as they are the next generation that can shape the role of women in public and political life. The project put little emphasis on this. Only 12.6 % of the Aparajitas belonged to the 18 – 30 age's brackets. In Bangladesh, much headway on women's empowerment actually happened as a result of several conducive policies, schemes, and initiatives that increased girls' school enrolment. The ratio of female students has increased dramatically over the past twenty years and stood at 50.75 % in primary, 55.14 % in junior school, and 51.65% in secondary level in 2023. With its significant youth population, empowering young women could harness a substantial and dynamic segment of the population for political engagement and leadership that would also stay engaged much longer than the older age brackets the project worked with.



Economic empowerment is essential for political empowerment. Many Aparajitas mentioned that the lack of economic resources hinders their political engagement. This is also echoed in the literature. Political empowerment does to some extent depend on the women's access to (economic) resources and opportunities. This should not be underestimated. However, one should also not fall back into the trap of assuming that there is a linear process which leads from social, to economic, to political empowerment. What needs to change for women's political empowerment is not only (i) their access to

resources & opportunities but also (ii) women's and men's consciousness, (iii) informal cultural norms and exclusionary practices, and (iv) formal laws, policies etc.¹³.

'Institutionalization' of the Aparajita networks (at Union level) should have been considered early on. While the design of Aparajita III put an emphasis on fostering networks of Aparajitas, the 'formal' Union-level Aparajita networks only developed late in this last implementation phase of six years. While the network members highly value the exchange and support they get from their peers in this network it remains to be seen whether these networks will sustain, potentially naturally evolve into broader groups and become part of larger women's networks in the country. It would be interesting to check and study after three years what has become of these networks to learn for future initiatives.

3.3 Outcome 2 – Influential, men and local institutions support effective inclusion of women in local political life in the selected districts

[Results achieved on outcome 2](#)

Outcome 2: *Influential, men and local institutions support effective inclusion of women in local political life in the selected districts.*

The majority of the targets related to Outcome 2 have been achieved. This pertains to contractually agreed targets related to the defined indicators. In hindsight, more emphasis could have been put on this outcome from the start, as the secondary stakeholders play crucial role in women becoming politically empowered. The most impressive results pertain to the following:

Increased support/cooperation from family members and other influential persons. Participating women reported a significant change in how their close environment and other gate-keepers support them compared to when the project started to work with them in 2018. 64% of the surveyed women leaders mentioned that they get support from their family, men, political leaders and other influential persons and that this support increased over time. During the baseline study only 29% of those women leaders were of that opinion.

The review team met one UP Chairman in Barishal, who shared that he ensures the engagement of women members in all UP initiatives and ensures the same allocations for both women and men UP members.

Male champions for women's political empowerment emerged. The project team reported that across the projects' working areas such champions emerged. Many of them are husbands and household members who support morally, financially, and with time resources a women leader in her political aspirations and endeavors. An important aspect of this is that such champions also take on household and care responsibilities. The review team also got to interact with some of these male champions during their visit to Barishal district. All of them testified about the behavioral and attitudinal changes they have experienced, the challenges they face, and how they are supporting women in local politics.

Commitment and support from government officials. Engagement with government officials appears to have led to a greater understanding and appreciation of the important role women can play in the political life of a Union, whether as active citizens participating in Ward Sabhas, as members of a UP Standing Committee, or as UP members.

¹³ Cornwall A (2016). Women's empowerment: What works. In Journal of International Development

Inclusion in political party committees. A major advocacy topic of the project has been the requirement of the RPO that political parties nominate at least 33% women in all committees at all levels. Thanks to the project – and other initiatives such as Bangladesh Mohila Parishad – the different political parties have started to increase the percentage of women in their committees. A member of a political party in Barishal voiced towards the review team that his party now complies with this requirement for all local committees and thanked the project for the support it rendered in raising this topic.

[Lessons learned concerning the support of influential men and local institutions for the effective inclusion of women in local political life](#)

It is crucial to work with families of Aparajitas due to the patriarchal culture. Women, in many cases, have not only limited roles in political participation but also in household decision-making, little access to household resources and assets, heavy domestic workload, and poor knowledge and skills. The latter is due to the fact that many women, especially those in rural areas, face limited opportunities to acquire formal education, vocational training, or leadership skills. Their lack of knowledge and skills further hampers their ability to make informed decisions, both in political participation and within their households. Working simultaneously with families, therefore, is essential and needs specific attention to changing the patriarchal attitudes that perpetuate gender inequality, enabling women to take on more active roles and contribute meaningfully to their communities and the political process.

It is also important to work with other influential men, such as male UP members, UP Chairman, and other community men, and provide in-depth training on gender equality and women's empowerment along with mentoring support as they play influential roles in preventing women from participating in local level political life.

The centrality of political parties and party elites for allowing women to become active in political life. At any political level, the centralistic and patriarchal nature of the political parties plays out. This pertains to who gets a seat in party committees, who gets nominated and/or is allowed to run in local or national level government elections. These decisions are taken based on complex clientelist considerations. It is crucial that when it comes to fostering women in politics, a conscious effort is made to work directly with the central level decision makers of the political parties, as this is the arena where politicians are shaped and decisions are taken. While political parties are currently the primary gatekeepers (not only in Bangladesh), it would be good to evolve beyond this model towards a more inclusive and decentralized approach.

Being elected from UP general ward member seats or as Chairman is perceived as a thick “glass door”. There is a widespread belief and understanding in rural Bangladesh that women are not meant to contest for general seats and the position of UP Chairman (it is telling that there is no female term for this in Bangladesh). We learned during our interaction with Aparajitas and male elites, that changing this belief and narrative requires also men to speak up and explain that these positions are not reserved for men. As all the persons interviewed on this subject mentioned, the real test for women's political empowerment at local level is when women are nominated and elected into such positions.

Be aware that dynastic, social capital, party loyalty, and meritocracy are the most influential factors in determining whether women become candidates and elected. This is the result of a commissioned and unpublished study by the Embassy of Sweden in Bangladesh¹⁴. Women have to negotiate within their own party hierarchies for positions of power and leadership. Their family background and social capital can help in this process. Women face a strongly built network of male

¹⁴ Indvelop and Tana (2014). A Study on Women and Elections in Bangladesh.

bonding and traditions deeply entrenched in social relations. For women, the challenge of getting a nomination from their party is seen as greater than actually winning a seat.

3.4 Outcome 3 – Improved policy and legal framework and attention to hindering and enabling factors at national level accelerates political empowerment of women

[Results achieved on outcome 3](#)

Outcome 3: *Improved policy and legal framework and attention to hindering and enabling factors at national level accelerates political empowerment of women.*

The targets concerning this outcome have not been fully achieved for different reasons. One reason is that the intermediary organization did not make this a priority, was hesitant to engage with national actors, and, in part, lacked the necessary capacities and experiences. Another related reason is that the intermediary organization started (too) late working on this outcome. Finally, making headway was also difficult due to a patriarchal and clientelist political environment that makes it challenging to advance institutional, legal, and policy reforms such as the RPO provisions mentioned above or the issue around equal inheritance for men and women. The reviewers got the impression that the level of ambition for this outcome differed between SDC and the project's implementing organizations. SDC wanted the project to put more emphasis and investment into policy and legal framework improvement activities. Our assessment is that the implementing organization was on the one hand hesitant to engage strongly on this due to capacity constraints. On the other hand, its engagement of building a national network, engagement with opinion leaders and policy makers came too late in the project's life, which minimized the likelihood of sustainably influencing policy and legal framework improvements.

The focus on the RPO provisions and envisaging women for positions as general UP seat members and Chairman was strategic and pragmatic. By focusing on the RPO provisions, the project was able to join and support a larger women's movement in the country that has been advocating for this provision to be fulfilled. This is important because advocating for these issues needs a lot of time, and success is connected with fostering personal networks. The focus on generating understanding, acceptance, and support for women to become candidates and elected as UP general seat members and Chairmen allowed the project to see progress in the attitudes of concerned persons. While the project states in its reports that, thanks to the project's activities, local communities now envision women in leadership positions such as general seat members and Chairman, we got the impression that there is still a long way to go – also in project areas – for society to truly support such ideas.

District, divisional, and national dialogues have attracted considerable attention from the different stakeholders, in part due to the Aparajitas' self-advocacy. The national-level dialogues happened very late in the project's life. The national-level dialogue event, nevertheless, showed the impressive network the project had developed among influential persons ranging from civil society to political parties.

The target on the local level concerning issues adopted by local government lobbied by Aparajitas was achieved. The project reported that local governments took up issues and actions concerning topics the Aparajitas advocated for. This concerns, for instance, the issue of preventing child and early marriage as well as fighting gender-based violence. The interviewees in all localities mentioned with pride how the project contributed to women and men speaking up against early marriage. The evaluators, though, received less evidence from the conducted interviews about the effect the project had on influencing local communities on their fighting gender-based violence.

[Lessons learned concerning improving the policy and legal framework and addressing hindering and enabling factors at the national level to accelerate political empowerment of women](#)

Consistent engagement with political parties at the central level is required. The nature of the patriarchal, centralistic, clientelist system needs to be understood and considered when trying to influence institutional, legal, or policy changes that foster women's political empowerment. The project started its engagement with political parties only late and did in our opinion not put sufficient attention on a consistent engagement with party leaders at different levels.

Fostering informal networks is crucial for advancing changes. A study by Maheen Sultan and Pragyna Mahpara¹⁵ shows the importance of informal networks in advancing women's rights issues. Such informal networks need to include powerful actors with strong bargaining capabilities. However, the success of such networks does not only depend on their strength but largely on how the ruling party assesses the political cost/benefit of supporting the claims of such networks. The authors also state that "[...] as politics shifts towards a more 'dominant party' system, the space for mobilisation becomes limited for dissenting actors, including on issues where women's rights groups disagree with the state. And as the importance of donors decreases with the state, development partners are no longer influential allies of the women's movement."¹⁶

There are already many legal and policy provisions in place which allow women to play a much stronger role in political life. The success of a project like Aparajita should not be measured against the success of bringing about policy or legal changes as these changes require a lot of time. Instead, the emphasis should be on advocating for the enforcement of existing provisions, such as the Reserved Positions Ordinance (RPO) and the opportunity for women to contest general Union Parishad (UP) seats and Chairman positions. In regard to the latter, there are clear indications that the project was successful.

4 [Efficiency](#)

4.1 [Assessment](#)

[Implementation structure](#)

The structure with Helvetas in a coordinating role seems to have worked well. The structure with four NGOs responsible for direct implementation and their setup seems to have established the project as a close ally of women on the ground. The distribution of roles and responsibilities between Helvetas, the NGOs and within the NGOs seems to have benefited implementation. The project could have benefited if all four NGOs had decentralized their work and placed their project coordinators in the working area instead of coordinating the staff activities out of Dhaka. In hindsight, it would have been necessary for Helvetas to oblige the NGOs to place all project coordinators in the working areas as was foreseen in the project design.

The project setup was costly yet effective. With an international implementer and four NGOs with setups in Dhaka and the working areas, this project was cost intensive. However, the review team is of the opinion that this setup was also a key for the success of the project. The project benefited greatly

¹⁵ Sultana M. & Mahpara P. (2020). Gender equitable policy reforms in Bangladesh: The role of informal networks and practices.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 29

from Helvetas' conceptual clarity, guidance, and overall management. This ensured uniformity in the implementation modalities and approaches of all four implementing partners.

The strong de-facto affiliation to political parties of two NGOs has complicated implementation.

The original plan was to have the project implemented by an equal number of NGOs aligned with both the ruling party and the opposition. However, this approach has complicated the project's execution, as two of the implementing NGOs were perceived as being directly affiliated with political parties, undermining the non-partisan nature of the project. This perception of political alignment (mostly with BNP) created mistrust among stakeholders and the implementing partners. Furthermore, the de-facto affiliation of one partner with the ruling party made it difficult for Helvetas to assert the required pressure on that organization to improve its performance and finally led to underperformance.

[Implementation approach and budget allocation](#)

The project attempted to work fully within and on the system by identifying and working with the relevant system actors. The project succeeded in working with formal institutions, such as the Union, Upazila Parishad and political parties. It also invested in identifying informal influential actors and networks. However, the project only partly succeeded in working with those. More could have been done to work with the true power holders such as the political parties on the side of formal institutions and local powerful elites on the side of informal actors.

The conscious choice of applying the concept of “self-advocacy” aligns with the principle that ‘real’ empowerment is something that women can only do for themselves. It was one of the crucial choices of the project partners to play a facilitating role in this regard. This is also true for the advocacy work at the national level with the establishment of a national Aparajita network, which consists of many well-recognized and intrinsically motivated advocates for women's rights in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, investments into the national network came very late, and hence, the durability of this network is questionable.

Steering by means of budget allocation could have been attempted by SDC. The majority of the project budget was allocated to outcome 1. Inadequate funds were allocated to outcome 2 from the start. SDC could have incentivised the project partners to put a stronger emphasis on outcome 3 and outcome 2 by respective budget allocations and forcing the partners to utilize this funds for the respective purpose – something they did not do.

4.2 Lessons learned concerning efficiency

Importance of linking the local to the national. It is crucial to link the local Aparajita networks with the national one to represent their interests at the national level, where crucial decisions are made in government and political parties. Currently, not all members of the national network have links to the local networks and hence a crucial link is missing.

Implementing NGOs playing a true facilitation role rather than taking on a lead role. This remains a constant struggle which has to do, among others, with the patriarchal society and with the fact that NGOs are eventually accountable to Helvetas and SDC concerning the project results.

Supporting true women's rights civil society movements. The project decided to work with four national NGOs. All of them are known to be organizations capable of efficiently implementing donor projects. However, only one is perceived as a civil society organization with its respective constituency. The other organizations are perceived as donor-driven organizations dedicated to implementing donor priorities, with little to no local constituency and no particular women's rights agenda. From a systems perspective, rather than focusing solely on efficiency, the SDC should consider partnering with more

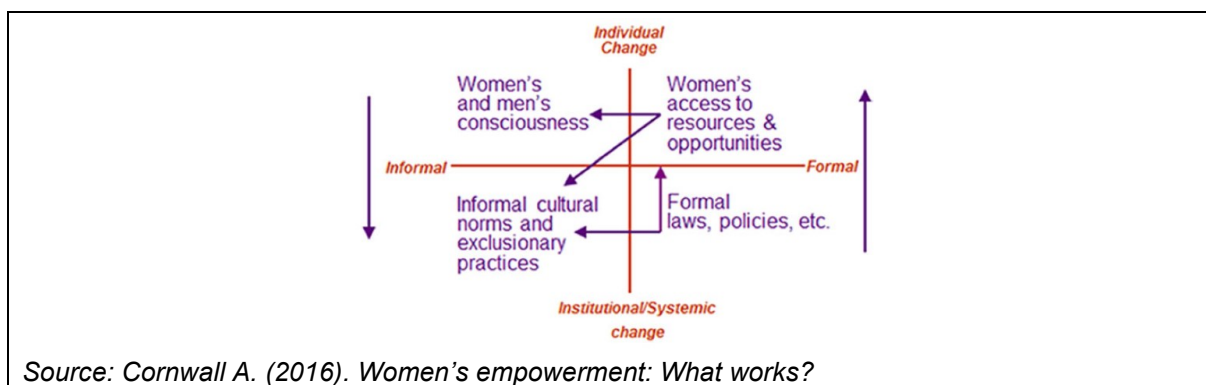
prominent national and local women's rights organizations in the future to address these issues more meaningfully.

Importance of localized implementation. NGOs working predominantly out of Dhaka with hardly any constituency at the sub-national level are not best placed to support women's political empowerment at the local level.

5 Impact and sustainability

5.1 Assessment

The impact of the project and the sustainability of its results can be reflected based on the question of what one is trying to change. The following model can be helpful in this regard:



The consciousness of the involved Aparajitas has, with a very high probability, sustainably changed. Not only this, but they also enhanced their capacities, which will serve them as they continue to be engaged in the political life of their community and the country. The considerable number of women who succeeded in being elected to general UP seats and as Chairmen is also likely to have a lasting effect as this inspires both women and men that women can hold such positions. The project also contributed to changing the mindset of 'secondary stakeholders' like husbands and other persons in the women's household and of men in formal local government positions. This is also likely to continue making a difference.

The sustainability of the project's results concerning women's access to resources and opportunities is inconclusive. Aparajitas have increased their social capital by being included in the Aparajita networks. This increased social capital has opened up new opportunities for them. Specifically, by being part of these networks, some women have successfully run for and been elected to local government leadership positions. These positions not only elevate their status and influence within their communities but also provide them with access to important resources. These resources may include public funds, decision-making authority, political connections, and opportunities to influence local development projects or policies. This enhanced access to both social networks and material resources further strengthens their standing in the community, reinforcing their roles as leaders and advocates for change. However, there is no evidence that Aparajitas have sustainably increased their control over physical, human, intellectual, and financial resources, which are important - although not sufficient - in women's (political) empowerment. This is not surprising since the project's design did not specifically emphasize this.

In terms of bringing about changes in the implementation of existing beneficial laws and policies, the sustainability of project results is also inconclusive. The project invested a lot in promoting the

enforcement of the RPO provisions. In the areas where the project worked, people were made aware that women are eligible to run for Union Parishad general seats and Chairman positions. However, the review team cannot determine if those who benefit from the clientelist system have been persuaded to support this change. These key figures need to actively support women's political empowerment, a role that is often overlooked in mainstream discussions, which tend to focus on individual women rather than the broader system¹⁷.

Sustainable changes concerning the culturally embedded normative beliefs, understandings and ideas about women and power is probably only limited. While the project worked and influenced this directly with the persons it engaged and the radio programs it broadcasted, there are many factors in the society that make such progress slow. Changing notions of what a woman or a man should be or do, and challenging understandings of gender identities and relations can take a long time. Both the project implementing staff and the Aparajitas the review team met emphasised that the patriarchal attitude of perceiving women as secondary to men is the main challenge in promoting women's political participation.

6 Recommendations for a future Swiss engagement of women and governance

6.1 Rationale

Democracy promotion is one of the priorities the Swiss Strategy for International Cooperation 2025-2028 specifically emphasizes. It is mentioned first in a list of five priorities¹⁸ of Switzerland's engagement over the coming four years. The strategy explicitly also recognizes the importance of this in the Asian context. Democracy promotion is a key element of Switzerland's international cooperation because it promises to foster stable and peaceful societies, ensure human rights and the rule of law, and is the basis for sustainable development since it promotes transparency, accountability, and public participation.

Equal participation of women in political processes is also emphasized in the strategy. The strategy is based on the fundamental conviction that women have the same fundamental rights as men and that in a true democracy, all citizens must have equal opportunities to participate in governance. SDC's work on women and governance also emphasises that besides the rights perspective, one needs to consider that gender-diverse leadership is associated with better governance and reduced corruption, that the economy benefits from women's full participation, and that it promotes social stability.

Gender-principled projects are in the interest of the Peace, Governance, and Equality section of SDC. There are not many gender-principled SDC projects and even fewer that link gender and governance. The PGE section is highly interested in seeing more gender-principled projects developed. The combination of gender and governance combines two topics in which this section has high competences.

Supporting democracy is key in Bangladesh's transition after the student-led revolution toppled the Awami League government of Sheikh Hasina. The country and its interim government face monumental challenges to restore justice, stabilize the economy, reform institutions, foster pluralism, and ensure democratic governance while considering the different political forces and the surge of

¹⁷ Cornwall A. (2016). Women's empowerment: What works?

¹⁸ Mentioned are also Health, Migration, Private Sector, and fight against Hunger

political Islam. The process of cleaning up and reforming institutions has already started. This also includes the removal of all elected members at Zila, Upazila, Union Parishad and City Corporation level, which were predominately occupied by Awami League personnel. However, a lasting change from a 'vulnerable authoritarianism' political settlement and a narrative of 'development first and democracy later' towards a new, more democratic political settlement in which women play a more significant role is challenging and not guaranteed. The current and still emerging transitional distribution of power of unorganized forces of students and citizens challenges the vested interest of the political and economic elites. Supporting the transition of unorganized power into new coalitions of women and political actors that hold up women's rights and women's equal participation in society and politics is of critical importance.

Women's social, economic, and political empowerment are strongly interlinked. Studies suggest that targets of women's empowerment were not achieved in part because most interventions aimed at primarily improving women's economic situation.¹⁹ The assumption of many initiatives has been that once women have access to economic resources, they can make changes in other areas of their lives. However, economic resources are just one among many of the preconditions for empowerment.²⁰ It is, therefore, important to approach women's political empowerment by acknowledging that it is interlinked with economic and social empowerment.

Women's active and equal participation in economic, social, and political life is far from being attained. Over the past twenty years, Switzerland has maintained its commitment to fostering democratic (local) governance in Bangladesh. It also has a solid reputation for empowering women socially, economically, and politically. In the current transition, Switzerland would, therefore, be well-positioned to continue supporting women's political empowerment.

In the current political transition, which includes a struggle over the new power distribution, many of the crucial discussions take place at the central level. Hence, shaping the future and advocating for change must target (emerging) influential persons at the central level or with persons at the sub-national level who are well-connected to the central level. Switzerland has developed a promising network of influential social, economic, and political figures who currently play important roles in shaping the future of the country. It could use these contacts also in regard to advocating for the political empowerment of women in the new political order.

6.2 Project description

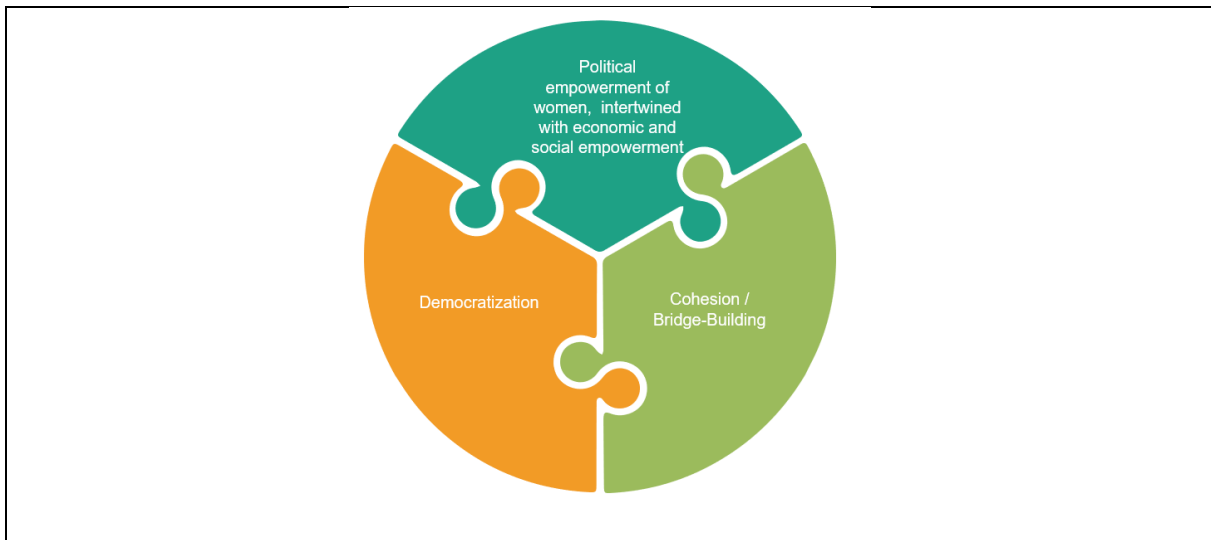
6.2.1 Objectives

The starting point of a new project on 'gender & governance' would be the changed context, Switzerland's strategic priorities in international cooperation in general and Bangladesh in particular, and the niche Switzerland occupies with its programs and projects.

The new project would intend to address three major issues:

¹⁹ Bayissa, F. W., Smits, J., and Ruben, R. (2018) The Multidimensional Nature of Women's Empowerment: Beyond the Economic Approach.

²⁰ Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005; Garikipati, 2008)



The work on women's political empowerment is the primary entry point for consciously promoting democracy and fostering cohesion and bridge-building between members of competing political and societal groups.

Swiss added value in launching such an initiative would be the following:

- *Harnessing the momentum of the current political transition.* A transition period like this is marked by many uncertainties. Switzerland's added value is that it is known for its pluralism of cultures and ideas. As Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis mentioned once: "[...] the pluralism of cultures and ideas is the engine that drives us to get back on our feet and find new solutions together"²¹. In the post-Hasina political vacuum, conservative Islamic parties seem to gain ground, threatening, among others, women's political, economic, and social empowerment. Promoting pluralism and dialogue are core competences Switzerland is known for.
- *Building on its competence in promoting democracy at the local level.* Switzerland has a long tradition of promoting local democracy in Bangladesh and beyond based on its own state structure and history. In Bangladesh Switzerland has a lot of experience it can draw on, has a specific niche in this regard among development partners, and a network of experts, think tanks, civil society organizations, and civil servants it can build.
- *Strong track record of promoting gender equality.* Maybe because the struggle for gender equality is ongoing in Switzerland, Switzerland has developed a high reputation of promoting women's empowerment internationally and in Bangladesh. Its own domestic experiences of integrating women into political systems and creating inclusive governance frameworks provide valuable lessons for Bangladesh. The experiences of Swiss projects in the realm of women's economic and social empowerment further contribute to the credibility of Switzerland's engagement in this field.
- *Expertise in working in uncertain, volatile, and fragile contexts.* Switzerland has a long history of working on these topics in contexts of political transitions and uncertainty, where women's political participation is often limited.

Besides, Switzerland would occupy a clear niche with such a project, since no other donor works consciously on the interlinkage of women's political empowerment, promoting democracy and fostering cohesion and bridge-building between members of competing political and societal groups.

²¹ <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/dfa/dfa/aktuell/dossiers/presidenza-2022/elezione.html>

6.2.2 The conceptual understanding that would guide the new project

Women's political empowerment: The new project would be based on the widely accepted way of conceptualizing women's empowerment, which was initially developed by Naila Kabeer. The ability to exercise strategic life choices can be thought of in terms of three dimensions or different 'moments' in the process of social change:

Resources (pre-conditions) > **Agency** (process) > **Achievements** (outcomes)

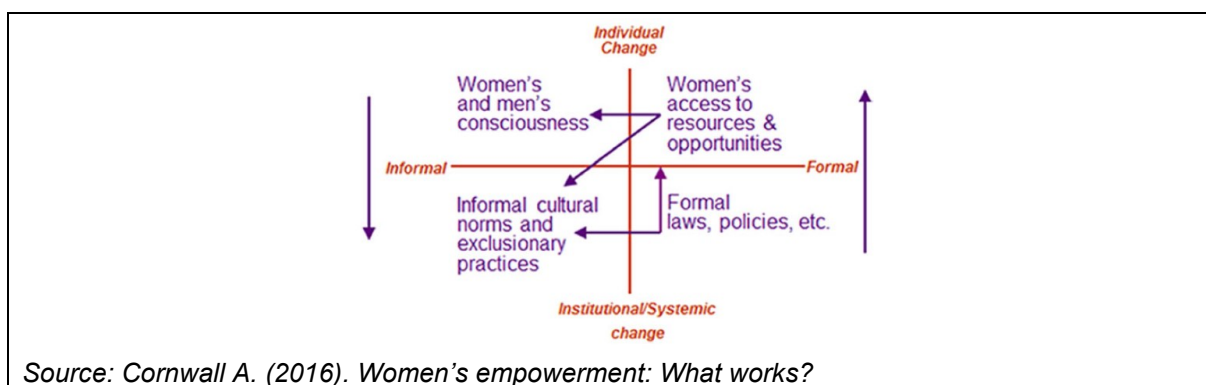
In addition to resources, one can also add "Institutional Structures" that shape the expression of agency and women's control over resources²².

Resources are tangible and intangible capital and sources of power that women and girls have, own or use individually or collectively in the exercise of agency. Resources include women and girls' critical consciousness, bodily integrity (health; safety and security) and assets (financial and productive assets; knowledge and skills; time; social capital).

Institutional Structures are the social arrangements of formal and informal rules and practices. They shape and influence the expressions of agency as well as women's control over resources. Institutional structures can be found in the family, community, market, and state arenas. They comprise formal laws and policies, the norms that underpin them, and the ways these are practiced in the context of human relations

Agency is the capacity for purposive action, the ability to pursue goals, express voice and influence and make decisions free from violence and retribution. It is at the heart of empowerment. There are three specific expressions of agency: decision-making, leadership and collective action.

What the project would intend to change concerning women's political empowerment would be along this model:



Democratization: In a transition context, as Bangladesh finds itself, working on democratic governance represents opportunities and challenges. What is critical is that donors support the agenda of local actors and do not dominate the agenda. It is also critical to balance the need for democratic reforms with maintaining stability and to deal with deep divisions and polarization. Finally, it is crucial to recognize that with the ousting of the Awami League government, there is an intense struggle among the political and economic elite to gain power. Today it is unclear what the future political settlement will look like. What is essential in such a context is to work with all major (political) parties on how (local) democracy

²² van Eerdewijk A. et al (2017). White Paper: A Conceptual Model of Women and Girls' Empowerment. Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute (KIT)

should be shaped and the role of women in politics, the economy and society. For this purpose, supporting spaces for dialogue would be crucial.

Cohesion & Bridge-building: The project would respond to the situation that the revolution and the removal of the Awami League government have led to a political vacuum, and different societal and political forces are struggling to fill this vacuum and gain power. It shows the very different visions and hopes people have for the country, ranging from a conservative monolithic to a liberal pluralist society. The polarization within society has become even more visible since the student-led revolution. Members of the Awami League and aligned parties have come under a lot of pressure. There are little signs for a dialogue between groups with opposing views on the future of Bangladesh. Cohesion must be fostered between these groups and also between different political parties to improve relationships between people, inter-group trust, and sustain peace. Bridge-building in this context means seeking different opportunities that enable persons from opposing groups to come together, interact, and foster cohesion.

6.2.3 Components

The project would address the three major issues through three components, each of which would contribute to addressing all three issues the project intends to work on. The three components would also include the conceptual understanding described above.

Component 1—Policy/advocacy support: This follows from the understanding that fostering informal networks, that include powerful actors with strong bargaining capabilities, is essential for advancing women's rights issues and democratization. Such networks also have the potential to go beyond political party lines and contribute to cohesion between persons affiliated with the polarized groups. Policy/advocacy support would need to be conceptualized, sufficient attention should be paid to the central level, and actors at sub-national levels that have power within the clientelist network that pertains to bringing about change should be identified.

Such a component could entail flexible *funding support* that allows advocacy networks and organizations to allocate resources as they see fit to advocate for different issues. It could be complemented by *expert support* in the form of access to experts on specific advocacy topics, capacity building and facilitating connections to other advocacy organizations, networks, and coalitions; and *research support* in the sense that funding is provided for research to generate evidence that supports advocacy campaigns; and *public awareness support* that would help advocacy networks and organizations conduct media campaigns; and finally *policy influencing support* that would entail funding for developing policy briefs that articulate advocacy issues and propose solutions as well as support for platforms for policy dialogue between advocacy networks and organizations and policymakers and other stakeholders.

This component would also entail fostering democratization for instance by promoting pluralism within the political parties by the means of including more women in their committees at all levels. This component would also entail activities to build bridges between persons from different political parties and groups by bringing them into a dialogue on topics of common interest in the sphere of women's political, economic and social empowerment.

In this component, it is envisaged that similar organizations and on similar topics, such as the Civic Engagement Fund, PACTA, Prabiddi, B-SkillFul, Ashshash, M4C, RMWB, and GO4Impact, will work very closely together.

Component 2 - Working in the nexus of women's political, economic, and social empowerment at the sub-national level: This follows from the understanding that women's political empowerment is intertwined with their economic and social empowerment, that fostering democracy in a country

emerging from vulnerable authoritarianism and being in transition should among others be approached by both at central and sub-national levels. This component would work at sub-national levels (District, City Corporation, Upazila, Poursabha, Union (TBD)). The focus would be working with stakeholders who have already participated in other SDC-supported economic and social empowerment projects and working specifically on the interlink between women being socially, economically, and politically empowered – with an emphasis on political empowerment. The assumption is that some of the women the project would work with (i) have already been economically empowered and would now be supported in their thrive on being politically active; (ii) have been socially empowered by being part of, for instance, of self-help groups, other CBOs or CSO and would now be supported to achieve their political aspirations. It is assumed that only a small part of women who have been economically and socially empowered would be interested in engaging in politics. Their incentives to engage in politics could be related to gaining influence, addressing community challenges, expanding their influence and leadership opportunities, and creating an environment where more women can thrive. This component would also entail identifying bridges that could connect people from different political parties and groups at the subnational level. Activities would be designed to bring those people together and, by working on topics of common interest, contribute to cohesion between people from main political opposing parties.

This component would work closely with people who benefit(ed) from projects like M4C, Prabiddi, Ashshash, SanMarkS, SSIE-B, etc.

Component 3 - Fostering networks/platforms that sustain the work on women’s empowerment and foster cohesion: This component would harness the potential of existing networks and platforms and help them to prosper and be effective. This would entail platforms such as the Women’s Development Forum, the Bangladesh Union Parishad Forum (incl. the ‘committee’ of women UP members and chairs), the Aparajita Networks, economic platforms, etc. Working with such formal networks is important but also has its limitations. This is why this component is seen as highly interconnected with the work on informal networks proposed for component 1. The objective would be to strengthen these formal networks and platforms, given their role as pluralistic political groups that bring together people from different political orientations and foster women’s empowerment. These networks and platforms have the potential to increase civic participation, mobilize people, provide space for diverse voices, and allow a space where people can practice deliberative democracy.

6.2.4 Methodological approaches

Working in the nexus of women’s political, social, and economic empowerment. While the project would focus on women’s political empowerment, its approach acknowledges that women’s political empowerment cannot be viewed in isolation.

Working with women who have been socially and economically empowered by other SDC projects. The project would build on the investments SDC has made with other projects in the social and economic empowerment of women. Hundreds of thousands of women have benefited from SDC-funded initiatives. While all of them would benefit from political empowerment, the project would focus on women who are/may be interested in, aspire to, run, and who were/are already part of local government bodies and political party committees.

Conscious focus on youth (18-35). The project would be unique by consciously focusing on young women who have the potential to shape society and politics over their lifetime. So far, projects have insufficiently focused on this age bracket, which is currently the largest in demographic terms.

Bridge-building is a continuous effort to foster cohesion between people from different political parties. This project would offer another unique feature by consciously working to bring together people

from different political parties - at both central and sub-national levels - around the issue of women's political empowerment. In doing so, it would aim to foster understanding and cohesion among participants. Women's empowerment has the potential to serve as a strong bridge for collaboration, as it is a common interest across political parties.

Preventing violent extremism by promoting critical thinking, voice, and agency among participants and building trust among people from different social, ethnic, religious, and political groups. A key aspect that a project on women's empowerment wants to achieve is a change in "women's and men's consciousness" and changing "gender-biased norms and exclusionary practices." The project would put particular emphasis on these two aspects. It would also promote women's empowerment in a culturally and religiously sensitive manner to avoid gender backlash.

Working based on lessons from different projects related to women's political, social, and economic empowerment. SDC has gained a lot of insights into women's empowerment through its projects. The new project would build on these learnings.

Adaptive program management. Working on the topics of women's political empowerment, democratization, and fostering cohesion in the context of Bangladesh finding itself in a transition marked by uncertainty, and polarization, requires incremental programming that is flexible and able to adapt to opportunities, new insights, blockages, etc. It would be important that SDC remains closely engaged with the implementer and remain flexible.

6.2.5 Instruments

The instruments mentioned under component 1 would also apply to the other three components. These include the following:

Flexible funding (grant) support: The project would need to have a flexible funding scheme in place, which would allow its partners to allocate financial resources as they see fit to achieve the jointly defined objectives. This would apply to all three components.

Expert support: The project should provide expertise based on the specific requirements of advancing the three components. Most of this expertise can be found in Bangladesh, while some specific expertise may have to be sourced from the region or internationally.

Research support: Since the project would be quite novel in its conceptualization and approach, it would be good to accompany it with a research component for in-depth learning and for generating evidence that could again be used in project adaptations and implementation.

Public awareness support: The project would benefit from support on how to address best the different target groups to increase their awareness and change their attitudes and perceptions concerning the topics the project would tackle. This would include, for instance, support related to targeted (social-) media campaigns.

Policy influencing support: This would include support for informal and formal ways of influencing policies. A formal means is support for developing policy briefs that articulate advocacy issues and for disseminating the respective information in the form of informal and formal closed-door or public meetings. It can also take the form of informally engaging with influential persons on specific topics and formal engagements in organizing roundtables, etc.

6.2.6 Target group and geographical area

The project would be meant to operate at the central and sub-national levels in different parts of Bangladesh, where SDC has been contributing to the economic and social empowerment of women.

For component 1 (Policy/advocacy support), the main focus would be on policymakers and persons with strong influence in the clientelist system, primarily at the central level and with a secondary focus on the district level.

For component 2 (Working in the nexus of women's political, economic, and social empowerment at the sub-national level), the focus would be on the District, City Corporation, Upazila, Pourasabha, and Union level. Considering that the project would work with women who were already economically and socially empowered by other SDC projects, the project would still focus on working at the higher tiers of sub-national government. The rationale is that working at the higher level has the potential to influence the lower levels and not the other way around, given the prevailing centralistic and patriarchal system. The target group would be primarily (aspirant, elected) women but equally men in positions of influence and power, be that as parts of political parties, sub-national government bodies, economic associations, etc.

For component 3 (Fostering networks/platforms that sustain the work on women's empowerment and foster cohesion), the focus would be on the national and sub-national level as such networks and platforms are relevant at all levels. The target group would be primarily women who are part of such 'formal' networks and platforms.

6.2.7 Organization and timeframe

The project should have a total duration of ten years divided into two phases.

The first five-year phase would start with an inception phase of eight months. The objective of the inception phase would be to develop the details of the project, including the impact hypotheses, the related results framework, the implementation strategy, and the detailed budget for the first phase. This would be elaborated by the implementer in close collaboration with the Embassy of Switzerland in Bangladesh. After the inception phase, the objective of the first phase would be to test, adjust, and establish effective means to advance the three objectives of the project.

The second five-year phase will be dedicated to rolling out the tested approaches. Furthermore, the second phase could potentially also enlarge the project's geographical scope.

Annex 1: List of persons interviewed / interacted with

SL	Name, designation and address	Gender Identity	
		Woman	Man
SDC Personnel			
01	Thévoz Corinne corinne.thevoz@eda.admin.ch	Woman	-
02	Haider Nazia nazia.haider@eda.admin.ch	Woman	-
03	Henchoz Pignani Corinne corinne.henchozpignani@eda.admin.ch	Woman	-
04	Ali Sohel Ibn sohel.ibn.ali@eda.admin.ch	-	Man
05	Yasmein Sabina Lubna sabina.yasmein@eda.admin.ch	Woman	-
06	Chowdhury Ameena ameena.chowdhury@eda.admin.ch	Woman	-
07	Lira Shirin Sultana shirinsultana.lira@eda.admin.ch	Woman	-
08	Nadim Rahman Mohammad nadim.rahman@eda.admin.ch	-	Man
09	Hofstetter Irene irene.hofstetter@eda.admin.ch	Woman	-
Helvetas Personnel (Project Management)			
10	Fawzia Khondkar, Deputy Project Director, Aparajita Helvetas	Woman	-
11	Fatema Mahmuda, MEAL Expert Aparajita Helvetas	Woman	-
12	Prashanta Tripura, Project Director Aparajita Helvetas	-	Man
13	Sahana Akhter, Sr. Finance Manager Aparajita Helvetas	Woman	-
14	Ben Blumenthal, CD of HELVETAS	-	Man
15	Tajmary Akter PM-GSE, HELVETAS	Woman	-
16	Bishakha Devnath, Helvetas	-	Man
Project Implementing Partners			
17	Omar Khaiyam, Project Coordinator Khan Foundation	-	Man
18	Nurun Nabi, Project Coordinator Democracy Watch	-	Man
19	Subol Kumar Ghosh, Project Coordinator Rupantar	-	Man
20	Shefali Begum, Project Coordinator PRIP Trust	Woman	-
21	Md. Morshed Alam, Project Coordinator Khan Foundation	-	Man
22	Wajed Feroz, Executive Director Democracy Watch	-	Man
23	Rokhsana Khondker, Executive Director Khan Foundation	Woman	-
24	Aroma Dutta, Adviser, PRIP Trust	Woman	-

25	Sandip Singha Roy, Executive Director, PRIP Trust	-	Man
26	Jhumu Karmaker Rupantor	Woman	-
27	Mohammed Tanvir Mosharraf Rupantor	-	Man
28	Nur-E-Azam Haidary Rupantor	-	Man
29	Sima Biswas Rupantor	Woman	-
30	Uzzal Kumar Paul Rupantor	-	Man
31	Jahangir Fakir Rupantor	-	Man
32	Mizanur Rahman Babu Rupantor	-	Man
33	Shakila Aziz Rupantor	Woman	-
34	Sanjib Kumar Paul Rupantor	-	Man
35	Rafiqul Islam Khokon, ED Rupantor	-	Man
Project participants (primary and secondary stakeholders)			
36	Enayet Hossain Bacchu Member, Barishal District, BNP	-	Man
37	Anwar Zahid, Advisor, ICDA	-	Man
38	Nazrul Haq Nilu President, Barishal District, Bangladesh Worker's Party	-	Man
39	Suvangkar Chakraborty ED, MAP 01716848406	-	Man
40	Syed Pantho Reporter, Channel i 01715647688	-	Man
41	Parvez Russel Reporter, MyTV	-	Man
42	Pushpo Chakraborty Secretary General, Bangladesh Mohila Parishad	Woman	-
43	Saheda Akter District Coordinator, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) 01712776361	Woman	-
44	Hasika Akter Nila Seceratry General, We Can (Amrai Pari) 01711284392	Woman	-
45	Bashir Uddain Chairman, Rangosri Union Council, Bakergonj Upazila	-	Man
46	Kohinur Begum Member, Bangladesh Mohila Sangstha	Woman	-
47	Al Mamun, Teacher Husband of Aparajita	-	Man

48	Ad. Shakina Alam Liza Vice-president, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
49	Afroja Aktar Laizu Secretary General, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
50	Dalia Nasrin Joint-Secretary, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
51	Morsheda Losker Organizing Secretary, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
52	Nazma Begum Treasurer, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
53	Beauty Sikdar, Executive Committee Member, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
54	Naznin Aktar Nipa Member, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
55	Sahida Member, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
56	Umma Habiba Member, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
57	Shalma Begume Member, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network 01743876323	Woman	-
58	Lovely Member, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
59	Mahenur Begum Member, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
60	Rahima Begum, Member Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
61	Nadira Parvin Member, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
62	Nuru Nahar Joli Member, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
63	Lucky Afrin Member, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
64	Khadija Rahman Member, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
65	Farjana Yesmin	Woman	-

	Member, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network		
66	Chompa Goshami CSO Member, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
67	Ramola Debnath Member, Jhalokhati Aparajita District Network	Woman	-
68	Tahmina Akter, Union Aparajita Network, Charmonai Union, Barishal	Woman	-
69	Hena Begum, Union Aparajita Network, Charmonai Union, Barishal	Woman	-
70	Mst. Nasima Begum, Union Aparajita Network, Charmonai Union, Barishal	Woman	-
71	Nupur Begum, Union Aparajita Network, Charmonai Union, Barishal	Woman	-
72	Layle Begum, Union Aparajita Network, Charmonai Union, Barishal	Woman	-
73	Prova Islam Mitu, Union Aparajita Network, Charmonai Union, Barishal	Woman	-
74	Feroja Begum, Union Aparajita Network, Charmonai Union, Barishal	Woman	-
75	Ripa Sultana, Union Aparajita Network, Charmonai Union, Barishal	Woman	-
76	Yarunnesa Rebu, Union Aparajita Network, Charmonai Union, Barishal	Woman	-
77	Nargis Begum, Union Aparajita Network, Charmonai Union, Barishal	Woman	-
78	Rabaya Begum, Union Aparajita Network, Charmonai Union, Barishal	Woman	-
79	Sabina Easmin, Union Aparajita Network, Charmonai Union, Barishal	Woman	-
80	Tahmina Begum, Union Aparajita Network, Charmonai Union, Barishal	Woman	-
81	Khayrun Nahar, Union Aparajita Network, Charmonai Union, Barishal	Woman	-
82	Munni Yasmin, Union Aparajita Network, Charmonai Union, Barishal	Woman	-
83	Nadira Rahman Chairman (female), Tungibaria Union Council, Barishal	Woman	-
Other stakeholders (GoB officials, policy makers etc.)			
84	Dilara Khanun Deputy Director, Department of Woman and Children Affairs Jhlokathi District	Woman	-
85	Anuja Mondol UNO, Jhalolkathi Sadar	Woman	-
86	Sahidul Islam Director, Department of Social Service Barishal	-	Man
87	Talukdar Md. Yonus Former Member of Parliament	-	Man

	Barishal		
88	Shirin Akhter, former MP and General Secretary of JSD (political party) & Member of the National Aparajita Network	Woman	-
CSO representatives			
89	Fauzia Moslem, President of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad & member of the National Aparajita Network	Woman	-
90	Zakia K. Hasan, Executive Director Dipto Foundation & President, Women for Women & Member of the National Aparajita Network	Woman	-
91	Nasimun Ara Huq, President, Centre for Bangladesh Women Journalists & Member of the National Aparajita Network	Woman	-
Development Partners			
92	Dr. Adi Walker Director / International Team Leader Nagorikata: Civic Engagement Fund (CEF)	-	Man
93	Rehana Khan Senior Programme Officer Democracy, Human Rights, the Rule of Law and Gender Equality Development Cooperation Section Embassy of Sweden	Woman	-
94	Tanja Nader, Programme Manager, Governnace EU Delegation to Bangladesh	Woman	-
95	Lesley Richards Deputy Chief of Party Strengthening Political Landscape (SPL) Program Democracy International lrichards@democracyinternational.com	Woman	-
96	Lipika Rani Biswas Director for Women and Youth Program Democracy International lipika@democracyinternational.com	Woman	-

Terms of references

Contract no. 81080861 (B Mandate)
APARAJITA: External Review and Backstop.

End of Project Review - Aparajita Phase III

1. Background

Gender dynamics in Bangladesh have witnessed positive shifts in the last two decades, with notable advancements in women's roles across various sectors, including education, employment, income, entrepreneurship, community engagement, and political representation. However, persistent gender discrimination rooted in pervasive patriarchy and widespread poverty continue to pose challenges. Women encounter domestic violence, restricting their mobility beyond their homes. Despite some progress, women's active involvement in political structures remains limited, emphasising the critical need to enhance their standing, especially at the sub-national level.

The Aparajita project, funded by SDC and implemented by a coalition of four NGOs and Helvetas, has achieved several positive outcomes during its three phases implementation. The project has facilitated increased participation and elected positions for affiliated candidates within Local Government Institutions (LGIs), signaling positive developments. The initiative has effectively enhanced the capabilities, agency, and solidarity of elected women representatives, enabling them to exert influence at the sub-district level. This influence has translated into more pro-poor and gender-sensitive resource allocations and services, demonstrating the project's tangible impact. Moreover, Aparajita's interventions have created space for meaningful grassroots-driven policy dialogues, expanding opportunities for women in politics. As the project nears the end of its third phase in June 2024, it stands as a testament to successful interventions accelerating positive gender and governance outcomes.

Taking this success further and in complementarity with other on-going Swiss initiatives such as the Civic Engagement Fund CEF, Strengthening institutions, Policy and Services (SIPS), Astha, the Embassy of Switzerland in Bangladesh is assessing the relevance and added value of a new project aimed at further empowering women to play a more influential role in political decision-making processes, while complementing on-going Swiss initiatives in support to civil society, human rights and rule of law. Such a strategic initiative would align with the Swiss Cooperation Programme for Bangladesh 2022-2025 and for the upcoming Cooperation Programme post 2025, emphasising institution building and strengthening democracy. The project's objectives should be closely aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 5, targeting gender equality, and Goal 16, focusing on just, peaceful, and inclusive societies. Specifically, the project would seek to ensure women's full participation and equal opportunities in decision-making across political, economic, and public spheres. The project would directly contribute to the Government of Bangladesh's 8th Five-Year Plan (8FYP) and upcoming 9th Five-Year Plan (9FYP), creating a platform for Switzerland to engage in policy dialogues with the Government.

2. Objectives

The purpose of the mandate is twofold:

- 1) to carry out an end of project review to assess against the OECD DAC criteria and capture the lessons learnt.
- 2) to give some analytical inputs for the design a new project intervention that focuses on "Gender and Governance". This will include an analytical step that determines whether or not launching a new initiative on Gender would make sense, be relevant, or add value. And develop a coherent notion or idea about whether and why a new endeavour is the "right thing" to undertake, considering the current political context and on-going Swiss initiative that also address SDG 5 and governance (such as CEF, SIPS, and Astha). **The overarching goal is to enhance the impact of Swiss supported interventions, contributing to positive gender and governance outcomes in Bangladesh.**

3. Purpose

The end of project review will examine the results of the Aparajita project at the levels of outcomes and outputs, with overall implementation process and progress towards project targets at the time of the evaluation, covering the period from the start of the implementation period. The scope of the evaluation will be based on six OECD DAC criteria specified below, along with gender and social equity (GSE) added as a cross-cutting theme.

Criteria	Organisational indicators	Operational indicators
Relevance	Relevance of the Aparajita project to the priorities and policies of the SDC, the implementing partners, and other programs in terms of complementarity/added value.	Relevance of the Aparajita project to the priorities and policies of the GoB towards women and the needs/priorities of women at different levels, considering their situation in the project target areas.
Effectiveness	Effectiveness of the project and organisational structure to deliver expected results, considering organisational resources, capacities, competencies, and networks of the partners in relation to the Aparajita project's goal and outcomes focusing on women's empowerment and political participation.	Effectiveness of the implementing approaches in regard to capacitating women's participation, representation and agency under outcome 1, engaging men and other key stakeholders in support of women's political participation under outcome 2, and related advocacy for women's rights and political empowerment under outcome 3, with focus on both achievements and shortcomings, if any.
Efficiency	Efficiency with which the project has been managed so far in terms of coordination and implementation, monitoring and budgeting, quality assurance and learning at different levels between the partners	Efficiency in outreach to primary and secondary stakeholders, adaptation and replication of good practices, networking and alliance building, considering emerging opportunities, challenges and risks.
Impact	Impact of the Aparajita project so far in terms of both intended and unintended changes, positive and/or negative, in the organisational policies, strategies and/or practices of the partners, especially regarding good governance, gender, diversity and/or social inclusion	Impact of the Aparajita project so far in terms of both intended and unintended changes, positive and/or negative, paying particular attention to impacts affecting participating women (and their families/communities).

Sustainability	Sustainability of investments made in the resourcing and capacitating of partner organisations e.g., benefit their institutional priorities, mandate, and operations beyond the Aparajita project.	Sustainability of results and impacts beyond the project life cycle in terms of the continuation of the Aparajita networks, scaling of the project's good practices in support of women's empowerment and political participation; institutionalisation of policies and/or practices as a result of advocacy initiatives.
Coherence	To what extent does Aparajita project draw on the past experiences and comparative advantages of Helvetas and its implementation partners?	To what extent does the project fit with the Union Parishad's/Upazilla structures, processes and priorities, as is aligned with relevant initiatives and has engaged with other stakeholders?
Gender and Social Equity	Gender and Social Equity has been integrated in the management of organisational resources, including human and financial, and in partner agreements.	Gender and Social Equity is adequately reflected in the project's goal, outcomes, results, and indicators; is sex and disadvantaged group disaggregated in the project's MEAL framework and is analysed and reported on quantifiably and qualitatively.

The consultants will be responsible to conduct

- 1) the assessment of the Aparajita project and
- 2) The assessment, rational and value addition of a new Swiss initiative, that would complement / strengthen the GOV and GESI Swiss portfolio.

4. Scope

The new programme concept must build on specific lessons learned and best practices from current and past projects and programmes on women empowerment/gender and governance; and result in concrete, practical and well-documented recommendations. The assessment will identify aspects that will support the **decision of designing a new initiative**. The assessment should answer the following questions:

1. Results and lessons learned
 - Drawing from Swiss results and lessons learnt on Political Women Empowerment (successes, approaches / methodologies / instruments, partnerships / form of cooperation and coordination) could the empowering of women to play a more influential role in political decision-making processes be integrated into on-going Swiss initiatives or would it be strategically relevant to develop?
 - What did other development partners (DPs) do in the Women Empowerment/gender, are doing and will be doing that relate with the objectives of the new programme?
 - What international good practices exist on gender that the new programme could consider to build upon?
2. Context
 - What legal frameworks, institutions, rules, and procedures are missing?
 - methods, and materials in the gender/women empowerment space? Given the complementarity with SIPS, in which areas is technical support needed?

- Who are the relevant stakeholders of a new programme at local, intermediary, and national levels? Who among them are the drivers and restrainers of change, which the new programme aims to promote? What are their explicit and implicit interests and what power do they have to support or obstruct the objectives of a new programme?
- What are the challenges and opportunities for building a new programme?

3. Strategic orientation

- Based on the current status of Women Empowerment in Bangladesh, what can be the Swiss value addition in the arena and how? Where does Switzerland have a comparative advantage, e.g., in terms of expertise/know-how, methodologies or success? What are the gaps that can be filled by Switzerland?
- What will be the realistic objectives for the first phase (4 years) and for the whole project duration (12 years) in regard to Women Empowerment and in regard to the interlinked objective of supporting democratic local governance?
- What interventions should the new programme concentrate on to achieve its objectives in the first phase and for the whole project duration? How will these interventions / activity lines contribute to the objectives (Theory of Change) and programmatic ambition of the new programme?
- Who should be the target group/s of the new programme and its different interventions? What geographical areas should the programme focus on?

4. Implementation strategy

- What intervention approach/methodology/instruments should be chosen to implement? How can the existing country system (Government) be used at local, intermediary, and national level?
- What partners should project work with at different level to achieve its objectives? What should be the form of cooperation with these partners?
- What measures need to be taken to ensure the sustainability of the results of the programme and the scalability?
- What are the data available in similar projects in the sector as far as cost efficiency/ cost-benefits analysis is concerned?
- Operational organisation, management and administration
- What could be the organisational structure and steering mechanism of the programme?

5. Risk analysis

- What are the risks associated with the concept?

Based on the outcomes of the assessment the consultants should develop a concept note for a possible new initiative or the integration of a components into on-going initiatives.

The concept note should be built around SDC guidelines for a ProDoc. (see annex):

5. Methodology and Procedure

5.1 Work Methods

The consultant(s) conducting the assignment will use both qualitative and quantitative methods to gather relevant information to assess the project's performance, and to draw lessons learned and based on the lessons develop the new project.

The consultant(s) will:

- Review all key background documentation related to the programme and overall context (such as project annual and bi-annual reports, baseline report, project document and its annexes, publications and other relevant recent documentation in the area of Women Political Empowerment in Bangladesh);
- Assess the quality of Monitoring and Evaluation report and the process followed;
- Collect testimonials (e.g., personal feedback, case studies) from the beneficiaries on processes and results of the interventions;
- Meet key stakeholders in Bangladesh, conduct interviews with project staff, national and sub-national senior management, and project stakeholders including (and more importantly) primary beneficiaries and relevant ministries;
- Meet with other development partners working on related and/or similar interventions;
- Make structured visits to programme sites and interview beneficiaries, and observe physical, social and institutional developments/results;
- Briefing with the Embassy of Switzerland to discuss the work plan and approach;
- Organise focus group / brainstorming discussions as relevant.
- Prepare a draft report and incorporate comments of the Embassy, and partners in the final report.
- The consultants will collaborate with the Embassy's concerned team in formulating the concept note, upon which the Embassy will make a decision on further steps to be taken.

5.2 Deliverables

- **An inception report** including a detailed work plan, which highlights the key milestones and deliverables, including the methodology and processes for data collection – including tools and techniques – to be undertaken. **A joint work plan** needs to be submitted to the embassy. **The inception report** must be approved by the Embassy;
- Briefing with the Embassy of Switzerland to discuss the workplan and approach;
- Tools and defined techniques used for primary information and data collection. These tools and techniques must be approved by the Embassy, before usage;
- **Draft report containing two parts:** (i) the end of project report and (ii) a concept note to enable the embassy to take an informed decision
- Presentation of the draft report to the broader Embassy team that highlights key preliminary findings and recommendations -(not more than 12 slides);
- Briefing and debriefing of the in-country mission addressing the scope of work;
- **Submission of the final report** as specified in the scope of work, including at least two feedback loops with revisions. The ETR report should be a maximum of 10 pages related to the end-term review (A4, Normal margin, Arial 11, single space) with an executive summary of a maximum of 1.5 pages, which reads as a standalone document. All other information should be annexed;
- The Assessment Grid of the DAC Criteria must be completed and attached to the final report;
- **Submission of the concept note** to enable the embassy to take an informed decision on what to do next, which shall be structured along the Embassy's requirements, including at least two feedback loops with revisions. The concept note should be a maximum of 08 pages (A4, Normal margin, Arial 11, single space) with an executive summary of a maximum of 1.5 pages, which reads as a standalone document. All other information should be annexed;
- **Submission of final concept** as per the annexed checklist; and
- Recommend additional and/or supporting analyses and follow-up actions, if required.

5.3 Team Composition

An external international consultant and national consultant will be engaged while the international consultant will have the responsibility to submit the quality deliverables (i.e international consultant takes the lead on writing the report and presenting etc. The total duration of the mandate will be of maximum 15 working days for the international consultant and 10 days for the national consultant, including document reviews, field visits and report writing.

5.4 Timeline

This assignment is for up to 15 working days for the international consultant and 10 days for the national consultant between May 2024 and June 2024, a minimum of 10 input days should be used in country and the remaining input days can be used for remote work. The input days will be used as follows:

Activity	Time-frame and Responsible		Place
Desk research	2 days for both consultants,		Remote work
Visit to project areas	4 days for both consultants,		
Bilateral consultations and group discussions	1 day - Consultants with Helvetas, DPs, relevant ministries, etc.		Dhaka
Preparatory consultation and Validation workshop	1 day - Consultants with project staffs and other stakeholders		Dhaka
Debriefing with the Embassy	1 day - Consultants with the Embassy		Dhaka
First draft report and related annexure	1 days for International Consultant	1 day for national consultant	Remote work
Create a well-funded concept note that is supported by data first to determine if starting a new project is "the right thing to do."	2 days for international consultant	1 day for national consultant	
Final deliverables (review report and concept note)	3 days for international consultants	3 days for national consultant	Remote work
Travel	2 days for international consultant		
Total days	17 days	14 days	

5.5 Next steps

Application deadline	30 March 2024
Evaluation of applications	April 2024
In-country evaluation and research activities incl. de-briefing with the Embassy of Switzerland	May 2024
Draft ETR report and concept note submission	1st week of June 2024
Adjustment of feedback and final report submission	Mid-June 2024

5.6 Required Qualifications of the International Consultant

- A minimum of 10 years' experience in women's empowerment and governance in developing regions, including substantial experience in South Asia and preferably in Bangladesh;
- Knowledge and expertise in women's empowerment, particularly political empowerment, and gender and local governance.
- Hands-on experience with minimum 5-7 years of relevant experience in the design and implementation of governance/women's empowerment programmes/projects, and related capacity building and cross-cutting aspects;
- Sound knowledge on local governance, public participation and gender issues in rural development;
- Experience in using methodologies including system approach in evaluations, outcome harvesting, and evaluating transformation;
- Relevant experience with results-based management;
- Demonstrated experience conducting cost effectiveness analysis / economic analysis for evaluating project efficiency;
- Proven ability to produce analytical reports and a good command of English;
- Track record of successful consultancies on developing high level strategic documents, including developing programme/project documents; Ability to bring gender-sensitive and disability-inclusive dimensions into the evaluation in the design, data collection, analysis and report writing of the evaluation;
- Excellent analytical skills with the ability to analyse and interpret data from a range of sources;
- Flexibility and responsiveness to changes and demand;
- Client-orientation and openness to feedback; Ability to work efficiently and effectively in situations with tight and demanding deadlines; and
- Knowledge of South Asia and/or Bangladesh development issues is highly desirable.

Required Qualifications of the National Consultant

- A minimum of 10 years' experience in gender, women's empowerment and governance in Bangladesh;
- Knowledge and expertise in women's empowerment, particularly political empowerment, and gender and local governance.
- Hands-on experience with minimum 5-7 years of relevant experience in the design and implementation of governance/women's empowerment programs/projects, and related capacity building and cross-cutting aspects;
- Sound knowledge on local governance, public participation and gender issues in rural development;
- Experience in using methodologies including system approach in evaluations, outcome harvesting, and evaluating transformation;
- Relevant experience with results-based management;
- Demonstrated experience conducting cost effectiveness analysis / economic analysis for evaluating project efficiency;
- Proven ability to produce analytical reports and a good command of English;
- Ability to bring gender-sensitive and disability-inclusive dimensions into the evaluation in the design, data collection, analysis and report writing of the evaluation; and
- Excellent analytical skills with the ability to analyse and interpret data from a range of sources.

6 Administration and Coordination

The consultant will be contracted by the Embassy of Switzerland in Bangladesh, and the consultant fees will be defined as per SDC's norms and criteria. In addition, consultants will be paid the daily flat rate for subsistence and actual accommodation and transport costs. The consultants are expected to settle their own accommodation bills and airfare, to be reimbursed upon presentation of the original bills only. Details of the budget will be part of this Terms of Reference, based on final agreements between SDC and the consultants.

The consultant will be reportable to the Embassy. All reports and documents prepared during the assignment will be treated as the property of Embassy. All resulting documents and output materials therefore cannot be sold, used, shared and reproduced in any manner without prior approval of the Embassy. The Embassy will assist the consultants in:

- Briefing, planning and debriefing discussions and developing plans for field trips, and review activities;
- Providing relevant written materials, documents, reports (e.g., Cooperation Programme, Project Document, reports etc.)
- Helvetas will provide relevant documents for and assist the consultants during the field visit, including the linking up with relevant stakeholders, meetings, consultations, etc.

7. Application Procedure

Interested candidates, including consulting firms and individual consultants, are invited to send an application package, including the below-listed documents, in English to the following email address: sabina.yasmein@eda.admin.ch by 10 April 2024 (2 weeks from the date of launch)

- 1) An expression of interest, of maximum four pages, stating how the assignment will be undertaken and demonstrate that the required expertise and competencies are met. A CV must be annexed to the document.
- 2) Financial proposal: the financial proposal shall be submitted in Swiss Francs (CHF) for the international consultant and in Bangladeshi Taka (BDT) for the national consultant using the form/s in the Annex to these Terms of References.

In the subject line, please indicate "End of Project Review".

8. Selection of the Consultant(s)

Only complete applications with all the documents described above and submitted before the deadline will be considered.

The consultant will be selected by the Embassy based on their professional experience relevant to the mandate, as per CV and references, the general concept proposal and the financial offer.

The contract will be awarded by the Embassy of Switzerland in Bangladesh based on the analysis of technical and financial proposals received in response to these terms of reference.

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