INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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Interviewer: Varanya Chaubey

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CHAUBEY: My name is Varanya Chaubey, and I'm here with Dr. Zahurul Alam, Director of Election Working Group in Dhaka. Thank you so much for participating in this interview.

ALAM: *Thank you.*

CHAUBEY: I'd like to begin by asking you a little bit about your personal background. So would you describe the position that you hold now?

ALAM: *Yes, currently I am working as Director of Election Working Group (EWG). This is the highest position in the Secretariat of the coalition of 33 NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and civil society organizations that are involved in good governance and electoral process. I have been involved in this organization since 2006 and prior to that I worked with different international agencies including the United Nations, CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency), and many other international agencies. Actually my career is with international agencies. I was never involved with government services in the country. So I worked with World Bank, ADB (Asian Development Bank), and other agencies, DFID (Department for International Development), etc., in different capacities. But with the United National Development Programme I was head of the governance program, that is one of the relevant experiences for the position I'm holding. Subsequently, I managed the electoral project funded and sponsored by the Bangladesh Election Commission. That also was one of the relevant programs, so as a whole I was involved in electoral and other governance projects and programs for quite some time.*

CHAUBEY: Could you describe how you became involved in working with the Election Working Group?

ALAM: *I was interested in this area. The Asia Foundation is the coordinating agency of the donor agencies, the six donor agencies, so when the Asia Foundation advertised, I expressed my interest and then I was recruited, that's it.*

CHAUBEY: Would you describe how the Election Working Group was created?

ALAM: *It was created in January 2006 and officially launched in August 2006, after I had joined. I joined in August so the background is not fully known to me. It was an initiative taken by the Asia Foundation. Donors were interested in addressing elections that were supposed to take place on the 22nd of December 2007. So aiming for the election in January 2006, the group was formed. It was a matter of 35 organizations coming together to work for the common goal of having a free, fair and transparent election. The Asia foundation coordinated the work. The donors wanted to "channelize" funds through the Asia Foundation. So when I joined the funds were available. Initially from January until August, it had been mainly desk work at different levels to form different committees and select the director. I became director in August 2006. After the official launching of the Election Working Group in August, there were a lot of political conflicts going on between the major parties in the country relating to elections.*

CHAUBEY: What were the sorts of committees that were formed or that are still in existence?

ALAM: *Actually there are several committees. Each month we have a plenary committee meeting. We had 35 partner organizations at the initial stage, but after formation, two organizations left the area and prior to the election, FEMA (Fair Election Monitoring Alliance) left. So at this moment we have 32 organizations.*

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CHAUBEY: In terms of the committees how they've changed?

ALAM: *Now in terms of committees, we have an executive and a plenary, these are the two major committees. In between the plenary and the executive committee, is the working committee. We have had more than one meeting per month of the working committee for the last three years. We have had about forty executive committee meetings and maybe 35 plenary meetings, held on a regular basis.*

             Apart from that we have a program committee that includes a supporting committee, material committee, and training committee. So the program committee is divided into three parts and we convene a relevant committee meeting whenever it is needed such as when there is a relevant total program activity analysis or identification planned. We call it a reporting committee if it is related strictly to reporting, or material committee or training committee, whatever may be.

             We have also a media committee and an ethics committee. We have special meetings when we feel that the executive committee should be extended, because not all partners were available. When we have an executive committee meeting and some members are in Dhaka, but are not members of the executive committee, we have an extended executive committee meeting so that we can have a broad group for discussion.

             There also can be ad hoc committees formed for different selective organizations who have skill in different areas. We can choose those organizations and get their feedback.

CHAUBEY: Would you describe how the activities of the Election Working Group have changed over the last three years from the beginning up to the present?

ALAM: *Initially the plan was to address the election of 22nd January 2007. For that purpose, beginning in August, we planned different formats for observation and reporting protocols and all of those things. Those were the basic things we did. But at a certain point, it became evident that the planned election for that date was not going to be a participatory election. If the election was boycotted by the major political parties then it would be a one-sided election without credibility and would not be accepted by the international community or by the people. So at that juncture, the Election Working Group decided that we should not be observing or conducting any voter or civic education for that election. We expressed to the media that we were not going to be a part of the election planned for the 22nd of January 2007, if the major political parties did not come together to participate. We had planned for deployment of some 168,000 observers all over the country, but after our decision, it would have been a misuse of resources because it was evident that it was not going to be a participatory election. Investing so many resources yielding only minimal results would not have been judicious for us. Taking that into account, we didn't participate. We declared that we were not going to be a part of that activity.*

             Now following that, there had been several political changes in the country. Those changes actually provided some scope for other activities. So after 1/11, we had a caretaker government. The caretaker government I think twice or thrice it was reshuffled and changed structurally. It was changed actually, there were different categories.

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As a common civilian and also as Director of this group, I understood that the major problem in the democratization process in this country was the lack of a good electoral voter list. The list that was with the Election Commission was not trusted by people or by major political parties because it was pretty inflated. There were 15 million extra names on the voter list. It is very easy to make that calculation because there is a census benchmark from the census in 2001. According to that census, we should have 57% of our population who are 18 years of age. So taking that calculation and the population growth rate, in 2007 the size of the voter population was 15 million more than that. It was understood that that voter list was not correct. By that time, the Election Commission was reshuffled and we had a new commission. We felt that this commission was quite different from what we had in previous times in terms of capacity and in terms of providing autonomy. The Election Commission felt the electoral voter roll was the foundation of the electoral process itself. If you don't have a good voter list you cannot expect to have good election.

Taking that into account, the Election Commission decided to go for having a correct voter list. The Election Commission, in one year's time, with the support of other agencies and the civil-society organizations and the donors, was able to create a good electronic voter list with photographs. It was quite a small span of time to address 81 million voters in this country. It was quite a lot of work. The Election Commission started the voter registration process on the first of August 2007. The Election Working Group has good communication with the Election Commission. The Election Commission has a very good habit of having consultations with civil society groups prior to taking any decision that may concern the public interest. They respect the civil society organizations and that is very much appreciated by us.

The army, with equipment, was available to help with voter registration. The Election Commission with its network was also available to register the people. Voters needed to come to the center for registration. It is not possible for even the biggest Election Commission in the world to address 81 million voters and bring them to the centers. So they needed support from the civil society organizations.

The voters, especially from the remotest areas, had to understand the utility of going to the voting center and getting themselves on the voter list. They had to feel that this would ultimately benefit them. So the Election Commission communicated with us and we agreed that it was a matter which should be dealt with by the civil society organizations, especially those with the strength to cover the whole of Bangladesh, all 81 million voters.

The Election Commission subsequently had discussions with civil society organizations and we signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the 27th of July 2007. Immediately after that we started our voter awareness program related to voter registration process.

CHAUBEY: The Memorandum of Understanding was about voter registration?

ALAM: *It was about voter listing, voter registration, voter awareness relating to the voter registration process, not for any other purpose. So the Election Commission conducted the voter registration process from the first of August 2007 until June 2008, for almost one year. They felt that it was necessary that we work together and It was also important for us because the electoral officials and the bureaucrats and law enforcement agencies, and the army. The local levels also*

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needed to collaborate. It was an emergency period and many things were not allowed, so we felt that it is relevant that when you conduct activities like rallies or disseminate messages through loud speakers or distribute leaflets or we had special meetings with vulnerable groups, or distribute the booklets, or display the banners, we needed to have support from the local administration because at any point of time, they might restrict it.

So we came to an understanding with the Election Commission whereby the Election Commission would send messages to all parts of the country saying, "The Election Working Group is supporting our voter awareness program related to voter registration, so voters come". They would communicate that to the structure and administration and security personnel. We also had subsequent meetings with the military. They also informed all their network at the field levels.

The MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) was relevant so that we could work together for that particular purpose. It had nothing to do with election observation. It was the voter list. So the voter list preparation and the voter awareness program was part of our job. We had three objectives: election observation, monitoring, voter and civic education. So that was the mandated job that we needed to do. We had to make people aware that they needed to be voters. And for that purpose, we should prepare whatever instruments needed. Donors also agreed to support us.

CHAUBEY: How did you go about conducting the voter awareness for the registration process? Would you talk a little bit about your strategies?

ALAM: *Actually, first we involved all the partner organizations in the process. Our partners are spread all over Bangladesh. They're not only in one place, in Dhaka city. It made our life easier, because if a partner is from Jessore, he has more influence on that society and has a good network there. So our first strategy was to involve all the partners in all the activities.*

The second was planning. How should we go about it, what shall we do? What would be the activities? So in planning, we identified the five most relevant activities. We needed to think about the cost effectiveness of the activities. So when we talked about voter awareness program activities related to voter listing, we also thought about what activities would be cost-effective and would attract the most people. That was desk work. We identified activities, we had our program committee meeting and executive committee and plenary meeting and we shared with the committees that these were the tactics that we are planning for. Then we agreed on the relevant activities.

Then we had to decide what would be the scale and range of activities at the grassroots level. So we decided we should cover the whole country, because we had a network all over Bangladesh. Then we decided to incorporate some additional activities like public service announcements (PSAs) on the radio and TV channels. We had three public service announcements during that time. For two or three months, continuously, there were PSAs on voter awareness and the voter registration process. Those were quite interesting and all the channels aired them.

Among the activities, we had "miking," you understand miking? Miking is through microphone, it is message dissemination through a loudspeaker. That is actually the scientific word.

CHAUBEY: Are these mobile microphones or is it in one place in an area?

ALAM: *It is mobile. Actually we decided that in each of the unions we should have 22 days of miking, twenty-two days of message dissemination through loud speakers, quite a lot actually. The system is that you use a relevant technology for a relevant area. So if it happens in an area due to geographical conditions or lack of infrastructure that the rickshaws are not available then you take a boat, with the microphones and banners on the boat. If rickshaws are available, use rickshaws. If vans are available, use vans. There were some places where there was no road. In that case, the Secretariat requested that partners go to the local mosques or where ever they have microphones, give them the slogan or the leaflet and ask them to read it out when everybody comes. In that case, then, people became aware. The hilly regions, char and haor areas lack roads. So, EWG had to conduct its voter awareness program using boats. In most remote areas, EWG disseminated messages on haat days (weekly market days). Where modern technology was unavailable, we used conventional methods for message dissemination. For example in the remote areas of the hill districts and in many char areas, EWG used megaphones on haat days. The mosques and other religious institutions were also used for the purpose, especially during the weekly prayer days.*

                In those areas, to attract people took work. Sometimes a clown was used. They didn't have any electronic device so they used conventional devices for making the speech louder and they disseminated messages in that way. So we used different ways of doing this. In Dhaka city it is quite OK, you have a rickshaw, you have a banner and then two loud speakers and they can proceed. They can stay at a place for fifteen minutes, disseminate the message and go to the next destination and disseminate the message.

                For Dhaka City and for most of the places that was quite OK. But for remotest places we used indigenous technology. So that was one of the things, " miking". Then we had rallies. We are talking about the big rallies. We planned for rallies at upazila [sub-district] levels. You know there are five hundred upazilas in Bangladesh. In each upazila we had big rallies with big banners. We invited government officials. The people's representatives, local chairmen, were very much interested. Local social leaders and elites were also interested to promote EWG voter awareness activities.

                I also joined in some of the rallies at the very remotest places. I went to Kurigram, Kinajpur, then Bandarban, Jhalokati. I also went to Bhola, in the southern part. I found that the organized rallies are effective when the voter registration process starts in a place. The voter registration process went on a rolling basis; it didn't start in all of the country at one time. They had to move from one place to another place. Whenever this process started at a place, the rallies were important to inspire the people especially if you go with large banners and microphones and with good slogans. Those slogans were formulated here in the Secretariat. What we did is we sat with the program committee and we chose the best possible slogan. In Bangla, it was, "Let's go all together and get registered as a voter." So that was a slogan. The program committee formulated it here. First, we'd shout out one slogan in the Secretariat to my colleagues and then we showed the slogan to the program committee. That's only one example. There are several thousands. We showed them to the program committee and they would agree, maybe with some modifications. Then it went to the executive committee. Once they agreed, I sent it by e-mail to all the destinations. I said, "This is the measurement of your banner and the background should be of this

color, a yellow color. The text should be of this font and this color. You should place this thing in these places, in the junctures, in the marketplaces and you should put fifty of them for this area". So the details are given to them. They knew everything, I mean everything, all instructions used to go from this place.

Then we sent out monitors, program people. They monitored, and if they saw everything was OK, they reported it, but if they didn't see the banners, they reported to me and I would communicate with the relevant organization who was responsible for that area to ensure that everything is in place.

CHAUBEY: Why was it decided that the materials would be produced by the partner organizations in different spots in different parts of the country rather than producing centrally and then distributing to all the areas.

ALAM: _Well, that would take longer time. We could do that at the center, but it would be 100,000 or more banners. It would be really time-consuming because if you asked anybody to produce 100,000 banners, 45 feet long and 3-1/2 feet wide and with the digital logo, then it would take one year to produce them. So it was relevant for us to give everything, all the instructions, and let them do it. It also creates a sort of ownership by the partners. They needed to be part of the process also. So we felt that it is relevant in terms of time, in terms of cost, and in terms of effectiveness. It is better that the partners get involved in other things. But they needed to be guided about how they do it and when they do it. That's what we did._

CHAUBEY: Who were usually the participants?

ALAM: _Participants are the general mass, but in addition, we also requested that they involve local social leaders, local people's representatives, the teachers. Then if government officials come you involve them. So at the very beginning that will create a very good sense for the people._

CHAUBEY: Did you consider involving political party representatives at all?

ALAM: _We didn't want to give any political color to anything. We are completely neutral. It might have created an idea among the people that it was going to be a political manner. We just avoided that. But if he is the chairman, if he is a people's representative, as the people's representative, he can always come. He is not representative of the political party, he is representative of the people. So that's quite OK._

Then we had special meetings to target special people. All voters are our target people, there's no doubt about that. But there are some places where you need to support vulnerable people like ethnic and religious minorities, like the disabled people, like women, like people from hard to reach areas. So we targeted those people, say in Gaibandha. It is a shore area, small islands in the villages which are nearby the big rivers. The characteristic trait of this area is that there is no infrastructure facility. They do not have roads, they do not have any type of communication, only on foot and through the fields can they come to a certain place. They were the remotest. They keep to themselves, communicate with the other communities only when there were weekly markets. Maybe one person has a radio so they listen to the radio. PSAs encouraged them by radio. But simultaneously what we did, we had a special meeting provision for these remote people or for the women. In this society, women are in a very special place. So we needed to have a system whereby village women are brought together and

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given certain messages. Women are important for our development purposes and how they can participate. What impact their elections can bring in, how they can raise their voice.

In the election this time, there were more women voters. They were the main voter participants. I want to give some credit to us that we could mobilize women voters. We selected one village. In the villages our partners have their own network. Some partners have their own groups, some partners have their own personnel who work there. From the village side, we have also our own network. The Election Working Group also has its comprehensive network all over the country. We have 64 district coordinators in 64 districts. At certain points of time we had 5000 union coordinators, 300 constituency coordinators and 500 upazila coordinators that we recruited. So we have this system in place. When the time comes we recruit constituency coordinators and we recruit upazila and Thana coordinators, we recruit union and ward coordinators. These are all trained people. What we did during this time, we recruited appropriate people, using the network of the relevant organization at the local level. Then we make women at the villages come together. We read the leaflet or booklet, whatever we had. Then we explained to them why they needed to be a voter and that they needed to get registered if they wanted to vote. If they cannot vote, they cannot choose their own representative. So these were messages that were explained to them in a way which is understandable to the women.

At the end of the day, we also had a system of reporting from the fields. We also shared our information with the Election Commission On a monthly basis we shared how we are progressing in our voter awareness program related to voter listing. By June 2008, at the end of the voter awareness program related to voter listing, we calculated that we accomplished 110,000 miking days, I mean in 110,000 days we disseminated message continuously through loudspeakers. Then we accomplished about 10,000 rallies, more than 6000 special meetings. We demonstrated with 13,000 banners all over the country and we distributed 1.8 million leaflets all over the country only related to the voter awareness program for voter listing.

After that we concentrated on elections. In August 2008, we had four city cooperation and eleven or nine ministry elections. So the elections were a trial for our voter and civic education. This time it was in a different manner, it was not voter listing. Once the voter listing was accomplished, MOU was not in place. We just said to the Election Commission that from now on there is no MOU, we are observers, so as observers, we cannot do contract work. We shall observe how you do your work. Now you will be having elections and we shall observe as an independent civil society organization. We had voter and civic education. Like PSAs, those were different messages. Those were messages such as, "You need to get out to vote. If you don't vote there is no relevance in getting enlisted on the voter list. So as a voter it is your duty and your responsibility that you vote and you choose the right candidate, the candidate who will talk for you, the candidate who will work for you, who will address your own local problems." The voter awareness program related to elections, those were completely different. There was no MOU in that case with the Election Commission so we worked independently during that time.

CHAUBEY: What were the challenges of conducting civic education without the MOU and in an emergency period?

ALAM: There are two points. First, the MOU was not relevant because as observers we needed to work independently even if it was very difficult. We didn't need MOU for that purpose. So that was one thing. Second, by that time, the Election Working Group was the major civil society organization in the electoral area. Everybody knew about the Election Working Group's mandate: the local level, the administration, the army, the people, the political parties. I gave letters to all of the deputy commissioners saying, " This is the organization that will be working in your area. I request that you provide all support to my organization".

I wrote a similar letter to the Election Commission also, "Please give instructions to all your networks so that my organizations can work appropriately in respective places". On the one hand, the Election Working Group became a major stakeholder in this area and on the other hand, it became a reputable organization and a trusted partner. Everybody believed in our capacity. We faced no problems other than problems relating to a lack of knowledge of certain people in the administration. Those incidents were minimal. If you had 300 constituencies or 500 upazilas or 81 million voters, you can accept that there are 10 incidents that take place; otherwise it went all right.

CHAUBEY: Would you be able to offer an example of some strategy that you were using over the course of your voter list education program that you changed mid course to fine tune it?

ALAM: Yes, actually, what happened, I remember how we started this process. We signed the MOU on the 27th of July. The Election Commission shared all documents with us about when they were going to do what in which place. So we knew that the Election Commission was going to start their voter registration process in August 2007. I went immediately, after signing the MOU, to Rajshahi, one of the Divisional HQs, wherefrom the BEC planned to initiate its voter registration process, and I organized a meeting with my partner organizations responsible for those areas. I sat with them and I explained that by tomorrow they had to start the voter awareness program because the Election Commission and the army were going to start theirs on the first of August [initially BEC planned to start voter registration on 1st August, which then was shifted to 11 August 2007.] The plan was that we start one week ahead of their work. In the first place, we didn't have one week's time but for the subsequent places that was the plan, that we start our voter awareness program one week ahead of their plan and we continue to the end of the process, approximately 37 days. Generally they used to be in place for one month and we planned for 37 days.

What I did, I went to Rajshahi and with my partners; we chalked out the activities they would start there. I asked them what would be activities relevant for this area and those activities we chose. Then we gave a work plan to them. We discussed together who would be doing what and how they would report to us. So the reporting protocol and reporting system and the work plan were developed there. We started that program with urgency. Then we had a press conference about the initiation of the program.

We did some refining related to the size of banners. Initially we went for six-foot banner with a different color. But we found it would make sense to have fewer, but bigger banners. So we went for that. In some places we found that an activity wasn't relevant and instead, we should undertake some mobile culture functions in a pickup van with better results. These were changes. Our strategy was that if it fits with local customs, then use that formula. We gave guidelines, but it's not the Bible. You use your own area's requirements also.

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Generally it was done our way, but particular places had flexibility to use their own ideas about what would be more relevant.

CHAUBEY: Now could you talk a little bit about some of the challenges you faced coordinating 32 organizations?

ALAM: *In Bangladesh, if you get three persons together, there is a political party. That is a joke; actually, it's not correct. In the Election Working Group, 32 organizations worked in a very coordinated manner. At all the executive committee meetings and plenary meetings, we were able to make the organizations understand that this was a noble thing that we were doing and if we worked sincerely then it would really make changes in the electoral arena in the democratic process.*

The challenge was that there was lots of work. But that challenge we had to take. But otherwise, the work was done in a very amenable manner and everybody was very cooperative. Some challenges were related to a lack of a local network for some partners. During our monitoring, we identified those areas. Immediately we informed the relevant partner that perhaps he needed to provide other people in this place, because it was not addressed appropriately. So they were under continuous monitoring, the whole process was under continuous monitoring.

CHAUBEY: You mentioned that EWG recruited coordinators, how did you go about doing that?

ALAM: *We recruited different coordinators. First, district coordinators were stationed in all the districts. Initially we were trying to decide what would be the modality for recruitment and what would be the reporting structure and protocol and what would be the communication system that we should develop with them. At first, we felt that the Secretariat should recruit the district coordinators. We thought about this option. But at a later stage, we found that it was better to involve our partner organizations in the process, because the partner organizations are responsible for different districts. So they're responsible for districts, constituencies, upazilas, Thanas and even unions. They are involved in the process directly. So it would be relevant for us to have partner involved in the recruitment process. Let them recruit a person who would be responsible to the Secretariat at the same time he would be responsible to the partner organizations.*

We could ask the partners to change the district coordinator or provide support to him. There is backup support for the district coordinator. We give professional support to him and we give all the directions and guidelines. Whenever we give any kind of directions to the district coordinator, we always send a copy to the partner organizations so they also know what the district coordinators are doing. Sometimes we request the partner organizations to do something in the area, perhaps involve the district coordinator in something that is an NGO focal point..

For the voter awareness program, district coordinators were more directly linked to the secretary. For other purposes also, district coordinators were more directly linked to the Secretariat because we executed or implemented all major activities through the district coordinators. They are our hands at the local levels. To support that hand, we had relevant organizations in those places.

CHAUBEY: You mentioned materials were created here and then you communicated the specifics to the local [inaudible], could you talk about the kind of committees that were created to create materials?

ALAM: *Whenever we talked about materials, it was a discussion within the Secretariat. My program staff and I made it a basis for discussion about the materials, the number of materials and the slogans or messages. But that is a very raw sort of thing. We used to get support from the Asia Foundation. When their international experts came, we used to send those materials and slogans to the specialist. They looked at the materials to tell us if they thought they were OK. Then we shared that with the program committee. So for all materials, leaflets or posters or whatever, we called the program committee meeting as a whole to sit down together to go through whatever material we produced. We had a big screen and multimedia. From morning until evening, we would sit with those materials and refine them. Once that was done, then I called an executive committee meeting to show it to the executive committee. So once that was approved, it went to the plenary committee that met each month.*

CHAUBEY: You mentioned that you also had some interactions with the military. What was that experience like for a civil society organization to interact with the military? What were some of the challenges?

ALAM: *It was a state of emergency and the military provided support to the voter listing process. I am sure that without the intervention or support from the military, it would have been really difficult for the Election Commission or any other organization to have the voter list with photographs in such a short time. Then also you had national ID cards.*

This was actually a great job, a huge job. I found the military cooperative in all the places, more cooperative than even the civil administration in some places. Whenever we went to any military officer, they just received us in a very decent manner and spoke about the business. They understood what we were doing. I would say that it was a great thing that they did. That was at the grassroots level. Generally for a district, a lieutenant colonel was responsible. For an Upazila or Thana major was responsible. Generally this was the structure but it may be different actually, I'm not from the army.

Apart from that, we had meetings with Major General (Md) Shafiqul (Islam), who was responsible for the whole project, and then Brigadier General Shahadat Hossain (Chowdhury,) who was the Project Director. So I had regular meetings with Mr. Shahadat Hossain each week. So I had good communication. I meet now with Brigadier General Shahadat Hossain and all the three election commissioners. Now also, whenever they have any occasion, any activity, they always invite us and they discuss with us about relevant matters and how to proceed. So we do it in a very collaborative way. I would say it was very satisfactory. There were no incidents whereby the army prevented my work, except in one or two places where army personnel wanted to have say T-shirts in seven days time, but we didn't budget for T-shirts. The district coordinator informed us that the army commander needed to have T-shirts for a rally, but we didn't have the budget for that so what do we do? In that case, I needed to intervene and talk to the commander saying, "Look, we cannot afford to do that. If we do that for the whole country, then it will be a great expenditure for us. If you can accommodate your T-shirt from your budget, please do that. But we cannot go beyond that."

In some places the civil administration planned for a big social program inviting some artist from Dhaka. Now that's a great expenditure and we couldn't afford it. In that case, we just told them, "Okay, if you have matching funds, you just match it with our fund and then have it. If that is more relevant, we can be a part of that, but you have to match your fund with us."

CHAUBEY: What were some of the steps that you took here at the Secretariat to ensure that people working in the field on behalf of EWG remained neutral?

ALAM: *This is basic. They needed to be neutral. So whenever there was a question of recruitment at the local level, say a union coordinator or a constituency coordinator or a district coordinator, there was clear instruction. There is a code of ethics of our own which is written very clearly that a person working with the Election Working Group cannot be linked to any political party directly or indirectly in any manner. He cannot express his view openly about his own affiliation to any political party. These are the codes that they have to maintain. This information is known by all the organizations and shared with them. With that consensus, they came together to form a coalition. So that was the bottom line.*

From our side, how did we monitor? We monitored continuously through the district coordinators. Theoretically, if we found anything, obviously there would be a decision taken urgently. There had been some letters that came to me without any signatures that this person belongs to that party or similar things what, but since those were without signatures, we didn't give them much importance, but we told the organizations that a letter had come. So you just look at the person. If there is anything, then you need to change the person. That is the bottom line, that we needed to ensure for the organizations, for the Secretariat people and for the people who are working at the grassroots levels with and on behalf of the EWG at any level, that they cannot be partisan.

CHAUBEY: When you recruited the district coordinators, was there an applicant's pool? Were they teachers or some sort of group that you recruited from generally?

ALAM: *No, nothing was predetermined. What we wanted was qualified and experienced people who could organize certain things at local levels. It is not necessarily that he was involved in the electoral process all the time. A person who can give leadership at the local level, who can organize certain things, who can communicate with different stakeholders, with the governmental person, the military and the local government representatives and who is not affiliated to any political party or any subordinate organization of any political party, these are the criteria that we wanted to maintain. It was not difficult to find 64 good district coordinators.*

CHAUBEY:

  So would you describe any innovations that you have seen developed here that you think were successful and deserve attention elsewhere?

ALAM: *I think the preparation of the voter list was a great job. If this can be replicated in any other place, it would be a great achievement, especially within the short time span to produce such a voter list with national ID card. That is a great achievement that people should take into account. At the same time, whenever a*

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government of any country goes for any initiative, then it is relevant that they always have support from the civil society organizations, from the citizens, the citizen alliance or whatever may be. It is essential to have work done at the grassroots level successfully. You cannot use a "top down" approach. It's not feasible for any purpose. It is always better to use the people or the organizations that really work at the grassroots level and use their capacity to obtain expected results.

CHAUBEY: We've covered a lot of issues here, but is there anything you'd like to bring up now that I haven't brought up that you think we should talk about?

ALAM: *We discussed the voter awareness program and the voter and civic education. We could speak about elections. We addressed the national parliamentary election. This was a very big event for our country. Subsequently we had also upazila elections or sub-district elections. So these were the two big events that we contracted for in recent past.*

                The Election Working Group contributed to a great extent to both these elections by conducting voter and civic education and observing.

                In the national elections we deployed more than 150,000 election observers all over the country. We disseminated 9 million voter guards and we also paid for a number of PSAs, Public Service Announcements on the radio and TV. We observed both national and upazila elections in a manner that we planned for initially. We found that both elections were acceptable elections, except in some isolated incidents.

CHAUBEY: What were some of the challenges that observers faced in doing their jobs?

ALAM: *Challenges were related to the organizations themselves. The first thing was the accreditation cards. if they are not given in sufficiently ahead of the elections, it was difficult for an organization and for the election working group to plan appropriately. We needed to train people. We needed to know how many people would be deployed. And we needed to have the accreditation cards. At a certain point, if we trained 150,000 people and we do not get the accreditation cards, they are not allowed to work. In that case that money is wasted. So I think that is one of the things that must be taken into account by the Election Commission and by the government.*

CHAUBEY: Did you receive the cards on time this time around?

ALAM: *I would say in most places yes, but in many places no. In many places it was delayed and arrived at the very last moment. But by that time, hypothetically we felt we had the right number of observers. In each booth, we deployed one stationary observer and in addition to that, we also deployed mobile observers. So we trained all the people on time because we were convinced that we would get the accreditation card at some point. In the Election Commission, I had many policy dialogues with the election commissioners and I raised this issue about the accreditation card. They always confirmed that I was going to get the accreditation cards and I could proceed as planned.*

CHAUBEY: Why are they delayed in your view?

ALAM: *One is that the Election Commission doesn't have the manpower. The Election Commission uses different actors from the society or civil servants. The central*

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part of the Election Commission is very small for addressing such a big number of voters. So I think that is one of the reasons. In terms of manpower, especially, manpower and training need to be developed.

CHAUBEY: You mentioned that EWG was preparing for observation work for the 2007 election, but you would not be observing. What was the cost to you of that failed exercise, of that cancellation?

ALAM: *That's the financial part. From August until November 2006, a short period, we actually had fruitful activities we performed. In 2006, we prepared all the basic materials, all the forms and the protocols. So that was a very intensive time period. Before it was cancelled, there was a certain period up to when there was a decision about what the government was going to do. Accordingly we had to plan for ourselves. So maybe it was or two months that elapsed in between. After that we became clear about the voter registration process that was going to take place and we started planning for how to access the voter registration process. In the meantime, we created our communications with the Bangladesh Election Commission and with other stakeholders and we attended several meetings. There had been some electoral reforms also during this time. So we were busy with these things also.*

CHAUBEY: So the materials that you printed and prepared, were you able to reuse them for the 2008 election?

ALAM: *For that purpose, those materials were aimed at voter registration, not for the voting itself, so those were different materials. Some part of the materials might have been used but not all. Say, for the planned election of 2007, we prepared orange-colored T-shirts from the Election Working Group. Those were used during this election by the observers. The materials for voter registration were different messages about getting registered so that message could not be used for this purpose. Banners also had different slogans. So those could not be used. I think most of the materials were for very different activities; one is related to the voter listing process, another is election observation. That is why our materials and messages also changed. For that voter awareness program related to the voter listing process we had MOU, for other purposes, say election observation, we didn't go for that, we worked independently.*

CHAUBEY: Well, we've covered a lot of areas now and I'd like to thank you very much for all the information you provided as well as for your time, so thank you.

ALAM: *Thank you as well.*

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