

## CPD and Nagorikata Programme helped prevent a child marriage in Sherpur

A child marriage in Sherpur was prevented after the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), through its Nagorikata Programme, helped bring a community-level case to the attention of the Deputy Commissioner of Sherpur. The case involved *Ms Shikha Ravi Das*, a motherless adolescent from Araiani in Nalitabari Upazila, who was at risk of being married before reaching adulthood. The issue was identified through the work of a Citizen Group formed under the Nagorikata Programme by CPD and Indigenous Peoples Development Services (IPDS). When the case was presented to *Ms Farida Yasmin*, Deputy Commissioner and District Magistrate of Sherpur, during a consultation on 8 June 2026, she took prompt action. The child marriage was stopped, and the Sherpur District Administration extended support for *Ms Shikha's* education and safe living conditions.

This outcome shows how CPD's initiative under the Nagorikata Programme helped connect citizens, community evidence and local authorities in a practical and meaningful way. The intervention did not begin with a single event. It was the result of a longer process of building citizens' capacity, supporting them to identify local problems, helping them document evidence and creating a formal space where those concerns could be heard by the administration.

The **Nagorikata: Civic Engagement Fund (CEF)** Programme, titled **"Achieving a Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Society through Enhanced Engagement of Civil Society and Citizens in Bangladesh"**, works to strengthen citizen participation in local decision-making. The programme is jointly supported by the Embassy of Switzerland, Global Affairs Canada and the European Union, facilitated by GFA Consulting Group, and implemented by CPD.

Under this programme, CPD and IPDS formed four Citizen Groups in Sherpur Sadar, Nalitabari, Nakla and Jhenaigati upazilas. These groups were created to help local citizens engage more effectively with public institutions and raise concerns related to public service delivery. Through capacity-building activities, the Citizen Groups were oriented on how to identify service gaps, collect community-level evidence, document lived experiences and communicate their findings to local authorities in a constructive manner.

As part of this process, the Citizen Groups conducted a social audit on public health and maternal healthcare services in the four upazilas. The audit looked into the use and accessibility of government health facilities, the quality of services, maternal and institutional delivery, availability of doctors, medicines, beds and equipment, informal payments, corruption, discrimination, accessibility barriers and the overall accountability of local health services.

The social audit followed a mixed-method approach. A structured survey was conducted with 400 respondents. In addition, the process included eight focus group discussions, 14 key informant interviews and eight case studies. These methods allowed the Citizen Groups to combine statistical evidence with real-life experiences from communities.

The findings showed that public health services in Sherpur were uneven. Some areas were performing better than others, while several facilities faced shortages of doctors, medicines, beds, specialist services and essential equipment. The analysis also showed that service use was heavily concentrated at upazila health complexes, while community clinics and union-level health centres remained underused. Medicine supply was irregular in many places, and full satisfaction among service recipients was low.

Maternal healthcare emerged as a major concern. The audit found that institutional delivery remained limited, and many women still gave birth at home or in other unsafe settings. Respondents also reported delays in receiving medical attention, inadequate facilities, poor service experiences and barriers faced by disadvantaged groups. At the same time, the findings showed that improvement was possible where local administration, health workers and communities worked together. Jhenaigati, for instance, performed comparatively better on several indicators, including institutional delivery.

While the audit focused mainly on health and maternal healthcare services, the process also helped Citizen Groups identify other urgent social concerns affecting local people. One such case was that of *Ms Shikha Ravi Das*. Her situation reflected a wider reality: when poverty, family vulnerability and lack of institutional support come together, adolescent girls can face serious risks, including child marriage and disruption of education.

To share the findings and community concerns with the relevant authorities, CPD and IPDS organised a consultation on 8 June 2026 at the conference room of the Deputy Commissioner's Office in Sherpur. The meeting created an opportunity for Citizen Group members and social audit participants to speak directly with local authorities and present evidence from the field.

*Ms Farida Yasmin*, Deputy Commissioner and District Magistrate of Sherpur, attended the consultation as the Chief Guest. *Dr Muhammad Shaheen*, Civil Surgeon of Sherpur, was present as the Special Guest. Government officials from the concerned upazilas, including Upazila Health and Family Planning Officers, attended the meeting along with Citizen Group members, social audit participants and other stakeholders.

The welcome remarks were delivered by *Mr Sanjeeb Drong*, President of IPDS, and *Dr Dwijen Mallick*, Project Coordinator of the Nagorikata Programme at CPD. The social audit findings were presented by *Mr Md Mojahidul Islam*, Project Consultant, Nagorikata, CPD, and *Mr Md Jawadul Karim*, Monitoring and Evaluation Associate, CPD. The programme was moderated by *Mr Avra Bhattacharjee*, Additional Director, Dialogue, Communication and Outreach, CPD.

During the open discussion, the Citizen Groups presented the challenges they had identified through the social audit. Participants spoke about weaknesses in health services, shortages at local facilities, difficulties faced by service recipients and cases requiring urgent administrative attention. The case of *Ms Shikha Ravi Das* was presented as one such urgent issue.

*Ms Farida Yasmin* listened to the concerns raised during the meeting and responded immediately to issues that could be addressed through local administrative action. The most visible outcome was the prevention of Shikha's child marriage. On 9 June 2026, the Deputy Commissioner provided financial assistance to support *Ms Shikha's* continued education. The District Administration also committed to constructing a house for her through the Sherpur District Administration Foundation, considering her need for a safe and dignified living environment.

The Deputy Commissioner also initiated follow-up actions on other local-level concerns raised during the consultation and instructed relevant officials to take necessary steps within their respective areas of responsibility. This demonstrated that when community evidence is presented through an organised and credible process, local authorities can respond quickly and effectively.

For CPD and the Nagorikata Programme, the Sherpur experience offers an important example of how citizen engagement can move beyond discussion and lead to concrete change. CPD's role was

to create the enabling structure: forming Citizen Groups with IPDS, strengthening their capacity, supporting the social audit process, analysing the findings and facilitating dialogue with the local administration. The Citizen Groups brought forward the realities of their communities, while the Deputy Commissioner acted on the evidence placed before her.

The prevention of *Ms Shikha Ravi Das's* marriage is therefore not only an individual success story. It is also an example of how local accountability can work when citizens are organised, evidence is documented and public authorities are willing to respond. It shows that social audits can serve as more than a monitoring tool; they can become a bridge between communities and institutions.

Some of the problems identified through the social audit require action beyond the local level, including policy decisions, additional resources and institutional reforms. CPD will take these issues forward through its engagement with national-level stakeholders. At the same time, the Shergur experience shows that many urgent concerns can be addressed when local evidence reaches the right authority at the right time.

Through the Nagorikata Programme, CPD and IPDS helped create that pathway. A local Citizen Group identified a vulnerable girl at risk. The issue was raised in front of the Deputy Commissioner. The administration responded. A child marriage was prevented. A girl's education was protected. And a community saw that their voice, when organised and supported by evidence, could lead to real action.