

## **PRCPB Working Paper No. 13: Abstract**

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This paper presents findings from research into expectations of government, based on focus group discussion sessions with over 100 poor and very poor people in rural and urban Bangladesh. The research was designed to help improve our understanding of the political constraints shaping public policy with respect to poverty. In particular it aimed to understand the following: if, as is commonly asserted, the interests of the poorest do not make it onto the public policy agenda, why do the poor appear to tolerate this relative neglect? What is the least a government must do for the poorest in order to retain the level of cooperation and legitimacy necessary for it to function? In brief, what do the poor and the very poor expect from their government?

The risks and difficulties of conducting research of this kind were addressed through a careful process of testing research tools detailed in the report. The team finally developed a semi-structured discussion guideline that incorporated participatory discussion tools. Even then, the analysis of the research findings is cautious and tentative.

The main research findings include that government was widely perceived as positive for the poor, and there was an unexpectedly clear understanding of the structure and operations of government, and of the mechanisms of political process and change. Findings about sources of information about government and politics highlight the continuing significance of community 'brokers', while also confirming the overpowering role of the public television in shaping perceptions of government. There seems to be considerable faith in the capacity of the poor to influence the government, and of the government to respond to the needs of the poor. Despite a generally positive appraisal of the role of government, the poor public is attuned to and critical of the actions of government which affect them directly. In their role as chief guarantors of the welfare of the poor, then, government fails when it fails to control the prices of essential goods. Respondents tended to find it difficult to prioritise between different issues, and supported more governmental action in most areas. There was a reasonably clear sense of what made government legitimate, as well of the conditions under which different types of political protest are acceptable.

The paper concludes that there is a high degree of awareness and involvement among the poor with respect to matters political. Sources of such awareness appear to include some voter education, but more important are regular participation in various aspects of politics; the print and broadcast media; election campaigns; and mediated knowledge garnered through efforts to access government services. Government is seen as inherently pro-poor, and there was no sense that government might curb private initiative or interfere with traditional norms and practices. If anything, government was frequently contrasted favourably with local actors such as community leaders or local government representatives. Problems with government such as corruption were strongly associated with these latter groups. The paper concludes with a discussion of this finding, offering some preliminary conclusions about its implications for political process and the poor.