

The European Union substantially increases its support to access to justice for poor and marginalised groups in Bangladesh

The European Commission has decided to substantially increase its support to Bangladesh's state-led rural justice system, known as Village Courts. The five-year project, implemented by the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives in partnership with UNDP, will be funded with € 25 million (about 250 crore Taka), and will focus on awareness raising among rural communities and capacity building of local elected government.

The Village Courts, comprising a panel of five persons (local government and villagers), deliver jury trials of petty (civil and criminal) disputes and provide a simple legal framework people can understand. They function as a bridge between informal and formal institutions and can be characterised as quasi-judicial. This unique model of legal empowerment, designed to occupy the lowest rung of the formal, state-led rural justice system, aims to reduce the pressure created by the case backlogs in district courts and provides easy access to justice for vulnerable groups at the lowest level of local elected government.

With the introduction of 1,000 additional Village Courts across Bangladesh, the project will scale up the successful EU-funded pilot intervention to a significant part of the country. This major leap, expanding the project's reach from 7 million to 34 million people, is expected to create citizens' demand across the nation and will help the Government of Bangladesh to realise its vision of nationwide implementation in future phases.

"Village Courts are shaped by the communities in which they belong," said EU Ambassador Pierre Mayaudon on the occasion. "They are helping the justice system to reflect better the interests and perspectives of the communities it serves. At the same time, they are helping to build strong, viable, accountable, effective and responsible local government in Bangladesh. [We know that making government accountable at the local level can improve quality of life and decrease poverty through better allocation of resources, better service delivery, more accountability, and reduced corruption. Because the best way to make sure that being poor does not stand in the way of justice – is to no longer be poor.]"

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