



Public Participation in Local Government to Ensure Good Governance in Bangladesh: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Public participation is regarded as one of the essential features that enriches good governance as it enhances transparency, accountability, and responsiveness in decision-making processes. This dictates local government institutions, especially Union Parishads, to uphold the rights of citizens and guarantee community participation in planning and implementation. This paper analyzes the nature and impact of public participation in the sphere of local government Bangladesh perspectives which is crucial in the context of good governance. The research used a qualitative design and collected primary data from 100 respondents of different demographics using a structured questionnaire. The findings of the study reveals that 47% of the population attends to ward meetings or open budget sessions, but levels of inconsistencies is still found as barriers to accessing budget information to citizens include political influence (62%), Ward citizen signatories' unawareness (54%) and local citizen authorities' unwillingness (47%). The study also finds the positive effect of citizen participation on accountability, with a key portion of respondents recognizing engagement as a positive contributor to service delivery in terms of sanitation, water, roads and supply etc. The study provides some policy recommendations like- capacity-building for citizens, awareness and confidence-based communication, and institutional strengthening mechanisms towards participation.

Keywords: Public Participation, Local Government, Good Governance, Bangladesh, Accountability

Introduction

Public participation is fundamental to democracy and even more so at the local level where citizens have no intermediary during decision making. It means bringing people closer to the planning, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring of public policies and services (UNDP, 2021). Local government institutions such as Union Parishads (UP), Pourashavas and Upazila Parishad aim to deliver a local governance structure to promote citizen participation in the governance process and enhance good governance. Participatory mechanisms, including ward shobha (ward meetings) and open budget sessions, are legally required (Local Government Division (LGD), 2020) under the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act 2009. LGD records show that at least two ward shobha meetings should be conducted every year at over 4,500 Union Parishads of the country to prepare the budget in an open platform. Such platforms seek to enable citizens to articulate their requirement, consider business plans, and account

the elected representatives. When it comes to exercising participation, it is still very limited. Recently published findings from a Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) survey (2023) showed that only 27% of rural citizens have ever attended a ward shobha and fewer than 20% believed that their voices had a meaningful impact on local decision-making. The main barriers to active participation were political partisanship, lack of awareness, and insufficient knowledge of meeting schedules. At the Union Parishad (UP) level the situation is more or less the same: according to the World Bank (2021), UPs are still weak on budget transparency with only 41% of UPs publicly posted their budget information in accessible formats. On a governance note, the lack of strong and meaningful public participation is counter to the good governance tenets of transparency, accountability, responsiveness and inclusiveness (OECD, 2022). This matters for Bangladesh, since the country aims to develop local democratic institutions as part of SDG 16: “Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions” (United Nations, 2023). Conceptually, these mechanisms are designed to enhance inclusiveness, transparency, and responsiveness in decision-making. Participation in this sense is far from universal or meaningful in practice however. A Ward Shobha is held four times a year; nearly 50% of rural respondents to a recent Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB, 2023) survey only attended one in the past year, and fewer than 20% said their contributions had a positive impact on local decision-making. Likewise, only 41% of Union Parishads publish budget information in convenient formats for the public from World Bank (2021) which limits transparency and public monitoring. Political partisanship works as another barrier to participation, ruling party influence can guide the meeting agenda, and political exclusion can silence opposition (Rahman & Chowdhury, 2022). Moreover, there is a low level of awareness regarding participatory events among citizens where many are unaware of their rights and the timing of participatory events. Economic constraints and high illiteracy levels especially among women, the poor, and the marginalized restrict and prevent their active participation (UNDP, 2021). Ironically, if more citizens did not participate in local governance, such local government could effectively lose touch with the felt needs of the communities it serves, leading to an endless cycle of service delivery failures and entrenched socio-political inequalities. There is an urgent need to critically analyze how public participation works in local government and what are the socio-political and structural obstacles causing the ineffectiveness given Bangladesh commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) of inclusive and participatory decision-making.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the role of public participation in local government in ensuring good governance in Bangladesh.
2. To analyze the relationship between citizen participation and the principles of good governance, including transparency, accountability, and service delivery.
3. To identify barriers hindering effective public participation.
4. To recommend strategies to strengthen participatory practices in local government.

Literature Review

Public participation is the active engagement of citizens at the local level in determining decision-making, policy and program direction related to their lives and communities. That goes beyond voting in elections, to participate in the planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring of local development initiatives (UNDP, 2021). There are two main types of participation (OECD, 2022): direct participation, where citizens either attend meetings or comment on public consultations themselves, as opposed to if they elect representatives to perform those activities on their behalf (indirect participation). Public participation is essential for democratic governance and the development of policies and practices that respond to the

actual needs and desires of the community (Rahman & Chowdhury, 2022). The classic conceptualization of participation is a continuum model (Arnstein, 1969), where participation is considered as a range from non-participation (manipulation and therapy), through tokenism (informing, consultation, placation) to degrees of citizen power (partnership, delegated power, citizen control). In the case of Bangladesh, ward shobha (ward level meetings) and Open Budget Sessions are examples of formal structures for participation that provide opportunities for participation but do not guarantee that authorities will listen or act on the pronouncements made at such participatory spaces. But many of these mechanisms are situated at lower levels of the ladder with citizens merely being asked for their opinions and not given any real power over outcomes (TIB, 2023).

Good governance is ‘one that is participatory, transparent, accountable, effective, equitable and follows the rule of law’ (UNDP, 2021). As the OECD (2022) notes, good governance also includes responsiveness, efficiency, and inclusiveness, all of which are only possible through citizen engagement. Governance consists of six broad dimensions like- political instability, rule of law, voice and accountability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality and control of corruption (World Bank, 2021). This enhances transparency because it opens up decision-making and budgeting processes to scrutiny, and it increases responsiveness because it aligns actions of government with the priorities of the community (BBS, 2023). While these policies are committed to good governance, they continue to face implementation challenges, such as poor local governance arising from inconsistent use of participatory processes and prevalence of political patronage networks (TIB, 2023).

Local governance system in Bangladesh is constitutionally mandated under Art. 59 and 60 of the Constitution which enshrined the provision of separate elected local bodies for the administration and development of each area at local level. The main law for rural local governance is the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act 2009 which has introduced various participatory mechanisms. These encompass the ward shobha that has to be held at least twice a year to identify local needs and rank the local development projects; Open Budget Sessions that allow citizens scope to review and comment on the budget proposed; and standing committee that is sector-specific bodies with defined functions for oversight and citizen engagement (LGD, 2020). The Local Government Division (LGD), supervises 4,500 over Union Parishads, 329 Pourashavas and 492 Upazila Parishads across the Country (LGD, 2023). In addition, other important policies that have a huge impact on participation are the Right to Information Act 2009 that gives the citizens the right to access the information of the government documents, and the National Governance Policy 2020 which lays out the strategies for participatory decisions. The framework on paper is extensive but there are notable implementation gaps. TIB (2023) found that while 27% of rural citizens reported attending a ward shobha in the previous year, fewer than 20% of those citizens believed their input influenced final decisions. The comparatively low participation of women, not just in sports but across all societies, indicates greater socio-cultural issues. According to the World Bank (2021), openness is only partial and at Union level, only 41% Union Parishads, for example, display the budgets in a mode accessible to citizens, ultimately impeding the path to transparency and cognizant participation. This opens up a platform for the introduction of tools such as community scorecards and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) by NGOs and development partners such as BRAC, UNDP, and Helvetas, etc. Though these initiatives have proven effective at the project level, they struggle to scale up through the national governance system where inadequate resources and political will remain problems. There are various factors that impede the public participation in local government in Bangladesh. Few factors pose a bigger challenge than political partisanship where ruling-party hegemony sets the

agenda for meetings, discouraging voices of opposition (Rahman & Chowdhury, 2022). The lack of awareness of participatory rights and opportunities also restrict engagement; Many citizens remain unaware of the details (when and where) of meetings (TIB, 2023). The socio-cultural barriers such as manageability norms, skills gaps and the tradition-based constraints are significantly hurtful to women, poor and marginalized groups (UNDP, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

This research used a theory for assessment of citizen engagement with the ladder of citizen participation of Arnstein as side theory. The ladder provides a helpful framework differentiating all levels of participation between non-participation to full citizen control (Arnstein, 1969). The same is true for the following UNDP Good Governance Framework, which provides a constructive framework through which to assess the extent to which participation promotes or detracts from important normative standards of governance (such as transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, and responsiveness) (UNDP 2021). This framework also highlights a dual approach, which enables a more layered understanding of the procedural as well as the substantive aspects of public participation in Bangladesh.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative-dominant mixed-method research design to examine the scope, nature, and outcomes of public participation in local government and its contribution to good governance in Bangladesh. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed to obtain a comprehensive understanding of participatory governance practices. Primary data were collected from 100 purposively selected respondents representing diverse demographic and institutional backgrounds, including general citizens such as men, women, youth, and marginalized groups, as well as local government representatives and officials, including Union Parishad' chairmen, members, female members, municipal councilors, mayors, and local government officials. The study followed structured questionnaires containing close-ended questions to collect quantitative information, while semi-structured interviews and observation methods were engaged to gain deeper qualitative insights into public participation and governance practices. In addition, secondary data were collected from journals, articles, books, reports, local government records, publicly available meeting minutes, budget documents, and other relevant publications. The collected data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS, where descriptive statistical techniques such as frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations were used to identify participation patterns and respondents' perceptions. To show the findings more clearly in the results chapter, different visual representations, including bar charts and pie charts, were equipped. Furthermore, qualitative data attained through interviews and observations were analyzed thematically to detect major patterns, experiences, and challenges associated with citizen participation and local governance in Bangladesh.

Results and Discussion

To ensure diversity in age, gender, education and occupation, the survey was conducted on 100 respondents from different selected Union Parishads and Pourashavas. A demographic profile is included below as background for the following analyses. Gender was evenly divided across sample: Male- 34% (n=34), Female- 33% (n=33), and other- 33% (n=33). In addition, this equal representation facilitated the conduct of a gender-sensitive analysis of participation patterns. However, male respondents were more likely to have attended ward meetings or open budget sessions than females and those identifying as other genders, as shown in the cross-tabulation below. In terms of age, the predominant age band was 26–35 years (25%), closely followed by 46-60 (22%) and Above 60 (20%). In contrast, only 18% of

the respondents were aged between 18-25 years, while 15% were aged 36-45 years. This age representation indicates that people who are working-age adults and older members of the community are well represented, providing perspectives of those involved in livelihoods and those with long-term engagement in the community. The percentage of education level varied widely, with secondary education topping the list at 25%, and graduate and above close behind at 23%. 19% of the respondents were illiterate, 18% were higher secondary educated and 15% were primary educated. The few respondents (approx. one-fifth of the total) with no formal education highlights how literacy can be a barrier to citizens interfacing with formal governance processes in Bangladesh (BBS, 2023). Occupation-wise, the top group was labelled as other (24%), including informal sector workers, retirees and any occupations not otherwise classified. day laborers-18%, homemaker-14%, government/private sector employees- 13%, student- 11%, businessmen-11% and farmer-9%. The results of this study significantly corroborate existing literature that discusses the positive effects of public participation in local governance in Bangladesh. The survey data confirm what Rahman and Khan (2022) appear to suggest that public engagement ward meetings, open budget sessions, and suggestion mechanisms can improve transparency, responsiveness, and accountability at the local level. Given the attendance levels in comparable rural governance studies (BRAC, 2023), the finding that 47% of respondents reported having attended any meeting in the last year suggests a middling but notable level of community engagement. It also lends further support to participatory governance theory such as Arnstein (1969) “Ladder of Citizen Participation”: true participatory governance is not just obtaining citizen input or “top down” but rather months or years of action-oriented, frank-talk with citizens that leads to control by the citizens. While this study involving interviews with respondents who participated in multiple modes, these responses demonstrate only limited influence on final decision-making with 38% stating their participation resulted in any visible changes, indicating a residual level of consultation rather than partnership. The findings of the study highlight the role of public participation the essential features of good governance especially transparency, accountability and inclusiveness. The overwhelming majority of respondents (more than 70%) agreed with the claim that citizen engagement hints to more accountability of local government, which is also accepted in the UNDP (2023), which indicates that participatory processes increase public trust and reduce corruption. The effect of participation, however, does not have the same impact everywhere. Both access to participation and perceived outcomes are affected by socio-economic status, with high education and stable job factors being more likely to report positive experiences in terms of transparency and service delivery. However, this shows that participatory governance will not inherently support in reducing inequalities, unless specific efforts are taken to include those more marginalized groups. The barriers emphasized in this study are consistent with the annual report by the Local Government Division (2023); recent political interference (62%) and lack of awareness/education (54%) were the most substantial identified barriers. Such institutional and social constraints undermine the quality of participation by deterring citizens from joining and reducing access to information across the board which further reinforces the citizen belief that participation is “of no use”. Gender differences were strongest, but not the only one, as more men than women appeared the meetings. These findings align with those of BRAC (2023), which found that cultural limitations, lack of mobility, and domestic demands serve as barriers for women in politics and in civic affairs. Tackling these barriers will need policy reform, public awareness and structural alterations to enhance the inclusivity and accessibility of taking part. This aligns thoroughly with the experiences in other developing countries having a decentralized governance system compared to global realities about the challenges. Similarly, as is the case in Bangladesh, lack of transparency and low levels of citizen awareness in Kenya (Mwangi & Kariuki, 2021) and the Philippines (Villarin, 2020), have been fixed as barriers to effective

participation intensified by political patronage. Nevertheless, examples from other countries suggest possible fixes. For example, participatory budgeting in Brazil has strengthened community trust by providing an open and transparent process for citizens to directly control spending priorities (Wampler, 2012). Similarly, India confers considerable powers to citizens through its Gram Sabha as a model governing assembly at the local level that has shown how, when appropriately resourced and well revealed, legally empowered local assemblies can drastically enhance accountability. For Bangladesh, emulating such best practices combined with digital engagement platforms, capacity-building and better enforcement of the Right to Information Act could emphasize participatory mechanisms and augment their overall contributions to outcomes of good governance. The results display that although there is public participation, it is marked by asymmetrical participation, combined with more institutional, political, and social obstacles of restriction. Moderate participation was also indicated by a slightly higher than average 47% of respondents reporting attending a least one ward meeting or open budget session within the last year. It was higher in males, people with higher education, and people in stable occupation. The most popular modes of participation were attending meetings, providing advice to representatives, and joining committees or groups. Yet, just 38% of respondents said their participation had led to observable changes within the restaurant, indicating a continued inability for citizens to influence decision-making.

Conclusion

Enhancing participatory practices in these institutions is essential for governance outcomes to respond to the needs of communities, prioritizing their needs, and using their resources wisely. This study matters for a few reasons. Firstly, it presents original empirical data regarding the present situation of public participation in local governance, based on primary data by citizens across different selected sites. Although general governance issues in Bangladesh have been reported on by national and donor agencies (e.g., Local Government Division-LGD, World Bank), this study seeks to fill an existing gap by providing recent field-based evidence about the nature and extent of participation (World Bank, 2021; TIB, 2023). Second, the results will facilitate an understanding of structural and socio-cultural barriers (e.g., political insensitivity, ignorance, and poor gender norms) which prevent a more effective citizen empowerment. For example, Transparency International Bangladesh (2023) found that only 27% of rural people are participating in the ward shobha meetings, while the participation of women was still unequally low. This study thus provides some insight into which particular intervention those gaps can be directed to by performing a trend analysis. Thirdly, the research reflects the commitments that Bangladesh has made in the National Governance Policy 2020 and the SDG 16 to ensure that decision-making at all levels is inclusive, participatory, and representative (United Nations, 2023). Policymakers, civil society organizations and partners focus on capacity-building programs, improving the means available for information dissemination, and institutional mechanisms for citizen engagement based on the recommendations of this study. The study finally contributes to the wider literature on democratic decentralization in Bangladesh by showing ways to enhance public participation for better service delivery, social equity and confidence in local government institutions. In conclusion, the study highlights the need for creating an enabling environment of public participation in the implementation of the ideals of good governance at the local government level in Bangladesh. Moderate participation was also indicated by a slightly higher than average 47% of respondents reporting attending a least one ward meeting or open budget session within the last year. It was higher in males, people with higher education, and people in stable occupation. The most popular modes of participation were attending meetings, providing advice to representatives, and joining committees or groups. Yet, just

38% of respondents said their participation had led to observable changes within the restaurant, indicating a continued inability for citizens to influence decision-making. Others expressed ambivalence, with some seeing transparency and accountability under the CCs as a positive but others questioning whether local service delivery had improved – more than 70% believed that citizen participation could enhance accountability. The two biggest barriers to participation were political interference (62%) and lack of awareness/education (54%) followed by unwillingness of local authorities (47%), resource and transport problems (33%) and cultural/gender restrictions (29%). In conclusion, the overall state of good governance could significantly be strengthened in Bangladesh through public participation but in order to do so it has to undertake institutional reforms, develop practice-oriented understanding and create participatory oriented mindset.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following policy recommendations are proposed: strengthening legal provisions for public participation to amend the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act to make ward meetings and open budget sessions mandatory with minimum attendance thresholds. Enforcing compliance through monitoring by the Local Government Division (LGD). Strengthening comprehensive local governance and public participation, public awareness campaigns should be enriched through community radio, social media, and public announcements that notify citizens about meeting dates, agendas, and their participation rights, while collaboration with NGOs can assist conducting awareness programs in rural areas with special attention to marginalized groups and women. At the institutional level, local government officials should accept training on participatory methods and community engagement, alongside the formation of women-friendly meeting spaces and schedules that inspire gender-inclusive participation. Independent oversight mechanisms should also be announced to decrease political dominance in local decision-making, and participatory budgeting processes should be encouraged so that community members can straight recognize and prioritize public spending needs. Furthermore, digital platforms such as online portals and mobile applications should be advanced to make able public to submit suggestions, report problems, and monitor project implementation, while ICT training programs should be delivered to guarantee all community members can effectively access and use these digital tools.

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