

Original Paper

Strengthening Local Governance in Bangladesh: A Critical Analysis of Challenges, Opportunities, and Policy Interventions

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Received: March 15, 2025

Accepted: April 2, 2025

Online Published: April 29, 2025

doi:10.22158/rem.v10n2p36

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/rem.v10n2p36>

Abstract

Local governance is central to democratic development, ensuring participatory, transparent, and accountable decision-making while fostering inclusive service delivery. This study critically examines the Union Parishad system in Bangladesh, focusing on its effectiveness in promoting equitable governance, particularly for marginalized groups and women. Using a mixed-methods approach—incorporating key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and desk reviews—the research explores policy frameworks, systemic challenges, and opportunities for strengthening local governance. Findings reveal that bureaucratic inefficiencies, financial dependency, political interference, and socio-cultural barriers significantly hinder governance effectiveness. While Union Parishads play a pivotal role in local service delivery and development planning, their impact remains constrained by weak institutional capacity, lack of financial autonomy, and limited public engagement. The study highlights the urgent need for governance reforms, emphasizing gender-responsive strategies, increased financial independence, community participation, and digital governance solutions. Policy recommendations include strengthening legal enforcement, enhancing financial decentralization, promoting participatory governance, and leveraging digital platforms to improve transparency and efficiency.

By addressing these governance gaps, Union Parishads can evolve into more effective and inclusive institutions, contributing to equitable local development in Bangladesh. This study provides actionable insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and local government stakeholders, paving the way for a more resilient and participatory local governance system.

Keywords

Local governance, union parishad inclusive development, gender equity, community participation, policy reform, service delivery, digital governance

1. Introduction

Local governance is a fundamental pillar of democratic development, fostering participatory decision-making, transparent governance, and equitable service delivery (Kumar, 2023). In Bangladesh, the Union Parishad (UP) serves as the lowest tier of local government institute (LGI), playing a crucial role in connecting citizens with government institutions. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, as of 2022, with 4,571 Union Parishads operating across the country, each governing approximately 20,000 to 30,000 people the UP system is a cornerstone of decentralized governance, responsible for essential public services, infrastructure development, and social welfare programs.

Despite the constitutional and legal framework supporting decentralized governance, Union Parishads face significant structural and operational challenges. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, political instability, and socio-cultural barriers limit their effectiveness in delivering services (Rahman, 2020). Women and marginalized communities experience systemic discrimination that restricts their participation in decision-making. Corruption, inefficient resource allocation, and weak institutional accountability further hinder governance outcomes. The intersection of gender, poverty, and governance gaps exacerbates these issues, leading to disparities in service access, particularly in rural and underserved areas (Zaman, 2017).

The governance crisis following the political transition on August 5, 2024, has further disrupted service delivery at the Union Parishad level. Many elected representatives abandoned their posts due to political retaliation, creating a leadership vacuum in rural areas. Public services, including social safety net programs, certifications, and village court operations, were either suspended or delayed, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations such as elderly individuals, women-headed households, and indigenous communities. This governance breakdown underscores the importance of strengthening local government institutions to ensure continuity in service provision, particularly during political transitions.

This article aims to analyze the complexities of local governance in Bangladesh, with a specific focus on the Union Parishad system. It examines the legal and institutional frameworks governing UPs, explores the socio-political dynamics affecting their effectiveness, and identifies the key challenges they face. Using a qualitative research approach—including Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)—the study highlights governance barriers such as limited public awareness, gender-based exclusion, and inefficiencies in service delivery. Additionally, the research explores how youth and civil society engagement can contribute to enhancing governance structures.

The study presents policy recommendations for strengthening the role of Union Parishads in fostering inclusive governance. Key recommendations include enhancing financial autonomy, ensuring gender-responsive governance, improving community participation mechanisms, and adopting digital solutions for service efficiency. Strengthening these areas can enhance the resilience of Union Parishads, ensuring that they remain accessible, effective, and inclusive governance institutions for all citizens.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to assess the governance structure of Union Parishads in Bangladesh. A combination of primary and secondary data sources was used to obtain a comprehensive understanding of local governance dynamics. The study's methodology is structured as follows:

- **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** A total of 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including local elected officials, NGO representatives, community leaders, government administrators, and policy experts. These interviews provided in-depth insights into governance challenges, institutional inefficiencies, and successful local governance practices.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Twelve FGDs were conducted, engaging 120 participants from diverse backgrounds, including women, youth, and marginalized communities. The discussions were structured to explore the participants' experiences with local governance, their access to public services, and their level of participation in decision-making processes. Special attention was given to gender disparities and the challenges faced by vulnerable groups in engaging with Union Parishads.
- **Desk Review:** A comprehensive review of relevant policy documents, legal frameworks, government reports, and academic literature was undertaken. This review helped contextualize Bangladesh's local governance framework and provided comparative insights from international best practices and decentralized governance models.

The collected data were coded and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key trends, systemic challenges, and policy implications. Data triangulation was applied to validate findings by cross-verifying information from multiple sources, ensuring a robust and evidence-based understanding of Union Parishad governance.

To strengthen the reliability of the findings, validation sessions were conducted with local government experts and civil society representatives. This allowed for the refinement of key insights and the development of practical recommendations to enhance governance at the Union Parishad level.

3. Geographic Scope of the Study

The study focused on multiple administrative tiers of local government in Rangpur District, ranging from the district to the union level. The selection of Rangpur District was strategic, aligning with regions with a high incidence of poverty. According to the 2022 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Rangpur Division exhibits the second-highest poverty incidence in the country (BBS, 2023). Furthermore, the Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics (2022) indicates that Rangpur Division has the highest proportion (42.7%) of households in the lowest wealth quintile among the eight divisions (BBS, 2023). Rangpur District was chosen as the primary study site due to its significance within the broader governance landscape, along with an extensive network of stakeholders, including political parties and local governance actors.

To ensure a representative assessment, the study purposively selected the following administrative units:

- **Rangpur City Corporation**- Highest urban level local government institute
- **Mithapukur and Pirganj Municipality**- Lower urban local government institution
- **Rangpur Zila Parishad (ZP)**- The district-level local government entity
- **Kaunia and Taraganj Upazila Parishad (UZP)**- Representing an intermediary governance level
- **Sarai, Mominpur, Nohali, Itakumari, Mithipur and Balapara Union Parishad (UP)**- Representing grassroots governance structures

The selected Upazila Parishad and Union Parishads were chosen based on specific socio-economic and geographic considerations, prioritizing areas with:

- High levels of poverty and economic vulnerability
- Hard-to-reach and remote locations
- Significant populations of ethnic minorities
- Char (river island) communities
- Historically underserved upazilas or unions

4. Local Government System in Bangladesh

Bangladesh follows a democratic republic model with a two-tier government system: national and local. Local government is constitutionally enshrined, and its legal framework is built on several acts, including the Hill District Local Government Parishad Act (1989), Local Government Acts (2009), and others. The Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development, and Cooperatives (MLGRD&C) oversees local government, except for hill district councils, which fall under the Ministry of Hill Tract Affairs (Ahmed, 2017).

The local government structure consists of urban, rural, and hill district systems. Urban local governments include 11 city corporations and 329 municipalities (pourashavas), which are single-tier structures. Rural local governance is more complex, with a three-tier system: Zila Parishads (district level), Upazila Parishads (sub-district level), and Union Parishads (village level). Additionally, there are three hill district councils (Siddique, 2005).

Local governments in Bangladesh have significant authority, including the power to levy taxes for local purposes, prepare budgets, and manage public resources. Their responsibilities vary depending on the level of governance, from managing public health, sanitation, and education at the city corporation level to overseeing local infrastructure and development projects at the rural and union levels.

Key legislative texts include the Hill District Local Government Parishad Act 1989, Zila Parishad Act 2000, Upazila Parishad Act 1998 (amended in 2009), and the Union Parishad Act 2009. Each local government body consists of elected members, including a chairperson, vice-chairpersons, and a specified number of reserved women's seats.

City corporations and municipalities are tasked with responsibilities such as waste management, public

health, education, and traffic regulation. Zila and hill district parishads focus on development projects, public libraries, infrastructure maintenance, and supporting lower-level councils. Union Parishads play a crucial role in local rural development, including managing agriculture, education, health, and public works.

Local governments are funded through locally raised revenue sources like taxes, fees, rents, and grants from the national government. They are also empowered to raise funds from other sources, such as investments, donations, and transfers. This decentralized structure aims to enhance democratic governance and promote sustainable development by addressing local needs and ensuring effective service delivery at the grassroots level (Rahman, 2019).

5. Union Parishad: Structure, function and Governance

The Union Parishad (UP) is the foundational unit of local government in Bangladesh, serving as the closest government entity to the rural population. Each Union Parishad is composed of a chairman, nine general members, and three female members elected from reserved seats, in total comprising 12 members. The Union Parishad system is designed to operate through direct elections where each of the nine wards of the UP is represented by a member elected from the respective ward, while three women members are elected through reserved seats to ensure gender inclusivity. This structure is designed to ensure that the governance system is representative and responsive to the local population's needs.

The role and responsibilities of the Union Parishad are defined by the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act, 2009. As the most basic administrative unit, the Union Parishad coordinates the delivery of services and the execution of policies from higher government levels at the district and sub-district levels (Siddiqui, 2008). Each UP is tasked with carrying out 39 specific functions and operates through 13 standing committees that are dedicated to managing these functions. Some of the key functions of the Union Parishad include:

- **Service Delivery:** Union Parishads are responsible for issuing certificates (such as birth and death certificates), processing legal documents, and providing legal aid through village courts.
- **Infrastructure Development:** They oversee the construction and maintenance of local infrastructure such as roads, bridges, culverts, and water supply systems, all of which are vital for the day-to-day functioning of rural areas.
- **Social Welfare Programs:** UPs play a key role in implementing social safety net programs, such as Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) and Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), to assist marginalized populations, particularly the poor and vulnerable.
- **Disaster Management:** They are crucial in coordinating emergency response activities, such as flood relief and rehabilitation programs, especially in rural areas that are highly vulnerable to natural disasters.

- **Community Engagement:** Union Parishads actively engage with the local community through Open Budget Sessions and Ward Shavas to encourage citizen participation in governance and decision-making processes, thus promoting transparency and accountability.

6. Discussion

The Union Parishad system serves as the foundation of grassroots governance in Bangladesh, playing a pivotal role in local service delivery, development planning, and community engagement. However, despite its importance, its full potential remains unrealized due to structural inefficiencies, financial constraints, and socio-political challenges.

A comparative analysis with other **decentralized governance** models highlights several critical gaps in the Union Parishad system. One of the key weaknesses is the **lack of financial autonomy**, which limits the ability of Union Parishads to implement development initiatives independently. Unlike in some decentralized governance models where local governments have greater control over taxation and budget allocation, Union Parishads remain largely dependent on central government transfers. This financial dependency not only restricts their flexibility in responding to community needs but also makes them vulnerable to political influences that can affect resource distribution.

Institutional strengthening is another area requiring urgent attention. Many Union Parishads operate with limited human resources, technical expertise, and logistical support, which significantly affects their efficiency. Capacity-building programs for elected representatives and administrative staff can improve governance effectiveness by equipping them with the necessary skills in financial management, participatory planning, and policy implementation.

A major challenge in the governance framework is the **lack of inclusive decision-making**, particularly regarding gender representation. While legislative provisions exist for the inclusion of women in local governance, female representatives often face social and institutional barriers that limit their ability to participate actively in decision-making processes. Strengthening gender-sensitive policies and creating a more enabling environment for women in governance is crucial for making Union Parishads more representative and effective.

Additionally, **citizen engagement remains limited** due to a lack of awareness about governance mechanisms and insufficient participatory platforms. While Union Parishads conduct Open Budget Sessions and Ward Shavas, these forums are often dominated by male community leaders and do not always provide meaningful opportunities for marginalized groups to voice their concerns. Enhancing public awareness and fostering more inclusive participatory mechanisms can lead to better governance outcomes by ensuring that community needs are reflected in local decision-making.

The study also finds that leveraging **digital governance solutions** can enhance transparency and service efficiency in Union Parishads. The introduction of e-governance initiatives, such as digital record-keeping, online service applications, and grievance redressal systems, has the potential to reduce bureaucratic delays and improve service accessibility, particularly in remote areas. However, the

adoption of such technologies requires substantial investment in digital infrastructure and capacity-building for both officials and citizens.

Finally, **accountability mechanisms within Union Parishads need strengthening** to minimize corruption and improve governance effectiveness. Establishing independent monitoring bodies and implementing stricter anti-corruption policies can enhance transparency in resource allocation and decision-making processes.

Overall, addressing these challenges requires a **multi-stakeholder approach** involving the government, civil society, and the private sector. Policy interventions focusing on financial decentralization, institutional capacity-building, gender empowerment, community participation, and digital governance can collectively strengthen Union Parishads, making them more effective, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of local communities.

7. Findings

The findings of this study reveal several key issues affecting the governance and effectiveness of Union Parishads in Bangladesh. These issues span legal, institutional, social, and financial dimensions, all of which contribute to inefficiencies in service delivery and governance outcomes.

- **Weak Implementation of Legal Provisions:** Although policies exist to promote inclusive governance, their enforcement remains weak due to a lack of political will and limited institutional capacity. Many local government officials are either unaware of these provisions or lack the training to implement them effectively. Furthermore, there is minimal oversight or accountability to ensure compliance with legal mandates.
- **Limited Public Awareness:** Many citizens, particularly women and marginalized communities, lack knowledge about their rights and available government services, limiting their engagement in governance processes. This lack of awareness leads to a low turnout in participatory forums such as Open Budget Sessions and Ward Shavas, preventing communities from actively influencing local development priorities.
- **Gender Inequality in Governance:** Women representatives in Union Parishads often struggle to influence decision-making due to traditional patriarchal norms and resistance from male counterparts. Despite the presence of reserved seats for women, their roles remain largely symbolic, with limited authority or financial control. Societal attitudes and cultural constraints further discourage women from taking on leadership roles within local governance structures.
- **Inefficient Resource Allocation:** Budgetary constraints and mismanagement of resources hinder the ability of UPs to deliver quality services to local communities. The dependency on central government allocations leaves Union Parishads with little control over financial resources, resulting in delays and inefficiencies in implementing development projects. In many cases, funds intended for local development are either diverted for political purposes or remain underutilized due to bureaucratic complexities.

- **Service Delivery Challenges:** Essential services such as waste management, water supply, healthcare, and education remain inconsistent across different Union Parishads. Rural areas face more acute challenges due to logistical constraints and inadequate funding. Citizens frequently experience delays in obtaining administrative services such as birth and death certificates, land records, and social safety net benefits.

8. Challenges

Union Parishads in Bangladesh face a range of structural and operational challenges that impede their ability to function effectively. These challenges arise from governance inefficiencies, socio-political constraints, and infrastructural limitations.

- **Lack of Institutional Capacity:** Limited training and professional development opportunities for UP officials reduce their ability to implement governance reforms effectively. Many Union Parishads lack skilled personnel, leading to inefficiencies in financial management, project implementation, and administrative processes. Additionally, newly elected representatives often assume office with little or no orientation on governance mechanisms, leaving them ill-equipped to address local development challenges.
- **Corruption and Bureaucratic Hurdles:** Many governance processes are plagued by corruption, making it difficult for citizens to access essential services without undue delays or unofficial fees. Bribery and favoritism in public service delivery have led to widespread dissatisfaction among citizens. Political patronage often influences resource allocation, leading to biased decision-making and exclusion of marginalized communities.
- **Political Interference:** Frequent political shifts disrupt governance structures, affecting the sustainability of local development initiatives. Elected representatives are often aligned with political parties, resulting in governance decisions that prioritize political loyalty over community needs. This interference not only affects transparency in decision-making but also discourages elected officials from acting independently in the best interest of their constituents.
- **Inadequate Infrastructure:** Poor connectivity outdated administrative systems, and a lack of digital services further impede efficient local governance. Many Union Parishad offices lack basic facilities such as reliable internet access, office equipment, and transportation, which limits their ability to deliver timely services. Rural Union Parishads face additional barriers due to poor road conditions, making it difficult for residents to access government offices and participate in governance processes.
- **Exclusion of Marginalized Groups:** Despite legal mandates for inclusivity, certain segments of the population, including people with disabilities, indigenous groups, and the ultra-poor, remain underrepresented in local governance. Their exclusion results in policies and programs that fail to address their specific needs, further widening socio-economic disparities.

- **Limited Community Participation:** Although Union Parishads are required to engage citizens through participatory platforms, many of these mechanisms are either non-functional or ineffective. Ward Shavas and citizen dialogues often lack meaningful participation due to low awareness, lack of trust in local governance, or logistical barriers that prevent community members from attending meetings.

To overcome these challenges, a multi-faceted approach is needed, including strengthening legal enforcement, improving financial autonomy, promoting digital governance, and enhancing participatory decision-making processes at the grassroots level. Addressing these issues will be key to ensuring that Union Parishads can effectively fulfill their mandate of delivering services and fostering inclusive local development.

9. Recommendations

To improve the governance and effectiveness of Union Parishads in Bangladesh, several strategic interventions are required. The following recommendations focus on enhancing institutional capacity, improving transparency, strengthening citizen engagement, and ensuring more inclusive and sustainable local governance.

- **Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Policy Implementation:** The government should take proactive steps to enforce existing local governance policies by increasing oversight, accountability, and monitoring mechanisms. Establishing an independent regulatory body to assess compliance with governance standards at the Union Parishad level would ensure better policy enforcement.
- **Enhancing Financial Autonomy:** Union Parishads should be granted greater fiscal independence to manage and allocate resources efficiently. Introducing local taxation mechanisms, such as service fees and property taxes, could provide sustainable revenue sources. Additionally, ensuring timely disbursement of government funds can help prevent delays in service delivery.
- **Capacity Building and Training Programs:** Continuous professional development programs should be introduced for elected representatives and administrative staff to improve governance efficiency. Training modules should focus on financial management, participatory planning, gender-sensitive governance, and digital service delivery.
- **Promoting Transparency and Accountability:** Implementing anti-corruption measures, such as public financial disclosures, audit systems, and independent grievance redress mechanisms, can enhance trust in local governance. Union Parishads should also adopt participatory budgeting approaches to ensure citizens have a direct say in financial decision-making.
- **Digital Transformation in Governance:** E-governance platforms should be expanded to streamline administrative processes and improve service accessibility. Introducing online

portals for birth and death registrations, tax payments, and community grievances can reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies and enhance governance transparency.

- **Increasing Gender Representation and Participation:** To ensure meaningful participation of women in governance, additional leadership training, mentorship programs, and financial support for female representatives should be implemented. Furthermore, targeted awareness campaigns can help shift societal attitudes that limit women's engagement in governance.
- **Strengthening Community Engagement:** Public forums such as Ward Shavas and Open Budget Sessions should be made more inclusive by implementing outreach programs to encourage participation from marginalized communities. Innovative approaches, such as mobile community meetings and digital participation platforms, can help bridge gaps in citizen engagement.
- **Infrastructure Development and Service Expansion:** Government investment in improving infrastructure, such as better roads, reliable electricity, and internet connectivity in rural areas, would enable Union Parishads to function more effectively. Additionally, mobile governance units could be introduced to deliver essential services in remote locations.
- **Ensuring Inclusion of Marginalized Groups:** Policies and programs should be specifically designed to address the needs of disadvantaged groups, such as people with disabilities and indigenous populations. Creating accessible governance spaces and translating governance materials into local languages can promote greater inclusivity.

By implementing these recommendations, Union Parishads can become more effective, responsive, and inclusive governance institutions, ultimately contributing to sustainable local development and improved service delivery for all citizens.

10. Conclusion

Union Parishads serve as the backbone of local governance in Bangladesh, playing a crucial role in service delivery, community development, and democratic participation at the grassroots level. Despite their importance, systemic challenges such as weak institutional capacity, gender disparities, financial constraints, and political interference continue to hinder their effectiveness. Addressing these issues through targeted reforms and strategic interventions is imperative for ensuring more accountable, inclusive, and efficient local governance structures.

The study highlights that while legal frameworks exist to support decentralized governance, enforcement mechanisms remain weak, leading to inconsistent policy implementation. Without stronger accountability measures and capacity-building efforts, Union Parishads will struggle to fulfill their mandates effectively. Improving financial autonomy, enhancing local revenue generation, and ensuring timely government fund disbursement are essential for strengthening the fiscal capacity of UPs and enabling them to undertake meaningful development initiatives.

Gender inclusion remains a significant challenge, as women representatives often encounter barriers to meaningful participation in decision-making processes. Addressing this requires not only policy changes but also cultural and societal shifts that promote women's leadership in governance. Expanding leadership training programs, creating mentorship opportunities, and ensuring that women have access to financial resources will foster a more inclusive governance environment.

Furthermore, enhancing transparency and accountability mechanisms is essential for restoring public trust in Union Parishads. The adoption of e-governance tools can improve administrative efficiency and reduce corruption by streamlining service delivery processes and making information more accessible to citizens. Digital transformation in governance, coupled with community engagement initiatives, can create a more participatory and responsive governance system that truly reflects the needs of the people. Infrastructure development, particularly in rural areas, must be prioritized to facilitate better connectivity, improve access to government services, and strengthen institutional capacity. Upgrading administrative facilities, providing technological resources, and ensuring proper training for local officials will enhance governance effectiveness and efficiency.

The path forward for Union Parishads requires a collaborative approach involving the government, civil society, international development partners, and local communities. By addressing key governance challenges and implementing the recommended policy interventions, Union Parishads can become more empowered institutions capable of delivering sustainable development outcomes.

Future research should focus on innovative governance strategies, best practices in participatory local governance, and the impact of digital transformation on service delivery. Understanding how Union Parishads can leverage technology and citizen engagement to improve governance will be crucial in shaping the next phase of local government reforms in Bangladesh.

By strengthening institutional frameworks, ensuring greater inclusivity, and embracing technological advancements, Union Parishads can emerge as effective and responsive governance institutions, ultimately contributing to a more democratic and equitable society.

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