



Recent Practices of People's Participation in Different Avenues of Rural Local Government: Realities and Challenges behind Strengthening Decentralisation in Bangladesh

Tanjil Ahmed¹, Azizur Rahman², Tamanna Akter³

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Abstract

People's participation in various avenues of local administration is crucial for strengthening decentralisation in Bangladesh, despite the fact that such participation faces significant. The main purpose of this research is to explore the most current trends in people's participation in different avenues of local government. This research also examines the realities and challenges involved in strengthening decentralisation in Bangladesh. Using a quantitative methodology, this research found that different avenues of people's participation in Union Parishads has fostered successful decentralisation since these avenues certify independent participation and enable them to share their opinions and influence decision-making processes. Since decentralisation facilitates the transfer of power from the central to the local level, people's participation is functional within Union Parishads. Moreover, this research demonstrates that most rural people are severely challenged in participating in the different avenues of Union Parishads due to political complexity, institutional corruption, poor education, and general unawareness. The authors therefore suggest that, by implementing public awareness programmes, ensuring the maximum autonomy of local government units, and confirming the accountability and transparency of service providers, people's participation can strengthen the decentralisation of rural local government in Bangladesh.

Keywords: decentralisation; people's participation; local government; union parishad; avenues of participation; Bangladesh.

- 1 Lecturer, Department of Public Administration and Governance Studies, Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, Bangladesh. Email: tanjilahmedtaj@gmail.com
- 2 Associate Professor, Department of Public Administration and Governance Studies, Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, Bangladesh.
- 3 Post-Graduate Student, Department of Public Administration and Governance Studies, Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, Bangladesh.



Introduction

Decentralisation is a widely discussed issue in development discourse, having a very positive relationship with democracy, good governance, public administration, development, and people's participation. From a democratic perspective, decentralisation enables close contact between local residents and governmental institutions' functionaries (Khan, 2009). The autonomous decision-making power of lower levels of government and citizens' access to decision-making are buttressed by the national constitution, which provides the framework within which local government is to function. Decentralisation—which means the transfer of the locus of decision-making (i.e., the transfer of responsibility) from the central to the local level—promotes grassroots involvement in the day-to-day decision-making

process (Boko, 2002). In this regard, participation is essential for ensuring decentralisation. Many mechanisms are available in the decentralised governance system through which people participate in decision-making (Kessy, 2013). The World Bank (1994) defines participation as the process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives (World Bank, 1995). Participation is a function through which people can come to share their development vision, make choices, and manage activities. It is also one of the most important elements of good governance, which means the active involvement of stakeholders in decision-making (Marume et al., 2016). Involvement in local government is made possible by both direct and indirect awareness of participation. In this regard, people's participation



is seen as a fundamental aspect of democratic and decentralised government (S.I. Mohammad et al., 2019).

Union Parishad (UP) is the lower tier of local government in Bangladesh. Through this institution, administration is handled closer to the beneficiaries (Insider, 2013). The Local Government (Union Parishad) Act of 2009 provides for the inclusion of local residents and elected representatives in different communities, meetings, Ward Shabha (ward council) and other activities. Each Union Parishad offers six avenues of people's participation: Ward Shabha, open budget sessions, village courts, standing committees, citizen charters, and access to information (Uddin, 2019). Each UP consists of nine wards, and each ward includes a Ward Shabha—an institution created as a result of decentralisation and the aforementioned Local

Government Act. The Ward Shabha is made up of all the ward's voters, with the elected general member of each Ward serving as the meeting's chairman and the elected female member serving as an advisor. These institutions are primarily responsible for choosing development plans and evaluating development initiatives, and thus provide democratic procedures for local governments to hasten the process by which citizens participate in decision making. At least five per cent of the ward's voters must attend each meeting, ensuring that the public's opinions are taken into consideration while making decisions (Muhammad Ahsan & Jahan, 2022) policy formulation or implementation, people's participation at all levels of policy process, decision-making and service delivery has become the prime prerequisite in the prevailing development



paradigm. Although in practice there remains huge argument regarding people's effective involvement in the development process due to unwillingness of the supply side and inefficiency, political ignorance of the demand end, it is an undeniable fact that the government of Bangladesh in the recent past has enacted laws for all levels of local government bodies with especial focus given on the people's participation in different phases of development process. This study aims at reconnaissance of the degree of rights and opportunity given to the general people to participate in the development process presented in the existing Local Government Acts, both in rural and urban local government tiers. The study mainly focuses on the secondary sources, exclusively on the existing Local Government Acts and ordinances. The study finds that all acts have significantly

included the opportunities for local people to participate in the decision-making process. It is interesting to say that the lower the tier of local government, the higher opportunity to participate in decision making process (Muhammad Ahsan & Jahan, 2022).

Prior to 2009, the budgeting process was centralised. However, the passage of the Local Government Act of 2009 provided a statutory basis for citizen engagement in local policymaking and budgeting: the open budget meeting mechanism. The main purpose of this mechanism is to guarantee that the people's opinions are heard and that representatives are held accountable to the citizens. According to the Local Government Act of 2009, each UP is to hold two open budget sessions each year, inviting all community members to attend regardless of colour, religion,



sex, class, or background. During these budget sessions, the UP typically presents its proposed budget, together with its revenue and expenses. Moreover, based on participants' opinions, the UP makes recommendations for amending the proposed budget (Uddin, 2019).

Although the Village Courts Act of 2006 included a mechanism for local inhabitants and elected officials to participate in village court proceedings, the Local Government Act of 2009 actively encouraged this participation. The chairman of the UP, together with four others—at least two of whom must be UP members and two of whom must be community members—rules over the village court. In this regard, village courts improve people's participation in local government institutions, i.e., Union Parishads (Uddin, 2019). There is thus no room for arbitrary conclusions, as decision-making processes

in the village courts are guided by law (Islam, 2015). The village court mechanism strengthens community cohesion and improves people's sense of ownership in local peace-building processes. Indeed, village courts are crucial for giving economically disadvantaged and vulnerable rural residents access to alternative legal systems (Islam, 2015). The village court system is ideal for rural people as it provides justice at a very low cost and in a friendly, informal setting. It is also emblematic of decentralisation, as it encourages people's involvement in alternative legal systems by delegating power.

Similarly, UP standing committees offer more institutional avenues for creating people's engagement. In accordance with Article 45 of the Local Government Act of 2009, 13 permanent committees on certain subjects

are established. According to the Act, each standing committee is led by one UP member and five to seven other members. Additionally, several clauses in the Act allow ordinary citizens to be appointed as members of standing committees and other bodies. This statement clearly indicates that ordinary people can participate in standing committees and share their views with elected representatives. In essence, standing committee members arrange frequent meetings among themselves to discuss the issues they face in their individual fields (Uddin, 2019). Additionally, members of the standing committees find ways to address local issues in a methodical fashion via their general sessions. The major responsibilities of the standing committees are to assist in local development planning and to keep an eye on service providers' activities and implementation

procedures. To gauge the needs and demands of the community, standing committees also gather feedback from general citizens and provide regular reports to the UP (Local Government Division, 2012).

Correspondingly, **people's right to access information is acknowledged under the Right to Information Act and Articles 78–81 of the Local Government Act. These laws also** provide legal protection for the free movement of information, ensuring that citizens can obtain the information they require. These laws clearly demonstrate that there is no legislation that restricts access to information or forbids the dissemination of information. Indeed, every person has a right to seek information from the government, and the government is required to comply with such requests under the Right to Information Act of 2009 (MRDI and



Asia Foundation, 2013). Correspondingly, a citizen charter clause is included in local government statutes (Local Government Act, 2009) and is required at every level of local government in Bangladesh. Under the Right to Information Act (Article 49), UPs are also obliged to develop a citizen charter outlining several categories of services and ensure that citizens can check the validity and availability of services. This charter should include lists, terms, and costs of services, time limits for some services, complaint procedures, and service assurance. Giving citizens more control over the provision of public goods and services is the straightforward goal of these charters, which seek to provide citizens with a thorough understanding of their rights and privileges (Uddin, 2019). In this vein, it can be said that the Right to Information

Act (2009) and citizen charters have provided a new dimension wherein local government institutions (i.e., Union Parishads) can fulfil citizens' demands for participation. Both promote the practice of decentralisation by transferring authority from the central government to the local level, seeking to ensure that people's participation makes local government institutions (LGIs) effective.

However, the public's lack of faith in the government is now seen as the greatest obstacle to local government institutions in Bangladesh (Tawfique & Haque, 2009). Even while it has shown some promise, public involvement in local governments has yet to meet statutory requirements and popular expectations. The poor capacity of local resources, public unawareness, and domineering central-local interactions are the key causes of such problems. For such reasons, UPs have mostly

failed to realise the people's expectations along with their mandated duties for national development (P. K. Panday, 2019). Furthermore, Muhammad Ahsan and Jahan (2022) argue that the laws of budgeting, planning, and resource management are very poorly understood by elected officials, which has very dangerous consequences, like limiting the scope of people's participation in local government institutions. Moreover, the efficient operation of local governments is hampered by this poor knowledge and aptitude gap (Muhammad Ahsan & Jahan, 2022) policy formulation or implementation, people's participation at all levels of policy process, decision-making and service delivery has become the prime prerequisite in the prevailing development paradigm. Although in practice there remains huge argument regarding people's effective

involvement in the development process due to unwillingness of the supply side and inefficiency, political ignorance of the demand end, it is an undeniable fact that the government of Bangladesh in the recent past has enacted laws for all levels of local government bodies with especial focus given on the people's participation in different phases of development process. This study aims at reconnaissance of the degree of rights and opportunity given to the general people to participate in the development process presented in the existing Local Government Acts, both in rural and urban local government tiers. The study mainly focuses on the secondary sources, exclusively on the existing Local Government Acts and ordinances. The study finds that all acts have significantly included the opportunities for local people to participate in the decision-making process. It is



interesting to say that the lower the tier of local government, the higher opportunity to participate in decision making process. Social Science Review, Vol. 38(1). Through a literature review, it has been found that, while reform measures signalled a prospective increase in local people's engagement, these initiatives failed to meet expectations. Similarly, it has been observed that field administrative units (i.e., Upazila Parishad and Union Parishad) cannot function properly due to the absence of a meaningful transfer of authority and responsibility to elected representatives, along with the presence of a centrally-controlled administration and the considerable intervention of politicians and bureaucrats (P. Panday, 2017). Similarly, people's participation in development initiatives at the local level in Bangladesh is lacking because the local institutions do not

have the authority to formulate development plans or the financial autonomy to implement programmes. As such, ensuring people's participation in development processes at all levels is challenging in Bangladesh (Khatun & Ara, 2019).

Decentralisation is crucial for enhancing the autonomy and capacity of local government institutions in Bangladesh. With a view of enhancing the political footing of these institutions, Bangladesh's political leaders have implemented several reforms to modify the structure of local government institutions in the name of decentralisation. In some cases, these reform initiatives have been taken for regional self-interest, which goes against the ultimate purposes of decentralisation. Such mismanagement prevents local government institutions from becoming hubs for growth, even as individuals

also fail to participate in and oversee the activities of these institutions (P. K. Panday, 2011). In contemporary democratic society and the governance system, people's participation affects their standards of living and thinking. Decentralisation, as a sustainable solution for the local community, ensures effective resource utilisation and allows citizens to participate in formulating and implementing decisions, development plans, policies, etc. It also plays a significant role in ensuring the effective delivery of services, e.g., natural resource management for marginalised communities. In particular, the apparent benefits of decentralisation include greater access to decision-makers; higher levels of participation in decision-making by various social groups; decision-makers being held more accountable; etc. (Andersson et al., 2004).

Citizens' participation in procurement processes has added new dimensions to the avenues of formulating and implementing UPs' annual development plans. There is no way to promote local socio-economic development in Bangladesh without considering the public procurement process. In this context, the participation and awareness of local people in the public procurement process play a praiseworthy role in enhancing public accountability in local government. At the same time, it is crucial that civil society can monitor public procurement to keep the process open and free of corruption. As numerous challenges (poor knowledge of public procurement processes, political biases, and corruption) limit public participation in the public procurement processes of local governments, it is essential to create a favourable environment wherein local people



and civil society institutions can participate in development processes at the grassroots levels (Razzaque, 2014). Economic progress and social justice rely heavily on the engagement of the people in local administration, but local administration is ineffective in most developing nations—including Bangladesh. In particular, the looming black clouds of inefficiency, resource scarcity, and political corruption continue to cast a shadow over elected local institutions (i.e., the UP), which continues to be weak. Although the different standing committees of UPs are the primary institutions for citizen participation in local decision-making processes, the local government is frequently overshadowed by national policies, practices, and initiatives for economic growth and social/political development. These factors negatively affect public

engagement and people's faith in various local government institutions (Tawfique & Haque, 2009).

Moreover, through decentralisation, local people are empowered directly. The process enables the general public and civil society to participate in the formulation and execution of public policies and programmes in field administrative units (Roche, 2008). In developing nations like Bangladesh, decentralisation is the ideal strategy for including rural populations in development networks. In practice, however, elites often obstruct the helpless majority in their efforts to participate actively in development programmes. In Bangladesh, those who are poor or disadvantaged cannot be effectively integrated into local government organisations. Although the male and female elected members of UPs engage equally in planning development

initiatives, the participation of rural peoples in these programmes is minimal. Moreover, Project Implementation Committees (PICs) uphold rigorous official procedures in which the members are neither sufficiently consulted nor appropriately informed of projects' progress during implementation. Public participation in PICs is highly artificial and undervalued. At the same time, the characteristics of involvement in the process of development planning are greatly influenced by the profiles, education, and economic standing of UPs. In fact, the selection of public needs-based initiatives and engagement of members of underprivileged sectors in local development projects are frequently hampered by influential local persons. In essence, rural elites gain from one another, keeping the poor and disadvantaged outside of the growth process.

To promote and encourage beneficiaries' participation in local development projects, it is crucial to implement a large-scale awareness campaign, foster a culture of local participation, ensure accountability, implement guidelines that are friendly to participation, and work with local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) (S. N. Mohammad, 2010).

Citizens' participation in inter-local cooperation and public administration is crucial in developing the local government system in Bangladesh. Although participation in the affairs of the local government bodies is significantly improving and general citizens are trying to make their presence felt and voices heard, elected officials are less interested in creating participation mechanisms. Elected officials are engaged and concerned with the efficiency of service delivery.



People's participation at the local level has remained problematic due to the persistence of patron-client relationships in rural societies, which is the fundamental basis for this debate (Zeemering, 2008). In Bangladesh's current development paradigm, the general public's engagement at all levels of policymaking, decision-making, and service delivery has been sorely needed. The primary concerns in this context are rights and opportunities provided to the general public to engage in the development process by taking part in various local government avenues. On the other hand, it has been recognised that current local government statutes offer considerable opportunities for local people to participate in decision-making. Even so, the lowest tier of rural local government (i.e., Union Parishad) gives citizens a greater chance to participate in the decision-

making process (Muhammad Ahsan & Jahan, 2022) policy formulation or implementation, people's participation at all levels of policy process, decision-making and service delivery has become the prime prerequisite in the prevailing development paradigm. Although in practice there remains huge argument regarding people's effective involvement in the development process due to unwillingness of the supply side and inefficiency, political ignorance of the demand end, it is an undeniable fact that the government of Bangladesh in the recent past has enacted laws for all levels of local government bodies with especial focus given on the people's participation in different phases of development process. This study aims at reconnaissance of the degree of rights and opportunity given to the general people to participate in the development process presented in the existing Local

Government Acts, both in rural and urban local government tiers. The study mainly focuses on the secondary sources, exclusively on the existing Local Government Acts and ordinances. The study finds that all acts have significantly included the opportunities for local people to participate in the decision-making process. It is interesting to say that the lower the tier of local government, the higher opportunity to participate in decision making process. Social Science Review, Vol. 38(1). Due to rapid economic development and extraordinary advances in information technology, the topics of decentralisation, governance, and good governance have attracted a great deal of attention among practitioners of public administration, international assistance agencies, and OECD nations. Similarly, with a desire to eradicate poverty in third-

world countries, the concepts of decentralisation, governance, and good governance have played a significant role since the 1990s. In this context, decentralisation supports public involvement in decision-making, fosters political education, ensures equitable and efficient resource allocation, and ensures dependable relationships between diverse central and local governments. Conversely, political reluctance, administrative confrontation, dishonesty, limited resources, poor harmonisation, insufficient information, and fragile organisational structures significant affect the practice of decentralisation in field administration and its ability to promote good governance that meets citizens' needs. Therefore, a participation-based local government structure can address the issues of local government in Bangladesh (Asaduzzaman, 2008).



In this vein, people's participation, leadership, transparency, and accountability are critical in demonstrating the importance of good governance in Bangladesh. The participation of the local population is a prerequisite for creating good governance at the rural level in Bangladesh. It integrates people's experience, knowledge, and commitments into the development process while upholding democratic values (P. K. Panday & Rabbani, 2011) the article explores the governance situation of the lowest local government tier (Union Parishad. At the grassroots level, to empower the people, local governments in Bangladesh have begun to implement democratic and participatory governance practices. In this regard, in the planning, implementing, and monitoring processes, there are some formal mechanisms for ensuring community

participation. Citizens are involved in local decision-making because elected representatives are accountable to the public for the money paid to local citizens. Similarly, citizens can complain about their local government and services (Uddin, 2019). In this context, effective decentralisation can significantly improve the overall efficacy and quality of the governance system while also enhancing the power and capability of sub-national levels (UNDP, 1997). Decentralisation and participation are thus closely intertwined (Saxena, 1998).

However, although numerous academics have written extensively in recent and past years about decentralisation and public participation, a preliminary review of the literature reveals that there are surprisingly few studies that explain the factors that contribute to people's participation in local government

in Bangladesh. No research has concentrated on the six avenues of people's participation in promoting decentralisation in local government in Bangladesh in the twenty-first century. Earlier studies also differed in their methodology, sample, and strategy. In addition, although the 21st century has brought multiple advances in governance systems, many people in rural areas still face substantial challenges when participating in decision-making processes at the local level, i.e., UPs in Bangladesh (Uddin, 2019). To demonstrate functional decentralisation and improve people's participation in decision-making, the present study aims to identify recent practices of people's participation in rural local government by exploring the realities and challenges of strengthening decentralisation in Bangladesh. In brief, the current study seeks to discover knowledge and status gaps

between the theory and practice of people's participation in UPs in Bangladesh. In particular, the study aims to explore the recent practices of people's participation in different avenues (open budget sessions, Ward Shabha, village courts, standing committees, local elections, and access to information) to strengthen decentralisation in Bangladesh. Based on the study results, the authors then suggested a number of strategies to address the issues with people's participation in local government organisations, i.e., UPs in Bangladesh. Therefore, the research contributes both theoretically and practically to the improvement of the practice of local government and public policy in Bangladesh. Theoretically, this research contributes to the body of knowledge by elucidating existing facts and expanding the literature in the fields



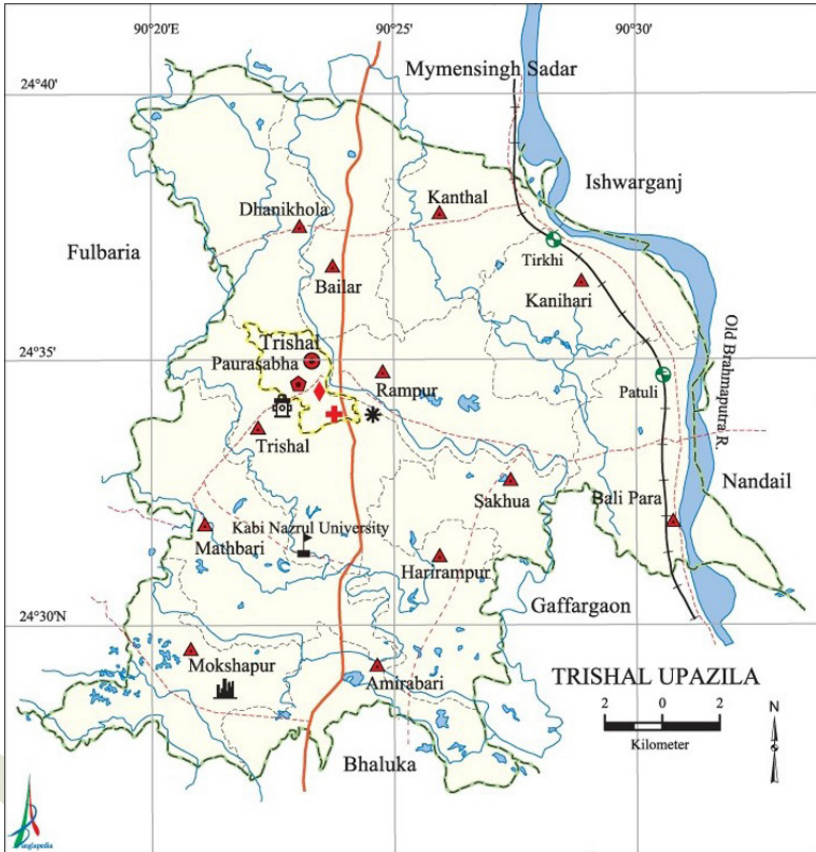
of decentralisation, civic engagement, local government, and governance systems. Practically, the study's results will help policymakers come up with solid policies for ensuring effective decentralisation in the 21st century by answering questions such as: What are the perceptions of people regarding participating in the different avenues of local government? How can people's participation in existing avenues of local government be enhanced? How can good governance in local government units in Bangladesh be promoted? In light of these considerations, the authors argue that this study offers a very pertinent and crucial contribution to strengthening decentralisation and people's participation in local government organisations (i.e., UPs) in Bangladesh.

Research Method

The study was conducted using a quantitative approach and positivist philosophy, whereas an exploratory research approach was also applied. Quantitative methods were applied to collect survey data. Data were gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were gathered from rural people who belong to selected UPs under Trishal Upazila in Bangladesh, while secondary data were gathered from books, peer-reviewed articles, reports, theses, websites, and newspapers. Close-ended questionnaires were used as instruments to collect survey data. Finally, the data were analysed using MS Excel and SPSS software. A total of 320 respondents, inhabitants of six UPs under Trishal Upazila, Mymensingh, Bangladesh

(Amiabari, Bailar, Bali Para, Dhanikhola, Harirampur, and Trishal Union Parishads), Since the study was conducted using a quantitative approach, the collected data were organised characteristically

Figure 1: Study Area



Source: Trishal Upazila (Hossain et al., 2019)



and coding was done manually. The prepared data were analysed statistically and presented using two pieces of data analysis software: MS Excel and SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The principal purpose of data analysis is to extract worthwhile information for decision-makers (Ali & Bhaskar, 2016). Correspondingly, this research was systematically connected to the ethical doctrines of social responsibility (Žukauskas et al., 2018). Ethical issues were maintained strictly to ensure a balance between the probable threats of research and the possible benefits of research, all ethical issues were maintained strictly. In particular, voluntary involvement, privacy, and consent were obtained before interviews and surveys, and respondents' confidentiality was strictly maintained (Yip et al., 2016) related to the subject and researcher. This article

seeks to briefly review the various international guidelines and regulations that exist on issues related to informed consent, confidentiality, providing incentives and various forms of research misconduct. Relevant original publications (The Declaration of Helsinki, Belmont Report, Council for International Organisations of Medical Sciences/ World Health Organisation International Guidelines for Biomedical Research Involving Human Subjects, World Association of Medical Editors Recommendations on Publication Ethics Policies, International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, CoSE White Paper, International Conference on Harmonisation of Technical Requirements for Registration of Pharmaceuticals for Human Use-Good Clinical Practice. The researchers



followed a no-harm policy, ensuring that no participants, entities, or groups were abused in any way.

Results

1. Demographic Information

As the main objective of this study was to explore recent practices of people’s participation in rural local government as part of decentralisation, a quantitative approach was used to gather primary data. Data were gathered primarily through a close-ended (i.e., yes/no) questionnaire. In terms of demographics, Table

1 shows that 65% of study participants were male and 35% were female. Of the respondents, 20% were from the 21–30 age group, 45% were from the 31–40 age group, and 35% were from the 41–50 age group. Participants came from diverse economic backgrounds; as shown in Table 1, 28% of respondents were day labourers, 36% of respondents were businessmen, and 24% of respondents were homemakers. Merely 12% of respondents were public/private officials. Most of the respondents had attained some level of basic education.

Table 1: Demographic Analysis

Variables		Frequency	Per Cent (%)	Cumulative Per Cent (%)
Gender	Male	208	65	65
	Female	112	35	100



Age	21–30	64	20	20
	31–40	144	45	65
	41–50	112	35	100
Education	Basic Education	147	46	46
	Higher Education	58	18	64
	Less Knowledgeable (Illiterate)	115	36	100
Profession	Day Labour	90	28	28
	Businessmen	115	36	64
	Public/Private Official	38	12	76
	Homemaker	77	24	100

Source: Field Survey at 6 Union Parishads (Local Government Bodies) under Trishal Upazila, Mymensingh, Bangladesh (January-April 2021).

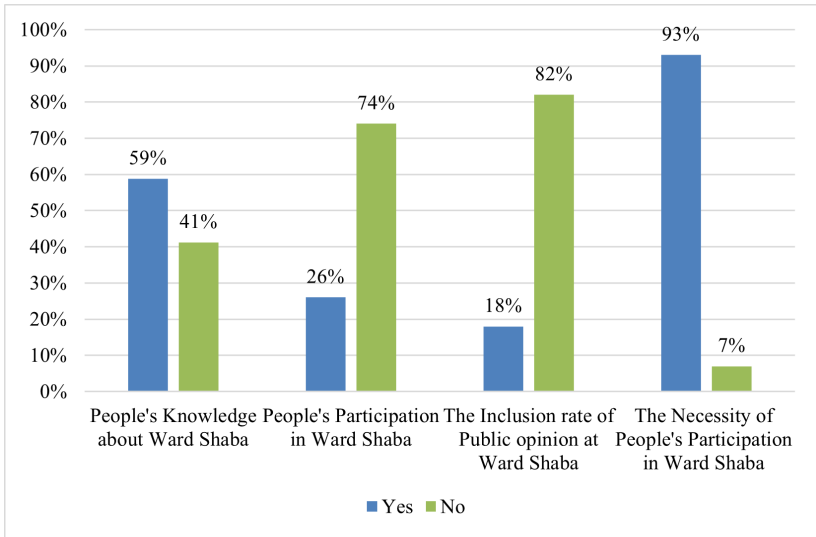
2. Recent Practices of People’s Participation in Ward Shabha

The following chart demonstrates the people’s participation in Ward Shabha, local government units under the UPs in Bangladesh. Survey data

indicated that 59% of local people knew these units, while 41% of respondents had no knowledge about Ward Shabha. It was found that only 26% of local people participated in the Ward Shabha; 74% did not, due to rural politics, grouping, and unwillingness.



Figure 1: Study Area



Source: Trishal Upazila (Hossain et al., 2019)

Conversely, only 18% of respondents' opinions were held in the Ward Shabha, whereas 82% of respondents' opinions were rejected. Although the Local Government Act of 2009 established Ward Shabha as a form of direct citizen involvement in decision-making (Panday, 2011), the above statistics demonstrate that many rural people fail to participate in these institutions, which may weaken

the decentralisation of rural local government in Bangladesh. Since the Ward Shabha certifies people's participation in local government organisations (i.e., UPs), and people can independently participate to share their opinions, the Ward Shabha fosters successful decentralisation through people's participation in local government. The main basis for this argument is that decentralisation ensures



the transfer of authority from the central to the local level (Farid Uddin, 2018), which is similar to people's participation in the Ward Shabha. Therefore, about 93% of local respondents held that people's participation in Ward Shaba would play a remarkable role in strengthening decentralisation within local government institutions in Bangladesh.

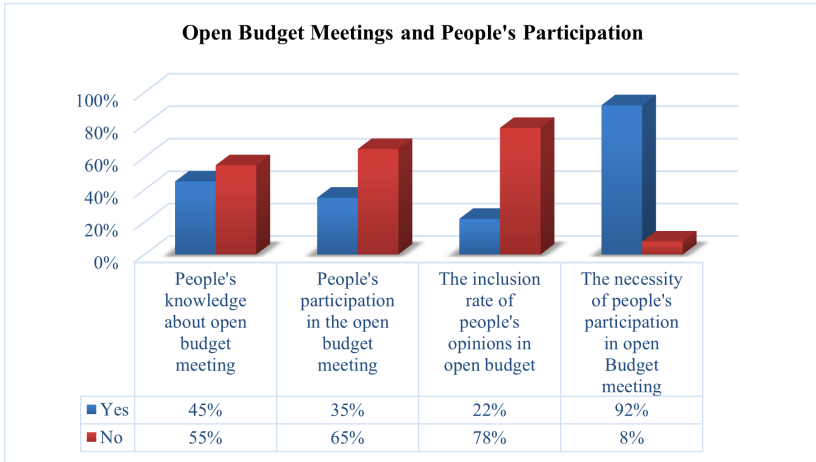
3. People's Participation in Open Budget Meetings to Strengthen Decentralisation

The bar chart below illustrates people's participation in open budget meetings in the different UPs under Trishal Upazila. The survey found that 45% of respondents had knowledge about open budget meetings, whereas 55% did not. The survey also found that only a small number of local people, i.e., around 35%, participated in these meetings; the majority

(65%) did not. Astonishingly, only 22% of respondents' opinions were included in the meetings; 78% of respondents' opinions were generally rejected. These statistics indicate that most rural people were unaware of the opportunity to participate in open budget meetings, and that—due to immense political complexity—the opinions of most respondents' (78%) were rejected. In this regard, the authors argue that the participation of rural people in open budget meetings is crucial for preparing effective and efficient budgets that promote overall development at the grassroots levels. In addition, these open budget sessions allow community members to give voice to their views and engage in decision-making processes and development initiatives (Chowdhury, 2017).



Figure 3: People’s Participation in Open Budget Meetings



Source: Field survey of Six UPs under Trishal Upazila, Mymensingh, Bangladesh (January–April 2021).

Since open budget sessions ensure that people can participate in local government organisations (i.e., UPs) and exercise authority alongside elected leaders, these sessions foster successful decentralisation through people’s participation (Uddin, 2019). Therefore, the majority of respondents—92%—argue that the participation of rural people

in open budget meetings plays a noteworthy role in directly and indirectly strengthening decentralisation in Bangladesh.

4. People’s Participation in Village Courts to Strengthen Decentralisation

The bar chart below demonstrates the people’s recent participation in village courts at the UP level in Bangladesh.

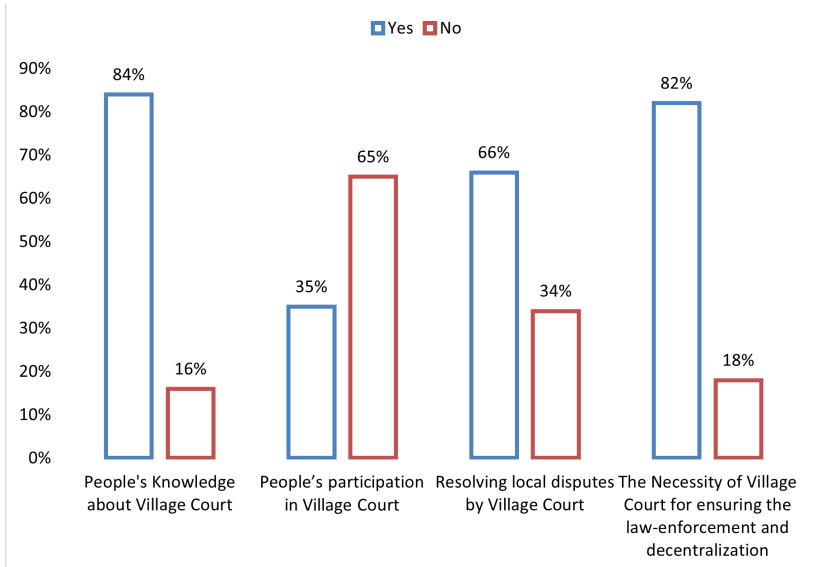


Survey data illustrates that 84% of respondents were acquainted with the village courts, while 16% of respondents had no knowledge about these institutions. Of the respondents, 35% had participated in village court activities in the selected study areas, while 65% had never become involved. Although 66% of respondents argued that village courts could conveniently resolve local disputes, 34% disagreed with this statement. In this respect, it has been noted that participation in village court activities is challenging since the members of the village courts (who come from the local population) tend to be politically motivated. Moreover, political interference, nepotism, corruption, and unwillingness have been identified as the main barriers to community participation in village court activities in Bangladesh.

Nevertheless, the village courts of Bangladesh encourage effective decentralisation by certifying citizens' involvement in local government organisations (such as UPs) and allowing them to take part in an alternative judicial system to deal with local matters (Islam, 2015). This argument is primarily supported by the fact that decentralisation facilitates the transfer of power from the central to the local level, where village court members wield significant power. In this context, the majority of respondents—82%—held that village courts could play a significant role in resolving local disputes by ensuring the effective application of laws and strengthening decentralisation through public participation.



Figure 4: People’s Participation in Village Courts



Source: Field survey of Six UPs under Trishal Upazila, Mymensingh, Bangladesh (January–April 2021)

5. People’s Participation in Standing Committees to Strengthen Decentralisation

The bar chart below illustrates people’s participation in the standing committees of UPs as a means of strengthening decentralisation. Survey data demonstrates that only 28% of respondents were acquainted

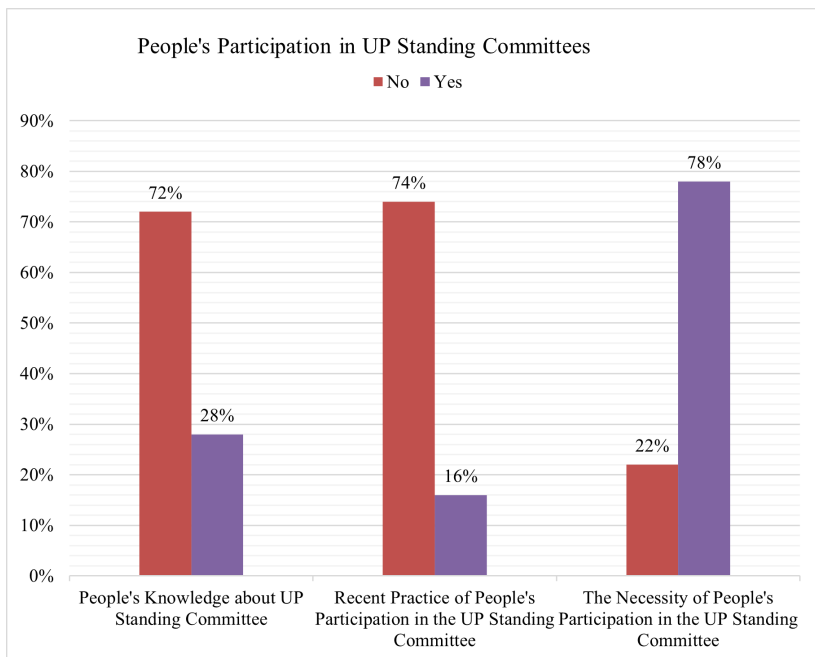
with the standing committees; the majority of respondents (72%) had no knowledge of these institutions. Likewise, only 16% of respondents had participated in committee meetings; 84% had not. These results indicate that rural people care little about participating in the standing committees, which limits their



ability to share their views with their elected representatives. In this regard, the researchers argue that poor education, lack of knowledge, and political antipathy are the primary factors driving the poor knowledge of UP standing committees and public participation in said institutions.

As the UP standing committees are tasked with involving locals in the rural development agenda, it promotes the decentralisation of power by transferring authority to the general populace (Local Government Division, 2012). From this point of view, UP standing

Figure 5: People’s Participation in UP Standing Committee



Source: Field survey of Six UPs under Trishal Upazila, Mymensingh, Bangladesh (January–April 2021)



committees are crucial avenues for participation that add a new dimension to local development in Bangladesh. Around 78% of respondents argued that the participation of rural people in UP standing committees plays a momentous role in strengthening decentralisation in Bangladesh.

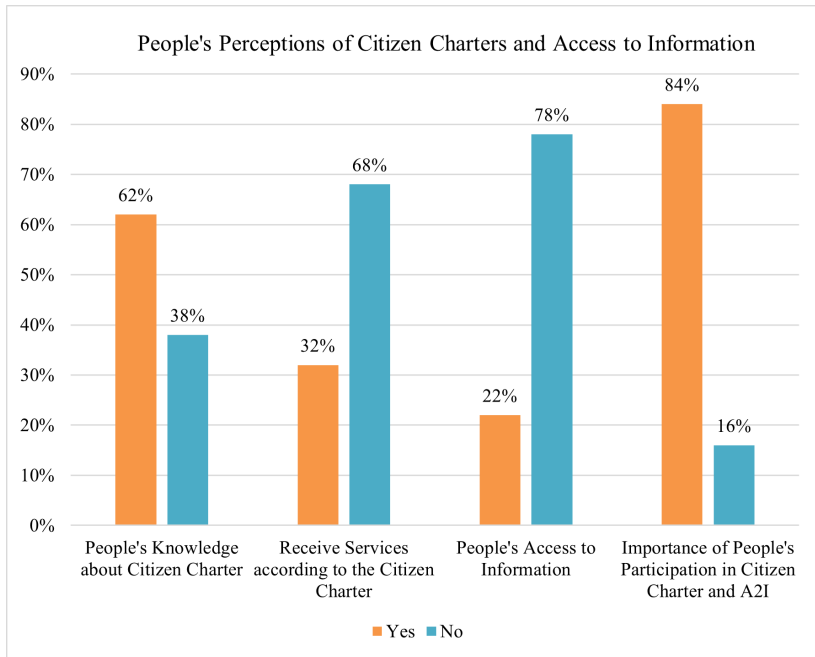
6. Perceptions of Citizen Charters and Access to Information

The following chart depicts respondents' perceptions of citizen charters and access to information in terms of strengthening decentralisation in rural local government units (i.e., Union Parishad) in Bangladesh. Survey data found that the majority of respondents (62%) were familiar with the citizen charters, whereas 38% of respondents had no knowledge of them. However, survey data also showed that merely 32% of respondents received services

from their UP according to its citizen charter; the majority of respondents (68%) did not. Similarly, it was found that only 22% of respondents used access to information services of their UP; the majority of respondents (78%) could not access information. These findings indicate that, despite the creation of citizen charters and the passage of the Right to Information Act, the majority of respondents were unable to access the services and information they required. In this regard, the researchers observed that respondents' poor education and unawareness, institutional corruption, and delays in service provision are the primary factors contributing to respondents' failure to receive services from UPs in Bangladesh.



Figure 6: People's Perceptions of Citizen Charters and Access to Information



Source: Field survey of Six UPs under Trishal Upazila, Mymensingh, Bangladesh (January–April 2021).

The Right to Information Act (2009) and citizen charters guarantee the people's participation in local administration (i.e., Union Parishads) and also improve the

practice of decentralisation by enabling the exercise of power (delegated from the central administration) within local government institutions. In this regard, 84% of respondents held

that the Right to Information Act (2009) and citizen charters could improve decentralisation in rural local government units (Union Parishads) in Bangladesh.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Decentralisation is a form of administrative reform that distributes and transfers the powers, activities, rights, and duties of the central government to local administrative entities. People's participation, meanwhile, refers to the independent engagement of individuals in decision-making; through this process, a large number of individuals may exert influence on government activities. People's participation and decentralisation are closely intertwined, and in Bangladesh, the former significantly contributes to the strengthening of the latter at the local level. In particular, by exercising power

delegated from the central administration, the different avenues of Union Parishads (open budget meetings, Ward Shabha, village courts, standing committees, and citizen charters) enhance decentralisation by regulating citizens' participation. At the same time, strengthening decentralisation in Bangladesh depends largely on people getting involved in local government institutions in Bangladesh. This study finds that, although decentralisation ensures the delegation of power, authority, and responsibility to field administrative units (i.e., Union Parishads), most rural citizens cannot participate independently in the aforementioned avenues of local government. Most rural people are unaware of their right to participate in the decision-making process. It has also been observed that, due to rural politics and grouping, the bulk of people's viewpoints are often



disregarded by relevant officials. Since decentralisation empowers field administrative units, promotes good governance, and increases the opportunity for people to participate actively, concerned authorities should implement appropriate initiatives to address the existing issues of people's participation in different avenues of local government in Bangladesh. The authors believe that the following policy recommendations will address the key challenges to people's participation in local government with respect to enhancing decentralisation.

First and foremost, authorities at both the central and local levels should take the proper measures (awareness-raising programmes, camps, etc.) to increase public awareness and strengthen effective decentralisation. Secondly, local government authorities should regulate grouping, nepotism,

and rural inflammatory political activities to encourage people's participation in different avenues of local government. Thirdly, local government legislation should be amended and altered as required to minimise corruption within local governments. Fourthly, existing patron-client relationships in local government organisations should be balanced to improve local government capabilities, central-local relationships, and decentralisation effectiveness. Fifthly, the cooperation, coordination, and professionalism of local government authorities should be bolstered to enable successful decentralisation through the people's participation in field administrative units. Sixthly, the financial autonomy of local government bodies should be strengthened to address the issues of decentralisation and people's participation in local

government in Bangladesh. Seventhly, by using effective information and communication technology (ICT), access to information, and citizen charters, the central administration should clarify the roles and responsibilities of local officials/politicians. Last but not least, the central administration should ensure the effective monitoring of UPs so that citizens can enthusiastically participate in the various avenues of local government (open budget meetings, Ward Shabha, village courts, standing committees, and citizen charters).

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The content is original and free of any instances of plagiarism. Moreover, the authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest in relation to this research, authorship, or publishing of this paper.

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