

# Governance at Grassroots–Rhetoric and Reality: A Study of the Union Parishad in Bangladesh

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## Introduction

Advocates of decentralization in developing countries during the last decade have argued that bringing the government closer to the people will make it more responsive, pro-poor, and in general, enhance the quality of governance. Decentralization will also create a participatory framework to develop policies, which meet the needs of citizens, especially the “poor and disadvantaged.” During the last two decades, Bangladesh has experimented with some decentralization exercises and piloted some projects to institutionalize the decentralization process. This paper attempts to examine some of the processes, issues and challenges of institutionalizing the decentralization processes with particular reference to age-old rural local government institution called Union Parishad (UP)<sup>1</sup> in Bangladesh. It further attempts to assess the state of local governance and identify major institutional barriers and challenges at the grassroots-based local government unit in Bangladesh. The paper is based on primary data drawn from field survey, interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations. Content analysis of different published and unpublished policy documents have been made.

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<sup>1</sup> UP is the village based and lowest level of Local government in Bangladesh. There are 4,502 UPs in Bangladesh with an average size of 33.3 km<sup>2</sup> and an average population of 28,000 divided into nine wards composed of 15–18 villages. The UP is a rural elected government with 13 elected members; one from each of nine wards and three women members (from reserved seats—one from each of the three larger wards) along with a directly elected chairperson.

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Local government in Bangladesh is characterized by a long historical lineage and progressive constitutional framework<sup>2</sup> in Bangladesh. The modern local government system started in Bangladesh in the nineteenth century under British India, first with urban local government, followed by rural local governments. Since then, they have undergone many changes in response to the prevailing political and administrative situations during the British, Pakistan, and Bangladesh periods respectively.

Historically, the villages in the greater India, including Bengal, were completely self-governing.<sup>3</sup> They were practically free from central control. The *Gramani* (headman) and other village officials were appointed by the community and were accountable to them. However, *Manu*<sup>4</sup> observed that the village officials had become government servants, and the Local Government system had become subordinate to the Central Administration. While Chanakya<sup>5</sup> noted that each village had a headman (*Gramika*, *Gramadhipa*, or *Gramakuta*), whose duties were: (1) to delimit the boundaries of the village and of the different plots of land within the village; (2) to divide the village lands into cultivated lands, uncultivated lands, plains, wet lands, flower gardens, vegetable gardens, fenced lands, dwelling-houses, assembly halls, temples, irrigation works, cremation grounds, charitable houses, places of pilgrimage, and pasture lands; (3) to maintain books of all sales, gifts, charities, and remissions of taxes which take place within the village; (4) to divide houses in the village into revenue and non-revenue collection, record the amount of taxes, rates, etc., payable by each villager; (5) to register the number of inhabitants distributed by castes, and following different occupations, like agriculture, pasturage, trade, arts, manufactures, manual labor, and menial service; (6) to maintain record of the conduct and character, income and expenditure, of each inhabitant. Each village had also maintained a court of justice to handle small civil

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<sup>2</sup> Article 59(1) provides that ‘Local Government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies, composed of persons elected in accordance with law. Article 59(2) provides the broad functions of local government as: ‘administration and the work of public officers; the maintenance of public order; the preparation and implementation of plans relating to public services and economic development’. Article 60 stipulates that ‘For the purpose of giving full effect to the provisions of Article 59 Parliament shall by law, confer powers on the local government bodies referred to in that article, including power to impose taxes for local purposes, to prepare their budgets and to maintain funds.’ There were two more Constitutional provisions like Articles 9 and 11 which further consolidated the operational aspects of local government. These two Articles were later dropped under the 15th Constitutional amendment.

<sup>3</sup> Sir Charles Metcalfe in Select Committee of the House of Commons noted that “The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they can want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds to revolution; but the village community remains the same.” *Select Committee Proceedings Vol III, app 84, p. 331, 1832.*

<sup>4</sup> Saint Manu (ca 185–100) is respected and honored as an Indian spiritual leader and political historian. His main work is called *Manu Sanhita* or *Manu Smriti*.

<sup>5</sup> Chanakya (c. 370–283 BCE) also known as *Kautilya* was an Indian philosopher and royal advisor. He wrote the classic political treatise called *Arthaśāstra* which is considered to be a classic document in the field of economics, government and political science in India.

suits like boundaries of lands, trial of petty criminal cases like larceny and assault, looked after public property, temples, and the interests of infants, and attended to the question of poor-relief (Banerjee 1916).

## Local Governance: Concept and Perspectives

Local governance is a broader concept and is defined as the formulation and execution of collective action at the local level. Thus, it encompasses the direct and indirect roles of formal institutions of local government and government hierarchies. It also embodies the roles of informal norms, networks, community organizations, and neighborhood associations in pursuing collective action by defining the framework for citizen–citizen and citizen–state interactions, collective decision-making, and delivery of local public services. Local governance, therefore, includes the diverse objectives of vibrant, living, working, and environmentally preserved self-governing communities. Good local governance, therefore, demands the creation of space for democratic participation and civic engagement and dialogue, supporting market-led and environmentally sustainable local development, and facilitation of outcomes that enrich the quality of life of residents (Shah 2006, p. 2).

Local governance is a new dimension of the decentralization reform processes that emphasizes strengthening local-level democratic practices to ensure sustainable and viable local level development. It also emphasizes the wider involvement of citizens, NGOs, and the private sector in relation to working with and monitoring local governments to promote the participation of civil society, establish downward accountability and devise mechanisms for pro-poor decentralized service delivery system (Olsen 2007).

UNDP defines local governance as:

the process of making decisions, allocating funds and delivering services at the local level. It involves actors (e.g., mayors, local councils, NGOs, business associations), formal and informal institutions (e.g., municipal administration, council, but also rules and regulations), and available means (e.g., human resources, money).<sup>6</sup>

However, this basic definition of local governance has been later revised by UNDP as:

Local governance comprises a set of institutions, mechanisms, and processes, through which citizens and their groups can articulate their interests and needs, mediate their differences and exercise their rights and obligations at the local level. The building blocks of good local governance are many: citizens' participation, partnerships among key actors at the local level, capacity of local actors across all sectors, multiple flows of information, institutions of accountability, and a pro-poor orientation.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> <http://hrba.undp.sk/index.php/introduction/local-governance-human-rights-based-approach-and-gender-mainstreaming-in-the-context-of-europe-and-the-cis/182-local-governance>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://hrba.undp.sk/index.php/introduction/local-governance-human-rights-based-approach-and-gender-mainstreaming-in-the-context-of-europe-and-the-cis/182-local-governance>.

The revised definition of local governance thus includes elements that ensure that the decisions taken reflect the actual needs of the population, in particular, on parts of the population that are neither well represented nor well-off. The revised definition aims at making public policies at the local level pro-poor and providing responsive and better services to the marginalized and vulnerable groups.

Grassroots-level local governance, therefore, recognizes the necessity of empowering local governments with authority and resources and building their capacity to function as participatory institutions that are responsive and accountable to the concerns and needs of all citizens. It is also concerned with the strengthening of grassroots democracy and the empowerment of citizens, communities, and organizations like CBOs and NGOs, to participate as equal partners in improving the quality of governance and local development processes.

Local governance examines the development issues and looks beyond the narrow perspective of legal frameworks and local government entities. It recognizes the multiplicity of formal and informal relationships between different actors in development (e.g., local government, the private sector, associations, CSOs) that shape and influence the output and effectiveness of political and administrative systems at a sub-national level.

It is also to be acknowledged that there is a large degree of synergy and coherence between national governance processes and local governance. National-level governance issues have direct and residual impact on the local governance process. However, strengthening local governance processes at the grassroots, in the long run as a “process of demand generated from below,” can also strengthen the quality of national governance processes.

## **Present Setup of Local Government in Bangladesh**

There are two types of local government institutions (LGI)—rural and urban. Among the elected LGI, there are 10 City Corporations and 307 *Pourasabhas* (municipality) in urban areas and 4,502 UPs. The UP, the lowest tier local government body in the rural areas, was formed in 1870 and has continued to exist (in different names) for over 140 years. About 65,000 elected functionaries (Mayors, Chairpersons, Ward Commissioners, and Members) lead and manage these institutions. Of all the LGIs, there is a provision of 30 % seats reserved for women. However, there are some deputed as well as transferred employees of the central government at Upazila,<sup>8</sup> Municipalities and City Corporations. In case of UP, there is one permanent staff member who is appointed by the Government and his salary is jointly paid by the Government and UP.

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<sup>8</sup> Upazila is the second tier local government at the sub-district level. On average each Upazila has about 12 UPs. At present there are as many as 483 Upazilas in Bangladesh.

## The Policy Context

The local government has been repeatedly identified as a key strategic sector for improving governance and development in Bangladesh.<sup>9</sup> The election manifesto of the *Awami League* (AL), the present ruling party, has expressed strong political commitment to establish an effective local government system in the country. The AL manifesto stressed that “every union will be made the headquarters for development and administration of the area and be developed as a planned rural township.” In line with such a political mandate, the Government of Bangladesh has recently formulated the 6th 5-Year Plan and categorically recognized that quality of local governance is a key institutional development challenge for Bangladesh and noted that “properly instituted and accountable local governments can play a major role in spreading the benefits of development” and “successful local governments must be based on the realities of the underlying political, social, administrative and economic milieu of Bangladesh” (GOB 2011, p. 35). The plan document asserts that “the Government is committed to instituting an effective and accountable local government to help implement its vision and give optimum emphasis on developing capacities of local governments to play their development role in terms of delivery of basic services” (GOB 2011, p. 35).

The National Rural Development Policy emphasized the need for a strong local government to deliver services to the rural population whilst facilitating the expansion of economic and social opportunities. It underlines the importance of ‘accountable and responsive’ LGI, where ‘people will be made aware of and given access to services and opportunities offered by government.’

The Second Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) underlines the multidimensional nature of poverty and the role of LGIs in addressing poverty reduction. Overall, the PRS recognizes the importance of LGIs in promoting good governance, and the PRS acknowledged the importance of local government for “Improving the quality and predictability of public service delivery, expand citizens’ participation and promotion open hearings to ensure that local government is responsive to citizens’ needs” (GED 2009, p. 72). The PRS specifically recognizes the need for and importance of Local Governments as an active partner/implementer of local development initiatives. PRS has specifically noted that local governments should be involved in microcredit delivery and the promotion of rural non-farm activities and that local government bodies and NGOs should also support community driven primary health care services, development of rural roads, improved utilization, and maintenance of constructed facilities and disaster management.

A new law called the UP Act of 2009, which replaces the old UP Ordinance of 1983, has been framed. The UP Act of 2009 recognizes the importance of community participation, transparency, and accountability by including specific sections to address governance issues related to community participation, ward *shavas*

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<sup>9</sup> All 5-Year Plans of the Govt. of Bangladesh highlighted the need and importance of local government as the prime institution for revitalizing the rural hinterland of Bangladesh.

(committees), participatory planning, access to information, and the extended authority of the Committee system, etc.

## The Local Governance Scenario in Bangladesh

Local governance reforms in Bangladesh evolved very distinctly according to the needs of the ruling elites. None of the political regimes gave due importance to the local government system. Although three reform commissions, namely Local Government Structure Review Commission of 1993, the Local Government Commission of 1997, and the Committee for Recommendation of Financial Powers and Sources of Financing LG Institutions of 1999 were set by the different political regimes, but unfortunately no substantive reforms or meaningful changes took place in the role, structure, and management of the Local Government in Bangladesh. Paradoxically, some of the substantive changes and reforms of the LG system took place during the martial law regimes and the period of authoritarian rule. Critics observed that such changes were generally dictated by the imperative of legitimizing and broadening the narrow base of the power-holders in the national government and all reforms initiatives evolved very distinctly according to the needs of the ruling elites. Bangladesh, therefore, has not been successful in establishing a decentralized system of governance and accountability; it has rather maintained a historical trend.<sup>10</sup> Similar observations were later drawn by Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed on his judgments. He noted "... Local government was inextricably mixed up with the central government's affairs, run entirely by the Government's officers with government money, it is in fact a hybrid of the two government entities".<sup>11</sup> A World Bank review of decentralization process in 19 countries ranks Bangladesh, along with a few other countries, lowest in decentralization (Williams et al. 1998).

Considering the political economy and the Constitutional commitment, decentralization is an imperative to improve service delivery, respond to the demand of the civil society, resolve conflict, address the technological changes, and meet the challenges of the growing urbanization. A World Bank initiated stakeholder analysis in Bangladesh revealed that decentralization and enhanced quality of local governance is well-supported by a variety of stakeholders, which include political leaders, media, academics, policy makers—senior civil servants, senior military officers, opinion makers, and other relevant stakeholders. All of these important stakeholders agreed that there is a strong association of decentralization and the practice of democracy in Bangladesh (Aminuzzaman 2007;

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<sup>10</sup> Indian local self-government was still in many ways a democratic façade to an autocratic structure. The actual conduct of the business was carried on by district officials...No proper system of local government evolved" Hugh Tinker (1954: 70).

<sup>11</sup> Supra note 330, Kudrat e Elahi Case, Dhaka Law Review (Appellate Division) Volume 44.

Rudra 2009). This position is supported with several arguments which include: (1) in a populous country like Bangladesh, self-governing local units can best guarantee efficient, equitable, participatory, and responsive administration—particularly for the rural poor; (2) decentralized local governments can provide the opportunity for regular feedback from the citizens, not only through elections but also through frequent face-to-face interactions between local community members and their elected members; (3) elected local governments contribute to the development and training of local political leadership, who can eventually move to governance at the national level; and (4) a well-functioning local government can contribute to more efficient service delivery to local populations.

International lessons also draw a broad conclusion that decentralization is not only a political process of creating accountability but also is the best means to bring government closer to people and institutionalizing democracy. Empirical data across the continents reveal that at least 3 Fs are essential to make any decentralization process successful (Ahmed 2007). These are: Functions, Finance, and Functionaries. In the Bangladesh context, unfortunately there has always been a severe imbalance among the 3 Fs. Finance and Functionaries have always been a perennial problem of the LG systems in Bangladesh. Empirical evidences (Akash 2009; Hossain 2006; Aminuzzaman 2009b) identify some invisible but serious challenges that characterize the governance of the rural local government.

Allocation of resources to rural local government during the last 10 years has ranged from 0.25 to 0.52 % of the national budget. During the fiscal year 2010–2011 all central government agencies working at the local level (i.e., at UP and Upazila levels) have spent about 700 % higher amount of resources compared to the resources allocated to local elected bodies. There is a conventional allegation that the Local government body, especially the UP, has a lower level of capacity to absorb a higher amount of resources. Ironically, empirical evidences suggest that the implementation rate of projects with centrally allocated fund is 100 % for the UPs compared to around 54 % for the different line agencies working at the field levels (Akash 2011).

A recent study on the governance and local power actors reveals the following findings on power relations, governance process, and dynamics at UP level (Aminuzzaman 2009b).

- *Role of UP*: UP is an elite-dominated, male-controlled body where the Chairman is placed in a relatively powerful position, and he often makes decisions in conjunction with a small circle of associates, from which women members, in particular, are excluded. As a body, it is heavily influenced by the members of parliament (MP), especially in the allocation process and use of the Annual Development Program fund, as well as various safety-net programs. The UP chair acts as the gatekeeper of relations and controller of limited development resources of direct grants of the central government.
- *Limited or no access to Project Implementation Committee*: Evidence indicates that, in spite of legal provisions of the UP Act, the members of the community have limited access to and or control over the selection of the types of

community based development projects. Members of the Project Implementation Committees (PIC) are handpicked by the UP or are nominated by the MPs who mostly belong to the ruling party vanguards rather than community representatives.

- *Exclusion of “declining and coping poor”*: Most studies and assessments have observed that “declining and coping poor” (especially women, old and marginalized are generally excluded from major decision-making arenas as well as various services of the state and or UP. Even the safety-net programs are misused within the patronage system of politics.
- *Lack of accountability of government officials*: Government officials located at the Upazila and the union level are answerable only to their own line departments and tend not to consult with let alone coordinate work through the UP. These line agencies are loosely coordinated by the Upazila Parishad and are not accountable to the elected LG officials. Local MPs especially of the ruling regime act as the *defacto* authority to regulate and instruct the line agency officials.
- *Role of NGOs*—NGOs are emerging as a key institutional arrangement in local level development management and mobilizing the poor and disadvantaged. However, NGOs’ role in mobilizing the “declining poor<sup>12</sup>” is limited. NGOs are trying to bring the poor, marginalized and women members of the community into some of the social decision-making process.
- *Role of UNO<sup>13</sup> is critical*: A range of line departments performing both regulatory and developmental roles are located at the Upazila and most of these agencies have extension workers at UP level. The UNO, in effect, does not have effective role to play to coordinate the line agencies. However, UNO are controlling, monitoring the UPs and also informally influencing the UP decisions on behalf of the MPs.
- *Dependency syndrome of the UP elected officials on UNO*: Relationship between elected representatives and local officials is characterized by mutual mistrust, suspicion and dependency to control the UP elected officials and staff. However, this does not preclude collusion, where this is in the mutual interest of the parties concerned. The UNO both directly and indirectly control and monitor the functions of the UP.

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<sup>12</sup> Declining poor refers to those with less or no access to NGO services, formal service deliveries or credit services; limited ability to contribute to labor market and perpetual dependency on social charity and state support.

<sup>13</sup> Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) is the chief executive of the Upazila (Sub-district). He is also the focal point of the central government at the Upazila and coordinates all the line agency departments of the central government based at the Upazila. The UNO also acts as the member secretary of the Upazila Parishad (Sub-district Council).

- *Role and relationship of MPs with local government:* MPs are only expected to perform a relatively minor and advisory role at the local government. In practice, MPs both formally and informally control the role, activities, project selection, and implementation of Upazila and UPs.

## UP Governance: Focus on Field Reality

UP is the frontline local government organization closest to rural people. However, the scope and quality of service delivery is one of the most critical areas that have significantly tinted the “credibility” and “institutional image” of the institution (Aminuzzaman 2009c). Failure of the UPs to respond to the dire need of the rural people, particularly the poor and disadvantaged in particular, often tend to seek services from alternative sources like the NGOs and private providers.

Field observations reveal that critical service areas like education, health, nutrition, family planning, irrigation, agricultural services, and the feeder/secondary roads are all managed directly by the central government officials and their field functionaries without any involvement of the UPs either in the design or implementation process. Thus, institutional “isolation” and ‘incapacity’ has made UP a non-responsive body to provide critical services to the rural poor, more so to the marginalized ones.

### Opinion of Community members with regard to UP

- Scope for participation and development need assessment in UP is limited. About 78 % of the UP residents feel they have no role to play in UP affairs.
- As high as 82 % of community members have no idea as to how the development needs of the UP are assessed.
- 85 % of the community members seem to be less concerned and aware about their individual role and direct responsibilities as regards the UP.
- 76 % UP officials seem to have no clear idea about the role of the UP and its development commitment as per the LG ordinance.
- 74 % members of the community have very low level of expectation from the UP; 66 % are not aware of its major functions.<sup>14</sup>

Rural people have a very low level of trust towards the UP officials and leadership. According to them, the UP leaders are hardly transparent, cannot optimize and make best use of the public resources, are less open to a participatory process, and do not make the best use of the Village Court at all. However, UPs are rated relatively high in terms of handling law and order and efficient implementation of development projects. Rural people also recognized that a UP elected office could easily be approached in a time of crisis, no matter if they can help or not.

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<sup>14</sup> Source: Aminuzzaman (2009c)

**Table 1** Gender wise distribution of satisfaction of the delivery of services by the UP (N = 385) in percentage

	Male	Female	Total
Satisfied	29	19	25
Not satisfied	71	81	75
Total	100	100	100

Chi square 4.84 significant at 0.05 level

Source Survey data

The survey data<sup>15</sup> revealed that as high as 75 % of the rural people are not satisfied with the types and nature of the services being delivered by the UP. Furthermore, it is striking to note that dissatisfaction is significantly higher among the women (see Table 1).

In line with the constitution, the UP Act of 2009 illustrates the role and function of UPs. It identifies four broad categories of functions including “planning and implementation of social and economic development activities.” Ironically, empirical data reveal that UPs are far from directly implementing any of such functions. Even a significant number of UP elected officials are not fully aware of such functional responsibilities of the elected body (Aminuzzaman 2009a).

The community expectations for service delivery are presented in Table 2. The table reveals that the most expected services that the rural people want are: income generating interventions; pro-poor support, continued supply of agricultural inputs and supplies; education and community health care services, microcredit, etc. But none of the desired services are either directly or indirectly provided by the UP. Thus, over the years as a poor woman from the survey area narrates that the “UPs have become a symbolic institution and only become important during the voting seasons. We get some assurance and also some cash incentives from the candidates.”

**Table 2** Types of services expected from UP (N = 385) in percentage

Types of services	Male	Female
Income generating activities	73	65
Pro-poor support	57	63
Agricultural input	79	26
Education	47	76
Small and micro credit	39	87
Community health care	48	56
Rural infrastructure	61	26
Maintenance of law and order	27	54

Source Survey data

<sup>15</sup> A survey was undertaken for this study in 23 Union Parishad in 12 districts covering all six divisions. As many as 385 adults (235 Males and 150 Females) were chosen through a purposive sampling.

The respondents were asked to further assess their level of satisfaction regarding the coverage of service delivery in selected areas (Table: 3 below). The survey data revealed a very disappointing picture. The respondents observed that in critical areas, which have significant impact on their livelihoods like fisheries/ livestock, health and family planning, irrigation and agriculture, they hardly get any service from the UP.

**Table 3** Present level of satisfaction for UP Service delivery (N = 385)

Types of services	Highly satisfied/ satisfied	Not sure	Satisfied/not satisfied at all	No such service delivered
Fisheries/live stock			14	86
Health and family planning	–	2	13	85
Irrigation	–	3	28	69
Agriculture	–	10	24	66
Irrigation	9	9	45	37
Law and order	19	15	51	15
Salish (alternative dispute resolution)	18	16	58	8
Education	–	4	92	4

Source Survey data

The respondents who were not satisfied with the performance of the UP in service delivery were asked to identify why they think the UP has failed to provide necessary services to the expectation of the community members. Table 4 presents the findings:

**Table 4** Respondent’s perception on why the UP fails to provide necessary services

Why UP fails to deliver services?	% (N = 287)
Lack of commitment/vision of the UP leaders	77
Lack of integrity and honesty	70
Lack of Govt. support	69
Failure to negotiate with GOB	66
Poor leadership	64
Lack of planning	62
Lack of resources	46
Lack of skill and expertise	38

Source Survey Data

According to the respondents, the most significant factors that prohibit the UPs from providing necessary services to the community is a lack of commitment and vision of the elected officials, particularly, the Chairperson of the body. Lack of Integrity and dishonesty of the leadership are also critical factors. But the community members also recognized that the UPs could not negotiate with the service delivery agencies of the government and failed to put a proper strategic plan and/or induce necessary services from outside. Interestingly, the community members did

**Table 5** Suggested options to improve the service delivery system of Union Parishad

Suggested intervention	% (N = 287)
Reduction of leakages/corruption	74
<i>Tadbir</i> (Persuasion) of the Upazila Chairman/MP	70
Involvement of the community in the project design and implementation	70
<i>Dandarbaar</i> (Negotiation/bargaining) with UNO	67
More targeted grants or the poor	65
Joint project/cooperation with NGOs	66
Engagement with GOB extension agencies	54
Borrowing from Bank to develop service infrastructure and microcredit	34

Source Survey Data

not put very high weight on the conventional explanation, such as a lack of resources/skills and expertise held by the UP leadership, as prime factors for the failure of service delivery.

An analysis of the above empirical data draws three important conclusions:

1. A significant majority of the rural people, especially the poor, are not even marginally satisfied with the nature and quality of service delivery system of the UP.
2. Some of the most commonly expected services are not provided by the UP. Whatever services being provided by the UP are not responsive to the true needs of the community, in particular, the poorer section.
3. According to the community members, it is not necessarily the availability of resource and technical/management skill, but it is the integrity, initiatives, commitment, vision, and close engagement of the UP leadership with government extension agencies that are the key factors affecting the quality and nature of the service delivery of the UP.

Respondents were asked to suggest how to improve the present state of service-delivery system of the UP. Table 5 presents the suggestions being put forward by the respondents. Interestingly the striking suggestion is to reduce the leakage to ensure better service delivery. The respondents also suggested that given the political milieu, UP leadership has to be persuasive in drawing more resources from the Upazila Chairman and the local Member of Parliament. They also suggested the meaningful involvement and inclusion of the community members in project design could also bring about better service delivery by the UP. Engagement with NGOs and extension workers of the GOB could also be considered as another option to improve the service delivery

Although the UP has a long list of role and functional responsibilities, its institutional visibility is far too limited, as far as the poor and disadvantaged are concerned.<sup>16</sup> A governance mapping exercise about the UP reveals that a

<sup>16</sup> UPs are broadly responsible for economic, social and community development. As set out in the Local Government UP Act 2009 have several functions including: Maintenance of law and order, including assistance to the law enforcement agencies and resolution of disputes; Adoption of measures to prevent disorder and smuggling; Conducting of censuses of all kinds; Registration

significant majority of the poor and marginalized people in rural Bangladesh is not in the service delivery net of the UP. The following broad observations have been drawn from the mapping exercise (Aminuzzaman 2011b):

- GOB line agencies, in collaboration with the grassroots-based local government, i.e., the UP, provide limited services to the poorest of the poor in rural Bangladesh. Such services are exclusively limited to food security vulnerable group feeding/vulnerable group development (VGF/VGD),<sup>17</sup> disaster management, and family planning and immunization services. The food safety net service is also reported to be highly corrupt and is based on patron–client relationships.<sup>18</sup>
- The poor people are not dependent upon UP or Central government extension agencies for other critical areas of services.
- For the most critical and crucial services, the rural poor depends upon their own and collective community initiatives.

UP, being the lowest level local government body, suffers from various institutional challenges—capacity, resources, lack of access by the poor in the decision-making process. Moreover, the UP is alleged to be class-biased and have little sensitivity, awareness, and concern about pro-poor interventions. The governance-mapping study further tapped the perspective of the rural poor (Aminuzzaman 2011b):

- Incapacity and insensitivity of the UP to identify and respond to the critical needs of the poor.
- The UP is not pro-poor enough to assess and understand the priorities of the poor. Thus pro-poor issues do not get priority and/or preference in UP program design and project selection.

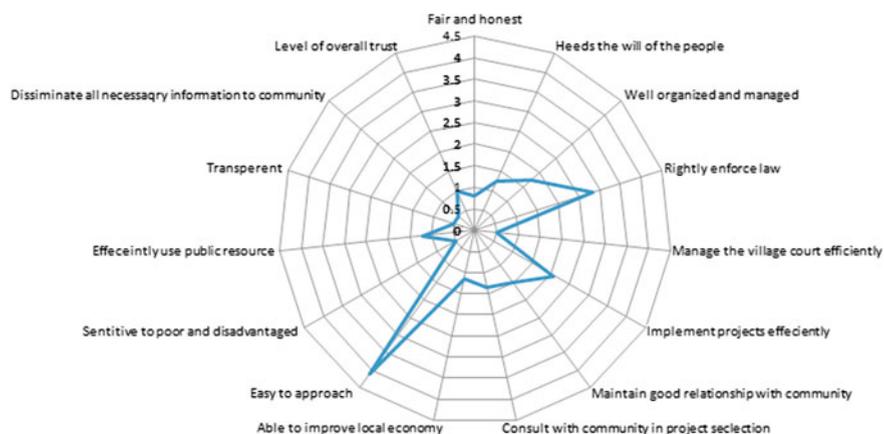
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(Footnote 16 continued)

of births, deaths, blind people, beggars and destitute; Planning and implementation of development schemes in the field of agriculture, forestry, fisheries, livestock, education, health, small and micro enterprises, communications, irrigation, and flood control; Implementation of other development schemes as assigned; Development and use of local resources; Motivation of people to use sanitary latrines; Promotion of family planning; Monitoring of development activities undertaken by different agencies (government, semi-government) in the Union; Protection and maintenance of public property such as roads, bridges, canals, embankments, markets, telephones, and electricity lines. In addition, specific rural infrastructure responsibilities defined for UPs are the maintenance of Rural Roads and the Planning and implementation of small construction projects, these include improvement of works on Rural Roads—for example, schemes under some food-aided infrastructure projects are implemented through the UPs. The UP is also responsible, through the union market management committees (UMMC) for the operation and maintenance of markets within the Union.

<sup>17</sup> VGF is a part of the government Social Safety net programme. Under this program government of Bangladesh provide food and other basic needs to most vulnerable and marginal group like poor widow, aged and physically challenged and disadvantaged people during disaster.

<sup>18</sup> VGD aims to promote self-reliance among the most vulnerable women, by providing them with food assistance and training for an alternative livelihood.



**Fig. 1** Governance features of UP

- Built-in mistrust about the UP as well as GOB extension agencies has also driven the poor away or demotivated them about demanding services.
- The NGOs have not been visibly effective at providing the service of the ‘link-pin’ between the poor community and the UP as well as GOB line agencies/extension staff.
- The poor are also not aware of their constitutional rights to be assertive in demanding services.

The governance-mapping study revealed the perception of the rural poor and marginalized people on various aspects of governance features of UP, and it uncovered yet another passive picture (Aminuzzaman 2011b). The following spider diagram shows the assessment of the governance features of UP in a scale of 5 (Fig. 1).

Good governance, as perceived by the poor, is *a system where everyone, especially, the poor and needy get a fair share of public resources*. The disadvantaged people acknowledged that resources for the poor in the form of VGF, Test Relief<sup>19</sup> and other food aid are a reflection of good and humane governance. For their livelihood, the poor people believe that a good and fair governance system would create more opportunity through the introduction of *soft credit and investment and more training and skill development for generating employment* of the poor rural people particularly of women and disadvantaged groups. The poor also perceive that good governance means assurance of *better health and educational support* for the vast majority of the people, i.e., the poor.

<sup>19</sup> Test Relief is one of the social safety net programmes for the poorest section of the rural communities. The programme targets the poorest section of the rural areas who are landless, asset-less, unemployed and unskilled.

The poor people also recognized that *honesty and integrity of leadership* is the cornerstone of good governance. Good governance to the poor is a cultural and political condition where the local elected leaders and officials would be *accessible during the most critical needs*. They also emphasized that the *scope for participation of the “poor” and “disadvantaged”* in the governmental affairs, especially in the UP, was also critically important to ensuring better governance.

In a rural milieu, the concept needs to be understood and judged in terms of its relevance to the needs of the people and its success should be assessed on the basis of how it affects the advancement of human development in its broadest sense. The ultimate realization of the people’s well-being should be the core concern of governance.

## **Institutional Issues That Affect UP Governance**

Local governments, in particular the UP, have had a long institutional history. During its life of about one and a half centuries, it has gone through different stages of institutional evolution and structural experimentation. Nevertheless, UP still suffers from image crises, poor capacity, and lack of competence. But empirical evidence aptly suggests that the role, function, and overall governance of UP is essentially a result of a number of structural and institutional limitations.

*Limited manpower and resources:* It is no doubt that, considering the workload and responsibilities, the UPs are understaffed. UP also lacks logistic supports, like computer and transport, like motorbike, etc. Although the UP has a relatively large tax base (as per the Model Tax Schedule), political reality and overall socio-cultural and economic conditions<sup>20</sup> do not permit the UP to collect taxes up to the potential target. UPs therefore become more dependent. UPs, in general, lack *managerial capability* and resources to design and run innovative service delivery in areas like employment generation, health, and education. Rather, UPs tend to be more interested and confined to infrastructure specially construction of roads and culverts. *Delayed release* of Government development grants also hampers the timely completion and quality of UP projects. There are reports that such delays also open the window of opportunity for corruption and leakages of public resources and subsequently hamper the quality of the service delivery projects.

*Lack of Coordination:* The participants, in general, observed that there was a lack of coordination between UP and extension service delivery workers of the government at the field level. In fact, there are no formal links even between the Standing Committees of the UP with the extension workers of the corresponding line agencies of the Government. Such isolation makes lots of the UP services

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<sup>20</sup> Field studies observed that rural people even the financially able ones are not happy with the performance of the UP. In general they consider that they do not get the real value for their money by the services being rendered by the UP (Aminuzzaman 2008).

dysfunctional and ineffective. This also deprives the UP of getting technical assistance and other professional support from the GOB line agencies.

*Lack of appropriate rules and regulation:* During the field level interviews a number of Upazila-based officials acknowledged that there was a lack of integrated rules and regulations for the coordination and monitoring of the field-level extension staff of the Government of Bangladesh, like health assistant, family planning assistant, sub-assistant agriculture officer and social welfare, etc. Moreover, appropriate instructions from different line ministries to their respective extension workers are still missing.

*Weak and ineffective monitoring:* The existing system to oversee and monitor UP functions are ineffective. Although the deputy director local government (DDLG), on behalf of the Deputy Commissioner, is supposed to visit UP periodically; but for lack of time, transport, and other logistics, most of the time it is difficult for the DDLG to inspect UP in due time. The conventional monitoring tool being developed by the monitoring wing of the LGD is also not done with proper care<sup>21</sup>. Respective line agencies also do not monitor their UP-based programs in collaboration with the UP. Due to a lack of logistic support and incentive systems, the Upazila-based Union Tag officers<sup>22</sup> of respective line ministries hardly visit the UPs for supervision of development activities.

*Lack of accountability and transparency:* There was hardly any scope for the members of the community to lodge any complaint to the appropriate authority when there was any service delivery forgery or corruption (Mohammed 2010). Most of the UPs tend to practice a “pseudo participatory” planning system, where only handpicked persons are involved, and even that is done without the knowledge of the community members at large. Such practices keep the members of community, especially, the marginal poor, women, and destitute in complete dark about the projects undertaken by the UP. Civil society members further noted that there was no formal mechanism for the UP to work closely with NGOs. UPs are not aware of which activities are being carried out by a number of NGOs in their respective areas. The NGOs, also being a service provider to the rural communities, tend to work in isolation. These result in a lack of coordination and thus the actual needs of the community are not appropriately served and accountability and transparency to the community, as well as to the UP, remain weak. Such lack of transparency and accountability has some bearings on the service delivery, especially to the poor and disadvantaged community.

*Political manipulation:* Community people noted that the influential local political elite, especially those in the ruling party coalition with UP Chairman/members, tend to manipulate the service delivery process of the UP. Thus, in some cases UP services are delivered on “political” criteria rather than on an

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<sup>21</sup> Local Government Division (LGD), a department in the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development, and Cooperatives

<sup>22</sup> For each Union of an Upazila, there is a Union specific Tag Officer. The Tag Office is supposed to visit and monitor the activities of the respective Union and report back to Upazila Parishad.

“objective” assessment. This is especially true for safety net programs. A section of UP Chairmen endorsed the observation and noted that some UP projects were determined not by “development need of the area but on the political priority of the influencing political elite.” Such elite generally refers to the ruling party local chapter and in many cases the Member of the Parliament of the constituency. It is also alleged that a new nexus has been formed between Upazila-based GOB officials and MPs to dictate the UP in determining and prioritizing the projects.

*Non-Cooperation from Upazila-based bureaucracy:* Non-cooperation from field bureaucracy is also a critical factor that affects the quality and process of service delivery. There appears to be a *low trust* relations between UP and Upazila-based central government officials. A section of UP Chairmen complained that, on various occasions, they were treated as subordinate institutions by the Upazila administration/or a section of Upazila officials.

## Interventions and Policy Measures

Given the context, some immediate measures may be considered to enhance the quality and process of governance at the UP in order to make it more pro-active and responsive.

Given the wide diversity and expanding responsibilities, especially, with the assigned role and responsibilities to implement the poverty reduction strategies of the government, UPs need to develop their institutional capacity, human resources, and logistic support. Although the UP complex<sup>23</sup> is supposed to be the base station of a number of specialized GOB extension workers, but at present there is hardly anyone posted to the complex. The mere presence of the extension workers of livestock, fisheries, agriculture, education, health, and family planning would bring a significant change in the quality of delivery of services. Concerned line ministries should therefore take necessary measures to develop appropriate rules/instruction manuals for their respective extension workers to work with and for the UPs.

NGOs and civil society bodies may also undertake awareness programs to make community members more aware of the “Citizen Charter” on UP. As a policy decision goes, the Government should encourage the NGOs and CBOs to be engaged in undertaking a ‘social audit’ of the performance of the UP.

Some policy issues need to be addressed to reinforce the decentralization efforts (Aminuzzaman 2011a). The present context strongly suggests that the government of Bangladesh should develop a comprehensive *decentralization policy*. There is also a strong need for an *inter-governmental fiscal transfer policy* for the

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<sup>23</sup> UP complex is a planned physical structure with 14 office rooms including a small public hall. The UP Complex is the office of the UP. All UP based extension workers of the government are supposed to have their office in the complex. The Village Court is also formally located in the UP complex. At present there are 2,518 UP complexes and another 525 are under construction within the current financial year.

distribution of resources among different tiers of LG to minimize/remove uncertainty and scope for political manipulation. In order to ensure the objective distribution and allocation of national government allocations and to implement and monitor the proposed *inter-governmental fiscal transfer policy*, a permanent *Local Government Finance Commission* may also be considered.

## Conclusions

Ideally, better local governance entails a process by which stakeholders' interests are articulated, their input is absorbed, and decisions are taken and implemented (Bakker 2003). Governance, thus, not only includes the political and administrative institutions of government and interrelationships, but it also includes the relationships between government and society, including the disadvantaged (McCarney 1996). Empirical evidence further suggests that governance for reaching the poor and disadvantaged should follow an approach, which is open and inclusive; coherent and integrative; and equitable and ethical (Resnick and Birner 2006). Advocates of decentralization in developing countries argue that bringing the government closer to the people will make it more responsive and hence more likely to develop programs and projects that meet the needs of ordinary citizens—the majority of whom are the poor.

One of the most critical and striking issues that halted the pace and process of decentralization in Bangladesh is that of rigid central control. The means of control being exercised by the central government cover three areas: institutional, financial, and administrative. This control is exercised through powers to set territorial jurisdictions, composition of local bodies, election procedures, staffing patterns, functional, and fiscal assignments and settlement of inter-institutional disputes. Although the central government is under statutory obligation to provide grants in aid, it can exercise a considerable degree of control by varying the amount or by making their release subject to fulfillment of conditionalities. The core issues that affect the role and performance of local government at the grass roots are: lack of comprehensive policy and planning framework on decentralization, inadequate legal and regulatory framework for decentralization, absence of a transparent process of inter-governmental fiscal transfer, lack of integration of local plans with regional and national plan, weak public consultation and participation processes, continued bureaucratic dominance, administrative, and political control of the MPs.

Noble laureate Amartya Sen (1999) observed poverty as the deprivation of basic capabilities that provide a person with the freedom to choose the life in his or her own way. These capabilities include good health, education, social networks, and command over economic resources, and influence on decision-making that affects one's life.<sup>24</sup> From this perspective, poverty and underdevelopment is thus a

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<sup>24</sup> Also see—Sen's Capability Approach, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/sen-cap/#H1>.

condition that has three interrelated perspectives: (1) it is the lack of income, employment, productive assets, access to social safety-nets; (2) lack of access to services such as education, healthcare, information, credit, water supply, and sanitation; and (3) lack of political participation, dignity, and respect.

In the context of Bangladesh, the process and quality of local governance is significantly affected by the conflicting political culture and the mindset of public bureaucracy. Local governance institutions, in effect, turn out to be the “means of exercising and abusing power by successive regimes and civil servants instead of becoming avenues of democratic and decentralized local governance” (Panday and Asaduzzaman 2011, p. 168).

Grassroots-based LGIs are not legally empowered to incorporate the non-state actors and CSOs in the mainstream development and management of UP. The space for democratic participation in the UP is strongly resisted by the dominant local political actors. Also, the capacity of the local actors, especially, the UP-elected representative is extremely low. All such features, therefore, indicate the poor and passive picture of governance of the grassroots-based institution.

Evidence suggests that programs for improving local governance and projects initiated by the international development partners are hardly institutionalized and lack adequate political support and ownership, both at the local and national levels (Aminuzzaman 2011c).

The grassroots-based Local Government system is perhaps one of the institutional frameworks that could address all three dimensions of underdevelopment and poverty and thereby ensure better governance at the grassroots. Both Bangladesh pilot experiences and regional/international experiences (Shotton 2004) reveal that rural local governments could utilize the resourcefulness of the rural poor and create the conditions for them to improve upon their conditions through an enabling environment. However, it is also true that, without a real devolution of authority, local governments will find it hard to be effective in addressing the developmental needs, poverty, and the cry for good governance at the grassroots. In fact, countries that have developed efficient local government systems have had to take hard policy decisions, which, in most cases, were not politically popular. What is, therefore, needed most is a strong *political will* to install an effective and truly decentralized local government system.

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