Political Economy of Local Governance: A Study of the Grassroots level Local Government in Bangladesh

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Abstract
Local Government (LG) is a much talked about institution in Bangladesh. Local Government Institutions (LGIs) has strong Constitutional and legal framework. Political leaderships across the regimes have highlighted the need, importance and significance of LG in the broader political ad administrative mosaic. Although several attempts have been made to improve local government in Bangladesh, it continues to be managed and controlled by the central government administrative structures. LGIs are still weak and neither structured nor capacitated in line with the provision of the Constitution but bear features of more of deconcentration than that of true form of decentralization.

Introduction
Local government Institutions (LGIs) in the twenty-first century face challenges regarding service delivery, finance, human resources and scope and opportunity citizen engagement and accountability and various institutional engagements (Warner, 2010). However, it has been predicted that the coming decades will witness a need for enhancing the capacity of local government and would demand active engagement and citizens’ role in Local Government to ensure sustainable economic development and a high quality of life. Many of the developing countries including Bangladesh have recognized the need and importance of the role of LGIs in the process of the strengthening democratic process and governance.

This paper attempts to make a political economic analysis of the various local Governance reform innovations and experimentation and draw some institutional learning in the context of Bangladesh. This paper further attempts to make an assessment of 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.

Defining and “local governments” and “local governance”

“Local governments” are formal institutions, mandated to deliver a variety of public goods and services at the local level. They constitute, in a sense, the local state. As local level service

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2 Political economy analysis is primarily concerned with the interaction of political and economic processes in a society; including the distribution of power and wealth between groups and individuals, and the processes that create, sustain and transform these relationships over time. It essentially recognizes that power is essentially about relationships - between the state, social groups and individuals, or between the state, market forces and civil society. The relationships and the processes of interaction among these forces, factors and actors need to be understood to develop an effective reform in supporting the building of responsive, legitimate and resilient states and quality multi-level governance.

3 The rationale for public funding of such (theoretically) private goods as drinking water, education and curative health services is that, on one hand, they generate large positive socio-economic externalities to the community and the nation but, on the other hand, they are not adequately supplied to the poor – if supplied at all – by the market. Basic health, education, water, infrastructure and services are thus termed “merit goods” – they are private goods which society judges to be worthy of subsidizing with public funds
delivery units, LGs are largely predicated on the principle of subsidiary, which stipulates that
government functions should be assigned to the lowest level of government that is capable of
efficiently undertaking this function.

On the other hand “Local governance” refers to the ways in which local level decision-making is
carried out. The normative term “good local governance” implies that decision-making in the
arena of local public affairs is, to varying degrees, subject to the scrutiny and oversight of
citizens, open and transparent, rule-bound, and participatory. Local governments, in that sense,
are one dimension (albeit an important one) of local governance as a whole.

Local Government in Bangladesh – A Historical overview
Local government in Bangladesh is characterized by a long historical lineage and progressive
constitutional framework in Bangladesh. The modern local government system started in
Bangladesh in the 19th 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.
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 observed that the village officials had become government servants, and the Local
Government system had become subordinate to the Central Administration. While Chanakya noted that each village had a headman (Gramika, Gramadhipa, or Gramakuta), whose duties were: i. to delimit the boundaries of the village and of the different plots of land within the village; ii. 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; iii. to maintain books of all sales, gifts, charities, and remissions of taxes which take place within the village; iv. to divide houses in the village into revenue and non-revenue collection, record the amount of taxes, rates, etc., payable by each villager; v. to register the number of inhabitants distributed by castes, and following different occupations, like agriculture,

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4 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 Article 9 and 11 which further consolidated the operational aspects local government. These two Articles were later dropped under the 15th Constitutional amendment.

5 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.

6 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.

7 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.
pasturage, trade, arts, manufactures, manual labour, and menial service; vi. 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 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 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).

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.

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.

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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 set up of Local Government in Bangladesh

There are two types of local government institutions (LGI) — rural and urban. Among the
elected LGI, there are 7 City Corporations and 307 Pourasabhas (municipality) in urban areas
and 4502 Union Parishads. The Union Parishad (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, Municipalities and City Corporations. In case
of Union Parishad, there is one permanent staff member who is appointed by the Government
and his salary is jointly paid by the Government and UP.

The policy context

The local government has been repeatedly identified as a key strategic sector for improving
governance and development in Bangladesh. 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 Sixth Five-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

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10 Union Parishad is the lowest tier of rural local government. It consists of 15 to 20 villages with an average population of around 30 thousand.
11 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.
12 All Five 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.
the realities of the underlying political, social, administrative and economic milieu of Bangladesh” (GoB, 2011, p. 35). The plan document asserts “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, 2011:35).

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’ local government institutions, where ‘people will be made aware of and given access to services and opportunities offered by government.

The Second Poverty Reduction Strategy underlines the multidimensional nature of poverty and the role of Local Government Institutions (LGIs) in addressing poverty reduction. Overall, the PRSP recognizes the importance of LGIs in promoting good governance, and the PRSP 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, 2009:72). The PRSP specifically recognizes the need for and importance of Local Governments as an active partner/implementer of local development initiatives. PRSP 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 Union Parishad (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 (committees), participatory planning, access to information, and the extended authority of the Committee system, etc.

Nature of Local Governance reform in Bangladesh
Local government reforms in Bangladesh evolved very distinctly according to the needs of the ruling elites (Westergaard, 2000; Khan and Hussain, 2001; Majumdar, 2010). With the changes of government, the policy of local government has also been kept changing. Such changes were generally dictated by the imperative of creating loyalty to as well as legitimizing and broadening the narrow base of the power-holders in the national government. As a consequence, Local Government institutions (LGIs) have not had any opportunity to act as effective tiers of governments with mandates and funds to carry out their roles and responsibilities. Though several attempts have been made to improve local government in Bangladesh, they continue to be managed and controlled by the central government administrative structures. Furthermore, empirical evidences (Akash, 2009) suggest that limited resources are allocated to the Local Government. Independent reviews observed that Bangladesh has not been successful in establishing a decentralized system of governance and accountability. A World Bank review of decentralization process in 19 countries ranks Bangladesh lowest in the decentralization scale (Williams, 1998).

Local government institutions in Bangladesh have evolved in response to the interests of the national political leadership and central bureaucracy (Siddique, 2000). With changes in regimes, policies to devolve power or create new representative institutions have also changed abruptly, generally with the aim of preserving centralized authority and ensuring partisan control over
local government. In this context, decentralization reform efforts have been, at best, partial; any limited gains have been quickly overturned, by incoming regimes focused on reasserting central control. Agitation by local leaders against the central political leadership is a significant development in the politics of local government, and may substantially change the local political landscape (Rudra & Sardesai, 2007).

International lessons draw a broad conclusion that across the continents at least 3 Fs are essential to make any decentralization process successful (Ahmed, 2007). These are: Functions, Finance and Functionaries. In Bangladesh context, unfortunately there has always been a severe imbalance among the 3Fs. Finance and Functionaries have always been a perennial problem of the LG systems particularly the UPs in Bangladesh (Akash, 2009; Hossain, 2006; Aminuzzaman 2009a).

Allocation of resources to rural local government during the last ten years has ranged from .25 to .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 bodies, 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 percent for the UPs compared to around 54 percent for the different line agencies working at the field levels. (Akash, 2012).

**UP Governance – Focus on Field Reality**

Union Parishad (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, 2009b). Failure of the UPs to respond to the dire need of the rural people, particularly the poor and disadvantaged, 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.

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<tr>
<th>Opinion of Community members with regard to Union Parishad</th>
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<td>• Scope for participation and development need assessment in Union Parishad is limited. About 78 percent of the UP residents feel they have no role to play in UP affairs.</td>
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<td>• As high as 82 percent of community members have no ideas as to how the development needs of the UP are assessed.</td>
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<td>• 85 percent of the community members seem to be less concerned and aware about their individual role and direct responsibilities as regards.</td>
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<td>• 76 percent UP officials seem to have no clear idea about the role of the UP and its development commitment as per the LG ordinance.</td>
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<td>• 74 percent members of the community have very low level of expectation from the UP; 66 percent are not aware of its major functions.</td>
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Sources: Salahuddin Aminuzzaman, 2009b
The survey data 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. According to community members, the UP leaders are hardly transparent, cannot optimize and make best use the public resources, 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.

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, 2009).

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 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 (Aminuzzaman, 2009).

An analysis of the field based empirical data and observations draw three important conclusions:

a. 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.

b. 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.

c. 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.

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

- **Role of UP**: UP is an elite-dominated, male-controlled body where the Chairman is placed in a relatively powerful position, and 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 local Member of Parliament (MP), especially in the allocation process and use of the Annual Development Programme 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 process:** 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. Local MPs especially of the ruling regime act as the de facto authority to regulate and instruct the line agency officials.

- **Role of UNO**\(^{14}\) 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 in effect directly and indirectly control and monitor the functions of the UP.

- **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 Union Parishads.

Furthermore, an overview of the political economic analyses of local governance (especially at the UP level) indicates that, in general, rural Bangladesh is characterized by following features:

a. **Culture of effective participation in formal community activities is still non-existent.** Though NGOs have worked hard to develop some client based community groups (some form of “social capital”) – still they are more concerned with their own group interest than visible community involvement (Mohammed Noor, 2010).

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\(^{14}\) 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).
b. **There is a range of new and emerging leaders.** They tend to be relatively young. The power base of such young and new is grounded more on political linkage and support than social recognition (Aminuzzaman, 2008). The new alternative leadership is sometime more powerful than the elected officials and maintain alternative channels of privilege distribution bypassing the UP and even the GOB line agencies. In almost all cases they use the clout of the local MPs.

c. **Confrontation and violence** are other features that characterize the rural politics. Such confrontational conditions shy away the civil society, social elite and traditional leaders to get integrated with the local governance affairs. As a result the traditional practice and process of social accountability is fading out.

d. **Dominance of Patronage politics** – The UP chairpersons and some dominant members tend to maintain strong patron-client relations with a section of rural community. Unfortunately such clients are not necessarily the weaker or poorer section of the rural community. UP therefore tend to take some of its development management and distributive decisions on the basis of such patron-client dependency syndrome. Different local level power players/ brokers (UP Chairman, political party leaders, and the representatives / sycophants of the members of parliament) tend to influence all vital local level decisions including the UP development project implementation. The political identity of the Chairperson of the UP and his network have significant influence on the smooth functioning of the Parishad.

e. **Top Down Project ignores political dynamics** – Various central government funded program interventions and innovations do not take into cognizance the role of power structure and the local political-economic milieu and political dynamics at the UP and Upazila level and thus do not get institutionalized at the UP level.

f. **Missed opportunity to use social capital** – Rural local governments have not been able to link up and fully utilize the already established “social capital” being formed by different NGOs of the rural areas and thereby cannot mobilize the relatively disadvantaged members of the community.

g. **Lack of integrity, initiatives, commitment and vision of local leaders** – Empirical evidences suggest that it is not necessarily only the availability of resource and technical/ management skill but the integrity, initiatives, commitment and vision are the leading factors that affect the quality and nature of the service delivery of the UP.

i. **Non accountable parallel development window** – Most of the safety net programs and some development activities of the central government are run by the non-elected political channel. Such programs are designed and managed by the political workers/ leaders of the ruling party under the administrative and political support of the Members of the Parliament. UP has been kept in sideline in administering and managing these projects.

j. **Poor law and order system** – Over all law and order situation and the nature of violence in politics have significant impact on the role and function of UPs. In many cases UP elected officials do not take a decisive position at the cost of their personal security.

A governance mapping exercise about the UP reveals that a 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, 2011a):
• Central Government line agencies, in collaboration with the grass-roots based local government, i.e., the Union Parishad, provide limited services to the poorest of the poor in rural Bangladesh. Such services are exclusively limited to food security (VGF/VGD), 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.
• 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.

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 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 Co-ordination: 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 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

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15Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) is a part of 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.
Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) aims to promote self-reliance among the most vulnerable women, by providing them with food assistance and training for an alternative livelihood.

16Field 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)
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 Union Parishad periodically; but for lack of time, transport and other logistics, most of the time it is difficult for the DDLG to inspect Union Parishad in due time. The conventional monitoring tool being developed by the monitoring wing of the LGD is also not done with proper care. 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\(^\text{17}\) 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, specially, 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 “objective” assessment. This is especially true for safety net programmes. 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.

The governance context and the overall political environment and dynamics of rural Bangladesh do not appear to be conducive for institutional development of Union Parishad which could ensure effective delivery of services and development management at the grass roots level. The

\(^{17}\)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.
practices of local governance and decentralization therefore are very difficult to establish under the above political and administrative milieu (Siddiquee, and Hulme 2000).

Interventions and policy measures
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\(^{18}\) 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, 2011). 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 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). 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

\(^{18}\) 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.
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.

Local Government in Bangladesh in general is captured by a section of political and commercial elite. Although some reform initiatives have been made during the last two decades, but most of the reform attempts appear to be symbolic and half heartedly implemented. Members of Parliament are enjoying both formal and informal power and authority over the LGI and exert their influence to manipulate the major decisions of the elected LGIs. In fact the MPs act as the linchpin between the LGI and the Ministry of Local Government and other line agencies.

In spite of apparent political commitment and policy regime, the LGIs specially the rural ones badly suffer from central control, meager resources, lack of capacity and extreme dependency syndrome. LG reforms are therefore symbolic and mere deconcentration of some selected functions of the central government under strict supervision and control of central bureaucracy. Evidences also suggest 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 at the national level (Aminuzzaman, 2011b).

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 grass roots. 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.

References


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