

Reality of People's Participation and Accountability in Local Government in Bangladesh: A Study of Union Parishads

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Abstract: This study explores the dynamics of citizen engagement and accountability within the framework of local government in Bangladesh, focusing specifically on Union Parishads (UPs) — the lowest tier of rural governance. The researcher conducted fieldwork in three Union Parishads in Cumilla and Lakshmipur districts, collecting data from chairman, members, secretaries, committee members, and local beneficiaries through semi-structured interviews and two FGDs. The analysis reveals a significant disparity between the provisions of the Union Parishad Act of 2009 and their implementation. The findings indicate that several interconnected factors, including limited awareness among rural communities, political influence, intimidation and fear, distrust, lack of seriousness, and bureaucratic complexity, substantially hinder public participation in Ward Shava and Open Budget meetings. For instance, among the interviewed citizens, more than 90% lacked awareness of Ward Shavas, and nearly 87% were unaware of the Union Parishad's standing committees. Notwithstanding the several measures in the Act designed to enhance local engagement in the governance of UPs, the outcomes observed in the field remain limited. The analysis revealed a significant absence of engagement in decision-making and the budget planning process, coupled with an ineffective monitoring mechanism that lacks accountability and transparency. To address these challenges, it is essential to enhance awareness, foster accountability and transparency, and facilitate effective communication between local authorities and the community.

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization, it is widely believed that local government is essential for establishing democracy at the grassroots level and for facilitating meaningful participation by individuals in the formulation, planning, and implementation of development initiatives (Siddiqui, 2000). Bangladesh's Constitution places significant emphasis on local government, particularly in Articles 59 and 60, which define its role and structure (Aminuzzaman, 2010).

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Moreover, the local government legislation ensures that citizens have ample opportunity to have a voice in the establishment of local organizations and the design of development initiatives (Uddin, 2019). However, it is common for citizens to express dissatisfaction with their Union Parishads and their services, often seeking to effect change (Aminuzzaman, 2010). Such efforts typically seek change through electoral turnover rather than administrative or structural reforms.

For local participation and accountability to be effective, local governments must engage the community in deciding how money is spent, clearly communicate the standards for delivering services, provide residents with timely information about service provision and budget management, and establish mechanisms for residents to monitor service performance and express concerns when issues arise (Crook & Manor, 2000; Monem, 2020). According to Stiglitz (2002), the national rural development policy emphasizes the importance of local governments as a means for individuals to promote "voice, openness, and transparency" in local governance. The Union Parishad Act of 2009 encompasses several notable features, including the implementation of ward shavas, open budget meetings, the establishment of a Citizen's Charter, and the inclusion of a right-to-information provision (Panday, 2011).

Unfortunately, local governments have faced significant criticism for perceived sluggishness, ineffectiveness, corruption, and a lack of accountability, as noted by scholars such as Khan (2009) and Zafarullah, Khan, & Rahman (1997). The functions of local government bodies may become restricted and specific due to operational coordination deficiencies, bureaucratic intervention from central authorities, internal factionalism and discord among local government officials, and procedural formalities. The absence of accountability on the part of the Union Parishad and the limited involvement of residents in local affairs present fundamental obstacles inherent in the structure and functioning of local democracy.

These methods theoretically possess significant potential to enable public participation in the decision-making process of UP and to hold local leadership responsible to its constituents (Chowdhury, 2018). The persistence of an inherited colonial framework, combined with political instability and a competitive power dynamic, cumulatively contributes to a fragile local government system. Despite substantial reform initiatives in organizations tasked with public service delivery in Bangladesh, local government institutions have not sufficiently benefited from these efforts due to their geographical remoteness and the extensive beneficiary population, the majority of whom remain uninformed about their public rights (Shil & Chowdhury, 2023). This situation presents us with an empirical puzzle: Despite the general public having the opportunity to participate in Union Parishad activities, why are the mechanisms for participation and accountability not functioning properly? This study seeks to examine the real extent of people's participation and the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms in Union Parishads. By identifying key challenges and gaps, the research aims to provide insights into strengthening local governance in Bangladesh.

To analyze the above-mentioned problem, the study will address the following questions:

1. To what degree do the people's participation and current accountability mechanisms implemented in Union Parishads demonstrate effectiveness in promoting transparency and responsiveness?
2. Why are there gaps between theories and realities regarding people's participation and accountability in Union Parishads in Bangladesh?
3. What are the barriers to effective participation and accountability in Union Parishads?

The aim of this study is;

- To identify the differences in the application of people's participation and accountability mechanisms in UPs in Bangladesh, by comparing them with existing theories and practices.

RESEARCH METHOD

This section describes the methodological approach employed to investigate citizen participation and accountability in Union Parishads. It outlines the research design, study area, sampling strategy, and data collection techniques used to obtain relevant information. Both primary and secondary data sources were utilized to ensure a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the research problem. Furthermore, the procedures for data analysis and validation are presented to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Research design

This exploratory study uses a qualitative approach to answer 'what' and 'why' questions about citizen participation and accountability in UPs. This approach helps identify the causes and effects of issues (Tenny, Brannan, & Brannan, 2022). Qualitative exploratory research is particularly suitable when the aim is to understand complex social processes, meanings, and interactions within their real-life context. According to John W. Creswell (2014), qualitative approaches enable researchers to develop a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon through participants' views and experiences.

Sample Area

The Union Parishad is regarded as the primary and foundational level of Bangladesh's local governance system. Three Union Parishads were selected for in-depth field study to collect primary data. Specifically, the study was conducted at two Union Parishads (9 no. Uttar Joypur and 11 no. Hazirpara Union) of Lakshmipur Sadar Upazila and at one Union Parishad (Bijoypur Union) under Cumilla Sadar Dakshin Upazila. The 11th Hazirpara Union and the 9th Uttar Joypur Union Parishad, located roughly 7 and 10 kilometers from the Lakshmipur Sadar Upazila headquarters, respectively, have distinctive characteristics. The Bijoypur Union Parishad was selected because it has a reasonable growth rate, is one of the oldest villages, and is located near the researcher's workplace, which made it convenient for the researcher to observe activities. Selecting two unions in the Lakshmipur district near the researcher's residence may introduce selection bias. To mitigate this limitation, data were triangulated

across multiple sources and methods, and findings were compared with those from Bijoypur Union, which has different socioeconomic and administrative characteristics. The study of these three Union Parishads has provided important insights and lessons on the structures, procedures, and dynamics of accountability at the level of government closest to local communities, drawing on statistics and other information about their experiences with accountability and participation.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were gathered from two main categories of sources: primary and secondary sources. Various techniques were employed to gather primary data. They were:

1. In-depth interview;
2. Focus group discussion and;
3. Observation.

The respondents for this study were selected using the purposive sampling method. Specifically, the chairman, three general members, one female member from the reserved seats, and the secretary from each of the chosen unions were included in the sample. According to Abejirinde et al. (2018) and Nilsen et al. (2018), when gathering in-depth information from participants in a qualitative study, it is important to select individuals with specific knowledge and experience relevant to the subject under investigation. Consequently, to understand citizens' perceptions and the nature of participation, residents were selected for interviews based on their education, responsibilities, and knowledge of local government. Thus, 30 general members of the public (from the three UPs) with knowledge of the UPs were interviewed. The objective of the interview with the general public was to collect relevant demographic information and obtain specific details about their participation in ward shava, open budget sessions, and related activities. This included information on their attendance frequency, the impediments they encountered, and their perceptions of the sessions' benefits, among other things.

Additionally, two focus group discussions were conducted in the 9th Uttar Joypur Union and the the Bijoypur Union. FGDs enhance the potential for adopting a dynamic, synergistic approach, since they allow respondents to incorporate others' input. This study involved conducting two focus group discussions (FGDs). FGDs) were conducted among the representatives of the UPs, citizens residing within the UPs, and NGO workers. The collection of secondary data involved a thorough examination of pertinent research materials and reports produced by multiple committees and commissions focused on local government. Furthermore, related documentation and records, such as meeting minutes and reports, were scrutinized to provide. Moreover, other information was collected from different published and unpublished sources, including books, journal articles, government circulars, gazettes, acts, newspapers, working papers, research reports, and the internet.

Sample Size

The sample size and composition of respondents are presented in Table 1. It includes both service providers and service seekers who participated in interviews and focus group

Table 1: Data Collection Methods and Respondents

Type of respondents	Information collection method	No. of respondents
Service Providers	UP Chairman	1*3=3
	UP Secretary	1*3=3
	UP Members	3*3=9
	Women	1*3=3
	Representatives	
Service Seekers	Interview	30
Teachers, NGO Activities, Political leaders, Community Leaders, Members	Focus Group Discussion	2*6=12
Total		60

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discussions.

Data Collection Instruments

The interviews were conducted by distributing semi-structured questionnaires to the respondents selected for the study. The researcher developed a standard questionnaire with variations to accommodate different groups of respondents. The questionnaire was written in Bengali to make it easier to understand. The questionnaire underwent a pretest before its final form to evaluate its validity and usefulness. The researcher gathered pertinent papers from the Union Parishad to compare the information in the records with that provided by participants in the field. Trustworthiness was ensured by enhancing credibility through triangulation of multiple data sources and respondent validation. At the same time,

transferability and dependability were supported through rich contextual description and consistent documentation of data collection procedures.

Data Analysis Method

Continuous data analysis occurred during the collection phase of qualitative research. The collected data were manually compiled and analyzed to make the study more informative, analytical, and useful to users. The data analysis yielded suggestions based on the findings. Codes and themes were developed inductively from the data, allowing patterns and relationships to emerge naturally. To ensure credibility and consistency, the findings were

cross-checked through repeated review and comparison of responses across different participants.

Ethical Considerations

Although formal institutional ethical approval was not required for this study, ethical principles of social research were strictly followed. Participation was entirely voluntary. It is noted that verbal consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and that the data would be used solely for academic purposes. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by not recording personal identifiers, and all collected information was securely handled and reported in an aggregated form.

Provisions of People's Participation and Accountability in the Union Parishads

In Bangladesh, Union Parishads (UPs) offer several direct (where residents are physically involved and actively engaged) and indirect (where citizens elect representatives) channels of popular engagement that enhance the accountability and transparency of local government to the community. The direct methods include establishing participatory budgeting (open budget sessions), community-based meetings (Ward Shava), standing committees, specialised committees, and ensuring access to information. This section focuses on the provisions of the Union Parishad Act, 2009, on direct participation. Below, I summarize four key participatory mechanisms established by the Act: Ward Shava, Open Budget Session, Village Courts, and Standing Committees.

Ward Shava (WS)

In most instances, both citizens and UP authorities acknowledge that WS serves as an effective mechanism for social responsibility at the local level (Ahmed, Rashid, Ahmmed & Razzaque, 2016). The Union Parishad Act of 2009 includes a provision for WS, promoting direct public involvement in the decision-making process and the evaluation of prior decisions. This act pertains to the formation of WS in each ward of a Union, comprising nine WS throughout nine wards. The elected general member of each ward serves as the Chairman of the WS, while the elected female member functions as an adviser to that assembly. According to the UP Act 2009, Articles 5(I) and 5(II), the meeting must be held within the jurisdiction of a ward, and at least 5% of the ward's voters must be in attendance at each meeting (Hossain, Ahsan & Jahan, 2021). The WS must meet at least twice a year to select development schemes and review ward-level activities. To ensure WS members' participation, the UP disseminates a public notice at least 7 days prior to the meeting. These sessions include information on current development operations, budgetary matters, and initiatives to help individuals assess UP's work.

Open Budget Session (OBS)

Section 57 of the UP Act 2009 stipulates that the Union Parishad's annual budget be finalized at a public meeting, usually known as an Open Budget Meeting. The priorities established

during the ward meetings are considered while preparing an UP's budget. Following the establishment of its budget in accordance with priorities determined during ward meetings and the suggestions of pertinent UP standing committees, the UP must secure approval for the budget details in a public meeting. This meeting must occur at the UP office at least 60 days before 1 July (the start of the financial year). This criterion aims to ensure transparency and reduce wastage of public funds. Individuals may pose inquiries, raise concerns, and provide remarks regarding any aspects of the proposed budget and plan (Ahmed et al., 2016). This criterion aims to ensure transparency and reduce waste

Village Court

An UP is tasked with adjudicating minor civil and criminal matters at the local level via a village court, in accordance with the Village Courts Act of 2006. The village court is a quasi-judicial and semi-formal tribunal. The village court is administered by the UP, led by the chairman and four other members, of whom at least two must be UP members. A provision exists for the nomination of two non-elected individuals, one by each party, to serve on a five-member judicial panel constituted independently of the elected representatives. There exists a provision for legal advice to guide the decision-making processes of village courts. Legally, arbitrary decision-making is not permitted, and village leaders have no authority to interfere in the decision-making process. (Islam, 2015). The open-forum hearing method is fostering a heightened sense of responsibility for the local peace-building process and for the development of communal cohesion.

Standing Committees

Standing committees are designed to facilitate citizen engagement and oversight. The standing committees are legally mandated to oversee specific functions, submit recommendations, and ensure that the UP's activities comply with the law. Article 45 of the UP Act establishes 13 standing committees to address certain issues. A standing committee, as mandated by law, is chaired by one member of the UP, accompanied by five to seven other members. Furthermore, there are stipulations for the inclusion of the general public as co-opted members in standing committees and other committees of UP. Officials from various government agencies may join several committees. Each standing committee is required to convene bi-monthly, although emergency sessions may be scheduled at any time. Members of standing committees hold frequent meetings to address issues within their specific sectors and localities, seeking systematic solutions to these challenges.

The UPs are obligated to discuss and evaluate ideas and comments from the standing committee (Ahmed et al., 2016). Furthermore, the project implementation committee and other local management bodies, such as the market management committee and the school management committee, serve as crucial mechanisms for community members to engage in and monitor the Union Parishad's development operations. These committees are primarily composed of local individuals. The primary functions of the standing committees are to offer planning support, monitor activities, and develop processes for service providers. Furthermore, it delivers periodic reports to the UP and provides feedback to the general public

based on their requirements and demands (Local Government Division, 2012). There is a provision for co-opting a community member to promote community empowerment. The views of the majority present at the meeting determine the decision.

Furthermore, in UP, one-third of the chairmanships of standing committees are allocated for women to promote empowerment. Moreover, the Project Implementation Committee (PIC) and other management committees serve as official channels for empowering local populations within local government. These are established to oversee and assess UP's developmental initiatives.

Table 2: Legal Framework for Citizen Participation and Accountability Mechanism under the Union Parishad Act 2009

Legal Provision	Citizen Engagement Measures
Article 4	Ward Shava
Article 4(1)	Each ward within a union parishad must establish a ward shava.
Article 4(2)	Membership of the ward shava includes all voters from the respective ward.
Article 5	Open Ward-Level Shava
Article 5(1)	Each ward shava must conduct at least two meetings annually within its jurisdiction.
Article 5(2)	A quorum for the open ward shava requires at least 5% of the ward's voters.
Article 42	Parishad Meetings
Article 42(1)	The union parishad must hold at least one meeting every month at the parishad office during working hours.
Article 45	Standing Committees and their Functions
Article 45(1)	Each Union Parishad must establish 13 standing committees to carry out its functions.
Article 45(9)	Each standing committee must convene at least once every two months.
Article 57	Budget
Article 57(2)	The union parishad must organize an open budget session in which the annual budget is presented to the standing committees and the local population.
Articles 78 & 79	Right to Information
Articles 49 & 76	Union Development Coordination Committee (UDCC), Citizen Charter, and Annual Reports

Sources¹

Collectively, these legal provisions establish clear expectations for regular, open citizen engagement through mandatory periodic meetings, defined quorum requirements, functional standing committees, transparent budgeting processes, and access to information, to ensure accountability at the Union Parishad level.

Access to Information

The right of individuals to obtain information is grounded in Bangladesh's legal and constitutional principles. Article 39 of the Constitution of Bangladesh provides freedom of thought, conscience, speech, and expression as a basic right. The Right to Information Act and the Local Government (UP) Act of 2009 (Articles 78–81) affirm the public's right to access

¹ See more Union Parishad Act, 2009; and also Ahmed, T. Rashid, M. H.R. Ahmmed, K. N., & Razzaque, F. (2016). Social Accountability Mechanisms: A Study on the Union Parishads in Bangladesh BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) BRAC University, Dhaka BIGD Special Publication Series No. 02.

information and establish legal frameworks for the unimpeded dissemination of information. No legislation explicitly prevents access; the Right to Information Act and UP Act define citizens' rights to request information. Under the legislation, every citizen is entitled to access information from the authority mandated to furnish it.

The accessibility and distribution of information empower individuals. As all powers of the Republic are vested in the populace², it is imperative to guarantee the access to information for their empowerment and the accountability of the relevant institutions. Websites for all departments and information centers at the district, Upazila, and union levels have been established to facilitate the unrestricted dissemination of information (MRDI and Asia Foundation, 2013).

Citizen Charter

The 2009 Act mandates that each UP establish a Citizen's Charter. Clause 49(1) of the 2009 Act mandates that each UP shall disseminate the "Citizen's Charter," informing all citizens of the services they are entitled to receive from the UPs and the conditions governing service supply within a specified timeframe. Clause 49 (2) stipulates that the Government shall develop a directory to guide the Citizens' Charter, wherein the UP retains the authority to implement modifications and alterations as deemed essential, contingent upon notifying the Government. Clause 49 (3) stipulates that the UPs may retain the authority to amend the Citizen's Charter (Panday, 2011).

Each UP is legally obligated to provide a charter of services (Citizens' Charter) in accordance with the 2009 Act. This charter should include a declaration of the services provided by the UP, its terms, and a specific delivery time frame. The CC requires the following: (a) A precise and unambiguous description of each service; (b) The cost of the service; (c) The terms and procedures for claiming and receiving services; (d) The specific time frame for service provision; (e) The responsibilities of citizens in relation to services; (f) The assurance of service delivery; (g) The procedure for resolving grievances regarding service delivery; and (h) The repercussions of declining to accept the service charter. The primary aim of the Citizens' Charter is to empower individuals about the provision of public goods and services. The Citizen's Charter educates individuals on their rights and entitlements. They can exert significant pressure on service providers to enhance their performance. On the one hand, the proper implementation of these provisions would undoubtedly create a new opportunity for the general public to participate in UP activities. However, it would guarantee accountability and transparency for the aforementioned activities (Panday, 2011).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Since gaining independence, successive administrations in Bangladesh have implemented numerous reform initiatives to enhance public involvement in local governance. Among several changes, a significant step by the government was the implementation of the Local

² See more details in Bangladesh Constitution, First Chapter, Article 7 (1), Government of Bangladesh

Government (Union Parishad) Act, 2009. Several significant characteristics integrated into the Act encompass ward meetings (ward shava), an open budget, and the right to Information. Moreover, the Act delineates criteria for establishing several standing committees and a Project Implementation Committee (PIC) to supervise the execution of diverse initiatives with direct participation from the local populace. Fieldwork revealed limited implementation of many provisions designed to enhance public participation, despite the Act's various procedures that boost residents' involvement in UP governance. The following section discusses the actual scenario of participation and accountability practices in the UPs, building on the legal framework discussion from the previous section.

Findings from Ward Shava Scenario

Ward Shava meetings tend to include invited local elites (e.g., imams, teachers, matabbar (an influential elder), and political leaders) rather than broad-based citizen participation. Nevertheless, UP members express considerable dissatisfaction with the evident and latent costs associated with holding WS. At times, meeting dates have not been disseminated in writing, and occasionally only verbal notifications have been issued by the village police. Typically, these meetings are held in mosques and hat bazaars, resulting in the absence of women's involvement. On average, only 5 women attended the meeting, indicating that women's participation remains quite low. In Bijoypur and Hazirpara, the photos shown by the WS chairpersons did not include any women participants. There is no documented evidence on whether disadvantaged groups can effectively voice their concerns. The Ward Shava Chairperson typically does not bother themselves with quorum. Meetings were conducted both with and without the requisite quorum of 5% of eligible voters in a ward. However, the effective engagement of attendees remained limited due to the absence of pertinent information necessary for substantive discussions. Moreover, UP members accused the general public of not being interested in attending the meeting because of their business commitments.

A member of UP in Hazirpara articulated the worry as follows: "*Due to WS, my personal expenses increased significantly. To arrange a ward shava meeting, I must allocate between 4,000 and 5,000 BDT, for which we receive no funding from the Union Parishad*" (Interview data, 12/04/2025). Moreover, another aspect of the WS raises questions about its efficacy and sustainability. UP members and the Chairman expressed that the UPs are gradually eroding public trust, as it is unfeasible for the authority to fulfill all demands given during the Ward Shava meeting. During the WS meeting, individuals propose numerous ideas and anticipate their implementation by the UP. Nonetheless, it is a problem for the UP to prioritize the populace's requests and categorize them correctly. Due to the disparity between public expectations and reality, it is very difficult to meet all the requests raised at WS meetings, as UPs receive insufficient government funding. Consequently, individuals diminish the efficacy of the WS, perceiving it as a waste of time, which ultimately leads to a decline in interest towards Ward Shava.

Among the interviewed service seekers (30 respondents), over 90% were unaware of the Ward Shavas. Almost two-thirds had not attended ward-level meetings, despite their identities being documented in the meeting resolutions. A comprehensive list of activities has been designated for ward shavas. In many instances, shavas convened regularly; yet, fictitious names were recorded in the WS resolution book as participants. The majority of attendees at the meetings were either neighbors or supporters of the ward members. In certain instances, when the Union Parishad distributes Food For Work (FFW) and Test Relief (TR), ward members collect signatures for the resolution book (Ahsan, Chowdhury, & Panday, 2018). The inability to achieve quorum at meetings has frequently resulted in local police, operating under a UP, being dispatched to some villagers' residences to obtain signatures for the resolution book. Invitations to meetings were disseminated ineffectively, leaving many voters unaware of the gathering. Some studies (Aubert 2006; Opel, 2007) revealed that civil society participants and impoverished individuals have been excluded from the decision-making process. Even when incorporated on a limited scale, they cannot affect the decision-making process. The study found that the political activists of the influential party determine the recipients of Food For Work (FFW), Test Relief (TR), and similar programs. 92% of respondents stated that public opinion is disregarded in the selection of recipients for UPs' social safety net programs. Furthermore, as several interviewed residents noted, regardless of the decisions made in a meeting, subsequent actions predominantly reflect their perceived priorities, with no regard for the content or tone of the discussions. The lack of responsiveness has significantly diminished the effectiveness of the meetings as instruments for promoting public engagement and ensuring officials' accountability.

Reality of Open Budget Session (OBS)

The Open Budget Session (OBS) serves as an additional mechanism to guarantee accountability at the union level. The study indicates that the OBS scenario is analogous to the WS meeting. All of the chairpersons of the investigated UPs stated that the open budget session typically invites prominent individuals, social workers, teachers, matabbar, and those who influence the villagers. Based on the Open Budget records, all studied UPs that maintain such documentation conduct OBS annually. In-depth interviews with male and female members of UPs reveal that the Chairman and the Secretary prepare budgets and then present them at UP meetings. After that, the chairman presents the budget orally at a general public meeting, with little opportunity for public input. On this occasion, the UP chairman publicly discloses its income, expenditures, and viable scheme list for the designated financial year in the presence of the general public of the specific UP. Of the three Union Parishads reviewed, two had Budget Books in which no minutes of budget discussions were recorded, and another one contained blank or partially completed pages. In all cases, the available records were limited to participant signatures, while no documentation of OBS-related discussions or observations was found. Respondents, including the chairman and union members, reported that over three years, the average public participation in budget sessions was approximately 20–40 individuals in Uttar Joypur (NO 9), and Hazirpara Unions in

Lakshmipur District, and 150–200 individuals in Bijoypur Union (Cumilla District), despite registered voter populations of 20,500, 19,617, and 22,500, respectively. Furthermore, it has been observed that these three UPs do not properly maintain a record book for the budget. Nonetheless, women's participation in OBS fluctuates between five and fifteen across the union.

The UP secretary asserts that they extended an invitation to secondary school teachers in the vicinity of the UP office. During the interview with the general population, the researcher asked a few school instructors whether they had received an invitation from UP to attend the UP budget sessions. However, no one responded favorably to this inquiry. They are unaware that they are eligible to participate in such meetings.

What was the procedure for notifying the public about the open budget meeting? Diverse UP members and chairpersons provide varying responses to this inquiry. Similar to the majority of UP members, they stated that they sent chawkidars to villagers' residences and announced during Jumma prayer to disseminate the date and time of the budget meeting. One of the UP chairpersons accused them of disseminating information to the local populace via miking to encourage attendance and solicit their useful opinions and insights into the proposed budget. Both union parishad members and the general public expressed that they had never encountered such an announcement. One of the chairmen said that we have exhibited reluctance to initiate the formation of ward shavas and to establish an 'open budget'. His perspectives as follows: *"We did not encourage ward shava nor conduct an open budget session due to the absence of additional funding to actualize these initiatives. Individuals exhibited a lack of enthusiasm for participating in these activities"* (Interview Data, 13/04/2025).

The current accounting system for recording income and expenditures is entirely manual and antiquated. The record-keeping mechanism typically does not adhere to the IBAS++ national standard. Although the examined UPs possess computers, they are hardly utilized for calculations; their primary function is typing. This record-keeping system is prone to inaccuracies, difficult to quantify, and not readily accessible; as a result, it complicates the investigation and verification of records. Although UPs have a provision to display the income and spending report on the notice board, this rarely occurs in practice. No one at UP takes the initiative to display their accounts on the notice board. Consequently, adequate accountability measures are probably absent there. One of the chairpersons said they would provide information on income and expenditure during the budget meeting.

Reality of ensuring Accountability via Standing Committees (SC)

A significant disparity exists between the Act's committee provisions and the way committees function in practice. According to the UP Act, there must be 13 standing committees in all Union Parishads addressing various development issues. In the visited UPs, it is apparent that, of the 13 standing committees, only a select few (Birth-Death Registration, Agriculture, Fisheries and Livestock, Tax Assessment and Collection, Education, Health and Family Planning) are consistently active throughout the year in three of the UPs. The SCs have not yet adhered to the standard procedures for committee operations, which include deliberations and decisions based on a predetermined agenda. The majority of UP members designated as chairs and members of the standing committees lack awareness of their tasks and responsibilities; many are even unfamiliar with the names of the committees to which they belong. The veracity of these facts is apparent via the interviews conducted with the UP members and Chairs.

Despite the establishment of 13 standing committees as mandated in each of the examined UPs, representatives have remained unaccountable for their conduct. The majority of the committees consist solely of UP delegates, with members of one committee serving as members or chairs of another. The concurrent involvement of UP members in several committees has led to their accountability to one another rather than to the residents. Additionally, due in part to these arrangements, committee meetings are not held as frequently as anticipated, and many members rarely attend, except for those responsible for UP financial and establishment issues. The lack of member attendance at committee meetings does not create quorum issues, as committee chairpersons only gather signatures from members at their convenience. A significant number of members lack a comprehensive understanding of the committees' tasks and significance, perceiving no personal financial advantage from their membership. Moreover, they frequently exhibit a reluctance to collaborate with other members due to personal animosity. Tawfique & Haque (2009) have also underscored these significant deficiencies in the committee system. Their outcomes have rendered the committees ineffectual in holding UP representatives accountable for critical areas of their duties.

The standing committee's performance in this regard was inadequate. Various categories of development initiatives were proposed during the ward shava (meeting) in each ward of the union parishad. This meeting also proposed the names of the committee members responsible for planning and implementing local projects. The final project selection and committee members were established during the Union Parishad coordination meeting, which excluded public input. Even ordinary individuals were unaware of the members of each project and the criteria for their selection. A participant remarked, "*I was unaware of my membership in any committee and had not attended any committee meetings*" (Interview Data, 10/05/2025). During a visit to the Union Parishad for a specific requirement, the chairman informed me that I had been appointed to a committee in my capacity as a teacher. Despite the directive for the Union Parishad to notify each committee member four to five

days before the meeting via mobile phone, the majority of members received no information about the meeting and attended only sparingly. One participant articulated his perspective as follows: "*As a member of the standing committee on sanitation and sewerage, I was never apprised of any meeting. I lack interest. I am content with my vocation as an imam in the mosque.*" (Interview Data, 11/05/2025). Regrettably, interviews with the general public found that about 87% of respondents were unaware of the Standing Committee of the UP.

The study's findings validate Tawfique & Haque's (2009) research, which found that the majority of standing committees were non-functional. A significant number of chairpersons and members were unaware of the exact number of standing committees to be established in each UP and of their respective functions within the various committees. Union Parishads members exhibited insufficient expertise and motivation to operate and oversee project committees successfully. The standing committee meeting minutes from all examined UPs indicate that records are inadequately preserved. For example, certain record books and lists of meeting dates were found without accompanying proceedings. In certain instances, the signatures of the SC chairs were observed on the blank pages (i.e., Hazirpara and Joypur UP record books). Furthermore, in Bijoypur, UP, SC proceedings, meeting dates, and attendee names were recorded in the book without adequate meeting minutes, discussions, decisions, or signatures of the members present at the meeting. Furthermore, the majority of standing committee meetings failed to record agendas and discussions.

Limited Impact of the Right to Information

Accountability via Right to Information (RTI): Article 78 of the UP Act 2009 establishes the right to access information from the UP. This article mandates that every union secretary must provide information upon request. The efficacy of right-to-information legislation is significantly influenced by the degree to which persons seek information. The UP will provide a chart detailing the information that citizens are expected to receive from the UP. The secretary of the studied UPs said that although the information cell is accessible, inquiries for information are rare. In practice, we observe that while UPs display a signboard with service details, such as birth and death registration, online applications, and similar matters, they do not provide any information about accounts and budgets.

Furthermore, no UP established an information cell; thus, they did not encompass the requisite information as stipulated in the RTI. Furthermore, all examined UPs have their own websites; however, none of these sites are up to date. It's an intriguing matter; in some pages, the UP-chairman's name wasn't even changed.

However, in the examined UPs, residents exhibit minimal interest in information. Evidence from the Information Commission shows that in 2023, 8,747 applications were filed under the Right to Information Act, 2009, across government and non-government organizations, while only 14 related to Union Parishad matters (Information Commission, 2023). Consequently, the question arises as to why residents have not utilized their freedom to acquire information about government and governance. One explanation is that although the literacy rate is

satisfactory, educated individuals predominantly live in urban areas. A pertinent issue is that the majority of UP citizens are unaware of their right to access information and the means by which it might be exercised.

Citizens' Charters are not Being Fully Implemented.

None of the studied UPs fully displayed a complete Citizens' Charter on-site, enabling some residents to review available services, including their eligibility criteria, accessibility, timelines, and grievance-resolution processes. In Uttar Joypur Union No. 9, it is noted that the UP merely delineates the services offered without specifying the time frame, pricing, grievance procedures, and other pertinent details. In Hazirpara Union, we noted the lack of a Citizen Charter in public spaces. Whenever I enquired of the UP secretary, "Have you displayed the Citizen Charter?" He stated, "*There is no location to hang the CC, so we suspend it in the UDCC room*" (Interview, 13/04/2025). The necessary information was not mentioned in that citizen charter. In Bijoypur Union, the conditions of the CC were superior to those of other areas. They have delineated the categories of services offered, along with their respective costs. Nevertheless, they did not furnish any more details.

This commendable attribute is duly recognized; nonetheless, it holds little importance, as several citizens remain oblivious to their existence, purpose, and worth. Similarly, the UPs themselves lack a culture that is both citizen-friendly and citizen-oriented, resulting in insufficient efforts to promote them. The cumulative effect renders them largely ineffective as mechanisms for UP accountability, as shown by Chowdhury (2015) and Huque and Ahsan (2016). The charters lack explicit details on local complaint-handling procedures, including the appropriate channels for registering complaints and the available remedies. However, even if such information were easily accessible, the arrangements are unlikely to be extensively utilized. This is mostly due to a local belief that filing a complaint may significantly disturb UP representatives and create complications when approaching a UP for other issues. During the survey, it was challenging to find enough respondents knowledgeable about the Citizens' Charter. Individuals who demonstrated comprehension of the Citizen's Charter lacked a thorough understanding of its intricacies. It is worth noting that the provisions of the Citizens' Charter have not improved the quality of services provided by the Union Parishads.

Practical Scenario of Village Court

Several studies claim the Shalish system is often biased and disadvantageous to people experiencing poverty. The village court was established to combat bias and discrimination within the Shalish system and to offer economically disadvantaged and vulnerable rural populations alternative justice mechanisms (Islam, 2015).

The field study indicated that the effectiveness of current Village Courts is limited by inadequate implementation capacity, poor record management, limited knowledge among the general population, and unfavorable economic circumstances, combined with the underdevelopment of women and the prevalence of narrow-minded political affiliations, significantly hindering the efficient functioning of village courts. Among the 30 service-seeker

respondents, approximately 97% reported low awareness of VC, and around 70% believe that VC is biased towards known political and social influencers. Respondents reported that the general public's lack of awareness of the village court system is the main contributing factor. Both service seekers and providers have limited or no understanding of VC. Most service providers and recipients accused the VC of operating without sufficient oversight and control from higher authorities, and of UP lacking the necessary resources to manage the Village Court effectively.

Focus Group Discussion Findings

Focus group discussion data indicate that most individuals did not receive an invitation to participate in the ward shava meeting; in addition, various issues were observed during the FGD. For instance, UP representatives had not yet attained full proficiency in executing their augmented responsibilities in preparing the Union Development Plan (UDP). The formation of the Planning Committee (PC), Standing Committees (SC), and the Union Development Coordination Committee (UDCC) was not fully developed. Moreover, no effort was made to conduct additional budget analysis. The UP representatives were unable to accomplish it. They were likewise unable to schedule meetings with the members of SC and UDCC.

A significant number of the proposals chosen at WS and finalized at OBM were not executed. The anticipated integration of policy, planning, and budgeting outlined in the mid-term budgetary framework (MTBF) often did not occur. Consequently, the financing was inadequate to implement the local plans. Furthermore, during the focus group discussion, the UP members were unable to remember the name of the Standing Committee they chair. Even members of the UP are unaware of the standing committees' duties and responsibilities. The subsequent discussion with one Ward Member elucidated the reasons behind the existence of certain counterfeit WSs: FGD participants reported that although a meeting was organized, invitations were not extended to all voters. They further noted that, in the absence of adequate funding for project implementation, planning exercises were perceived as having limited practical value. Concerns were also raised regarding irregular receipt of Union Parishad allocations. Additionally, it was stated that decisions regarding the distribution of UP funds were typically made jointly with the UP Chair, and that no deliberate efforts were undertaken to solicit substantial financial contributions from community members. During the focus group discussions, when participants were asked about the Websites, none exhibited interest.

Observation and Summary of the Findings

Many villagers demonstrated limited understanding of planning and budgeting processes. The Ward Members are coordinating ward shavas and an open budget meeting; they have employed several methods, such as personal outreach, mobile phone calls, and messages conveyed by Chowkidars (village guards), to motivate voters to participate in the meeting. Notwithstanding the extensive opportunity to participate, the majority of non-participants reported a lack of invitations and unawareness of WS and OBM. Women's participation was minimal due to their limited mobility, lack of awareness, and the purdah system (practice of

female seclusion and modesty), which obstructs their engagement in the political arena. Moreover, the UPs assert that Ward Shava is routinely organized in the majority of wards; however, it is challenging to find evidence or conclusions to substantiate this claim (Ahmed et al., 2016). Although there is a clear expectation that they promote community involvement in local decision-making, ward-level meetings have become superficial, often conducted merely to satisfy legal requirements. Numerous UP functionaries noted that various issues, including professional obligations, lack of personal interest, insufficient awareness, political motivations, "inopportune" meeting hours, and scheduling issues, hindered people's participation at the WS. Consequently, genuine public participation has not been guaranteed, leading to a lack of accountability on the part of local officials for their decisions and the resulting community impacts.

The open budget meeting serves as a grassroots forum for facilitating participatory planning. The Chairman, secretary, and members of UP determine the budget for the upcoming year. Theoretically, the current budget development process is efficient, transparent, and facilitates the effective participation of the impoverished, women, vulnerable populations, and those without a voice. The research demonstrated that the current budgeting process perpetuates the supremacy of politically and economically influential factions, such as UP Chairpersons and their associates, ruling party affiliates, local elites, and bureaucrats, thereby obstructing socioeconomic advancement at the grassroots level in Bangladesh.

Participants in the village court have a limited understanding of its regulations and authorities. There is not enough training for UP functionaries on village courts. Furthermore, village courts lack financial allocations, constraining resources for logistics and paperwork. The extent of bias in their conclusions remains ambiguous, especially considering that most panel members are politicians. While local elections may render them accountable to voters for delivering equitable judgments, they may be reluctant to adjudicate against politically connected individuals. UP serves as the institution for providing information services to local communities.

Nevertheless, a scant number of individuals receive information regarding various services when they enquire with the chairman or secretary of UP. In numerous instances, the chairpersons and secretaries were observed to be unwilling to grant UP members access to resources. Furthermore, the UP websites offer generalized information and lack regular updates. Moreover, the general public, especially those in vulnerable positions, lacks awareness of this process. They are unable to connect the right to knowledge with the resolution of issues about their lives and livelihoods. Despite the recent amplification of female representatives' voices at the grassroots level and their social legitimacy in addressing specific women's issues, their involvement in UP activities remains constrained in some instances.

Implementing an accountability mechanism requires citizens' awareness, capability, and engagement. Local budgets or participatory forums exist; nevertheless, individuals often lack

awareness of these resources, do not know how to access them, or are hindered in their utilization due to insufficient knowledge, inadequate access to guidance, or actual or perceived intimidation.

During the data collection, it was observed that the majority of the women UP members of the committee had a limited understanding of the functions and processes of the Union Parishads. Even more than that, women members of the UP were not very knowledgeable about standing committees. They only sign the provided sheet when required. Common people were allowed to voice their opinions on project selection and planning, but only through open discussion sessions held twice a year. The only thing the local community can do is voice their opinion; they do not have the right to vote for or against the decision made by the higher authority. Another significant finding of the study is the lack of awareness among members of various standing committees. The majority of members are unaware of their committee affiliations and the roles they are expected to undertake.

The findings indicate that power politics significantly influence decision-making within Ward Shava and during open budget meetings. In selecting members for PICs and recipients for social safety net programs, chairpersons and members sometimes attribute their decisions to various forms of pressure, including pressure from political parties and requests from local elites.

The absence of accountability has obstructed resident participation in UP decision-making processes. The connection between citizens and UP officials has diminished, thereby undermining local democracy, as residents have been unable to oversee UP activities adequately. They have had limited opportunity to provide constructive input on effective practices and areas for enhancement, leading to inferior service quality from the UPs than warranted. Merely 10 percent of the respondents believed that individuals obtain information by enquiring with the chairpersons or secretaries of UPs. Even UP members, in certain instances, encountered challenges in obtaining information regarding the income and expenditure of the UPs. In several instances, chairpersons and secretaries have shown reluctance to provide information to UP members.

The investigation concentrated exclusively on three Union Parishads that were intentionally chosen. The findings reveal particular circumstances instead of providing statistically generalizable conclusions regarding all Union Parishads in Bangladesh. These UPs may not accurately represent the range of governance practices, participation trends, or accountability issues in other regions of Bangladesh. Moreover, the qualitative data gathering from rural inhabitants proved unproductive due to their lack of awareness and understanding of Union Parishad activities.

Future research should expand the sample size and include a more diverse range of Union Parishads across different regions of Bangladesh to enhance representativeness and generalizability. Employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates qualitative insights with

quantitative performance indicators would provide a more comprehensive understanding of participation and accountability outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The research indicates that, across the three UPs examined, public engagement and accountability mechanisms are largely ineffective at promoting openness and responsiveness. Despite legal frameworks that facilitate interaction through Ward Shavas and open budget meetings, their implementation is often inadequate and largely symbolic. Participation is minimal owing to insufficient awareness, restricted invites, gender-related barriers, and socio-political marginalization.

The disparity between theory and practice arises from structural deficiencies: institutional inefficiency, political intervention, elite dominance, and an absence of authentic commitment to implement participatory government. Legal mandates for transparency and accountability are sometimes evaded by authorities, turning public forums into mere formalities rather than venues for inclusive decision-making.

Obstacles to effective participation and accountability include insufficient citizen awareness, inadequate training of UP officials, gender disparities, the lack of operational standing committees, ineffective information dissemination, and local leadership's reluctance to distribute power and resources. These obstacles combine to diminish the democratic capacity of Union Parishads and obstruct grassroots development.

Based on the findings of this study, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. To enhance the effectiveness, accountability, transparency, and pro-poor orientation of local government bodies, a robust political vision is essential. This vision should decentralize additional authority to local governments, strengthen the capacity of local government representatives through initiatives, and empower citizens by raising awareness of their political rights. To ensure participation and accountability, Union Parishads must increase awareness through a multi-faceted approach that combines education, outreach, and community engagement among the general people.
2. Disseminate information regarding the functions, rights, and responsibilities of the Union Parishad via local television, radio, leaflets, miking and print media. These should emphasize the ways individuals can participate in local governance and the significance of such involvement. Establish educational initiatives in schools to teach youth about civic responsibility and the importance of local governance. Promote student engagement in community events. Moreover, educational institutions can establish clubs or forums for students to oversee Union Parishad activities. These groups may focus on engaging youngsters in political and governance processes. By organizing debates, forums, and discussions, they can enhance understanding of the Union Parishad's functions and ensure accountability among local authorities.
3. Establish a clear and transparent follow-up procedure. Given the widespread use of mobile phones, disseminate regular SMS notifications about Union Parishad meetings,

resolutions, and local concerns. This can ensure citizens remain informed and encouraged to engage.

3. The Upazila administration can provide training on engaging in local governance, submitting complaints, and ensuring Union Parishad accountability for their activities. Use these venues to address concerns and solicit community feedback. Engage local leaders and representatives in these sessions to cultivate trust. Engage with local NGOs or community organizations that possess established public trust. These groups can assist in promoting awareness campaigns and engaging in local governance.
4. The government should take the initiative to standardize meeting minutes, resolutions, and financial record formats across all Union Parishads; provide training for UP Secretaries and Chairpersons on record management and financial reporting; offer gender-sensitive capacity-building programs for elected women members. Union Parishads should organize meetings at times and in locations convenient for women to encourage female citizen participation.
5. To ensure meaningful participation and accountability, monitoring should be a collaborative effort that involves various stakeholders, including local community members, youth, marginalized groups, NGOs, media, government bodies, and independent auditors. To enhance oversight and guarantee engagement and accountability in Union Parishads, it is imperative to establish a comprehensive structure that incorporates diverse stakeholders capable of actively participating in monitoring efforts. These diverse committee members must oversee the execution of development initiatives, budget distribution, and public service provision. They can monitor Union Parishad meetings to ensure they are transparent, inclusive, and conducted appropriately. These committees can evaluate the transparency and efficacy of Union Parishads' operations at the grassroots level.
6. No budget has been allocated for the WS, OBS meeting, and associated expenses. The members and Chairs believe that the government should allocate funds specifically for conducting those meetings, as a limitation of the WS is the absence of financial assistance.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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