

Status of Social Accountability at Rural Local Governance in Bangladesh and the Way Forward: In the Case of Union Parishad

Abstract

In the 21st Century social accountability has become one of the preconditions to create more transparent and representative governments and aid public institutions in meeting the expectations of the population through empowering citizens which is necessary for effective and sustainable development. Social accountability of the elected representatives at the rural level may help the government to increase service quality, empower rural citizens, and also to promote good governance. At present Bangladesh, mostly known as the “Development Surprise”, has leaped towards lower middle-income country status from a poor developing one within four decades of its decisive victory. In this stage of growth and development, the persistence of social accountability at the rural local governance would ensure the attainment of sustainable development through demand-based service delivery. Against this backdrop, this paper intends to explore the present status of social accountability mechanisms at the Union Parishad as the lowest tier of rural local governance in Bangladesh and summarizes several recommendations as the way forward. Secondary data analysis and empirical knowledge have been exerted which would refer to a clear view of the current status of social accountability at the grass root level. In the first section importance of social accountability at the union level based on theoretical analysis have mentioned. Existing mechanisms to ensure social accountability at Union Parishad have been delineated in the second section. The third section develops a compact understanding of the current status of social accountability at the Union Parishad level. Discussion on the findings, recommendations, and conclusion would be shared in the fourth section.

Keywords: social accountability, sustainable development, good governance, demand-based service delivery, rural local governance

Introduction

In the recent decade ensuring social accountability has become one of the indicators of good governance and one very important component of development assistance as well. Now citizens expect to be empowered through participating in the formulation, planning, and implementation of the development process. Social accountability is such a mechanism to make the authority accountable to the citizens and to ensure citizens' effective engagement in the development process. Social accountability is an evolving umbrella category that includes: citizen monitoring and oversight of public and/or private sector performance, user-centered public information access/dissemination systems, public complaint, and grievance redress mechanisms, as well as citizen participation in actual resource allocation decision-making, such as participatory budgeting (Fox, 2015). While corruption in public expenditure is rising rapidly, especially in developing countries, the urgency of social accountability is absolutely increasing. Bangladesh as a third-world country is not out of this condition. Hence, social accountability has a very important role to ensure good governance and to establish democracy as the state principle properly. Recently, scholars and practitioners have argued in favor of direct civic engagement in the State actor's activities, as more and more failures of the political accountability mechanisms are noted (Sarker & Dutta, 2011). In the present crucial stage of growth and development, the persistence of social accountability at the rural local governance would ensure the attainment of sustainable development through demand-based service delivery. Against this backdrop, this paper intends to explore the present status of social accountability mechanisms at the Union Parishad as the lowest tier of rural local governance in Bangladesh.

Objectives of the paper:

The main objective of this paper is to reveal the status of social accountability at the Union level as the lowest tier of rural local governance. Specific objectives of the study are:

- i) To illustrate the urgency of social accountability at the local governance.
- ii) To explain the existing mechanisms of social accountability at Union Parishad as the lowest tier of rural local governance in Bangladesh.
- iii) To elicit the current status of social accountability at the Union level in Bangladesh.
- iv) To refer compatible recommendations for making the existing mechanisms of social accountability at the Union level more effective and responsive.

Methodology of the study:

The study followed qualitative analysis of trends and patterns in documents depending on secondary sources and analysis based on secondary sources. The urgency of social accountability at the local government to ensure good governance has been discussed based on the study of relevant literature such as journal articles, book chapters, research reports, newspaper reports, etc. In the next section, existing mechanisms of social accountability at Union Parishad, the lowest tier of rural local governance in Bangladesh have been mentioned by studying relevant rules, laws, acts, and other literature. Analysis of the current status of social accountability mechanisms at the rural local governance in Bangladesh has been presented based on a literature review and empirical knowledge. Key recommendations and the conclusion have been mentioned as the way forward in the next sections.

Conceptualizing the urgency of social accountability at the local governance:

Recently local governance has become one of the potential sectors of development partners to work for ensuring deliberative democracy and empowering citizens through their active participation in local affairs. As the approach of decentralization ensures the transfer of authority, legislature, judiciary, or administrative mechanisms to local govt., so local governance has immense scope to deliver demand-based public services, accelerate revenue generation, ensure democratization, and maintain law and order situation at the local level. Local government institutions have a key role to make the local governance process successful. The United Nations defines local self-government as "a political sub-division of a nation or state which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs, including the power to impose taxes or exact labor for prescribed purposes. The governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected (UN). Local govt. is vested to ensure demand-based service delivery to the community members and to confirm the fair distribution of the resources. But the matter of fact is that often local govt. institutions become non-responsive to the demands and problems of the local people and involve various malpractices. Here comes the question of accountability of the local govt. institutions to society.

“Social accountability” refers to actions initiated by citizen groups to hold public officials, politicians, and service providers to account for their conduct and performance in terms of delivering services, improving people's welfare, and protecting people's rights (ANSA-EAP, 2008). An accountable government is one that proactively informs about and justifies its plans of action, behavior, and results and is sectioned accordingly for a complete discussion. As a new development strategy, this approach emphasizes the citizens' active participation in the development process and civic engagement in local affairs. Social accountability in the

local governance process is beneficial for both the local govt. institutions and the community members as it elicits citizens' demands and helps local govt. officials to provide demand-based services cost-effectively. Through the practice of social accountability at the local level, community members become empowered and they get a platform to raise their demands and problems to the locally elected representatives as well as to the local govt. officials. Social accountability strategies try to improve institutional performance by bolstering both citizen engagement and the public responsiveness of states and corporations. Insofar as social accountability builds citizen power vis-a-vis the state, it is a political process – yet it is distinct from the political accountability of elected officials, where citizens' voice is usually delegated to representatives in between elections. This distinction makes social accountability an especially relevant approach for societies in which representative government is weak, unresponsive, or non-existent (Fox, 2015).

As social accountability seeks for citizens' engagement to monitor and oversee the performance of the public or private sector, so for better service delivery and for fair resource distribution it has become urgent to ensure social accountability at the local governance. Various malpractices like extortion, embezzlement, corruption, etc. at the local government level would be reduced for the continuous safeguard of the citizenry.

Existing mechanisms of social accountability at Union Parishad as the lowest tier of rural local governance in Bangladesh:

Article 59 of the Constitution of Bangladesh suggests establishing local govt. in every administrative unit of the Republic which shall be entrusted to bodies, composed of persons elected in accordance with the law. The present local govt. in Bangladesh is segregated into urban local govt. and rural local govt. The rural local govt. in Bangladesh does have three tiers while the urban local govt. has a two-tier special set of local govt. excluding the Cantonment Board (Talukdar, 2009). The local government in rural areas represents a three-tier hierarchical system.

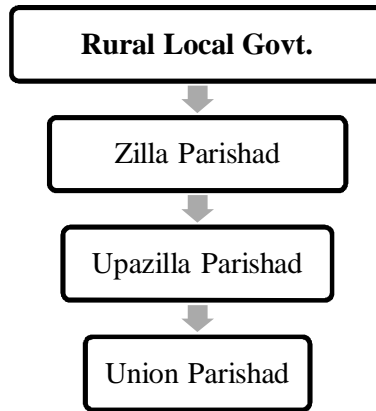


Figure 1 Rural local govt. structure in Bangladesh.

Union Parishad, as the lowest and smallest tier of rural local governance in Bangladesh, is constituted under the Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance, 1983, and subsequent other rules. A Union Parishad consists of a chairman and twelve members including three members exclusively reserved for women. Each Union is made up of nine Wards which are considered as its jurisdiction.

In Bangladesh, despite the fact that the importance of the discourse of active citizenry in State actions was never denied, attempts to engage them in political activities were not always successful. People's engagement in the governing process was lost in power capture by the ruling elites and ineffective Public Accountability Mechanisms and Political Accountability Mechanisms (Monem & Beniamin, 2013). For the failure of both the Public Accountability Mechanism and Political Accountability Mechanism, development agencies, practitioners, and academicians emphasized introducing Social Accountability Mechanism the Rural Local Governance. One of the core components of Local Govt. Support Program 2006 was the institutionalization of social accountability mechanisms in UP's administrative structures to ensure formal citizen engagement in the process of procurement, project formulation, project implementation, supervision, and monitoring (SoG, 2018).

Different deliberative forums, such as Ward Shava (WS), Open Budget Shava (OBS), etc., have been established at the Union Parishad to ensure social accountability through participatory planning and budgeting. In addition provision of citizen participation in various committees of Union Parishad, such as Ward Committee (WC), Scheme Supervision

Committee (SSC), and Standing Committee (SC) has been kept for empowering citizenry with monitoring and supervising power and making civic engagement more viable.



Figure 2 Existing mechanisms at Union Parishad to ensure social accountability.

In this case, Local Government (Union Parishad) Act, 2009 has the key role as the cornerstone to ensuring social accountability in Rural Local Governance in Bangladesh. However, existing mechanisms at Union Parishad to make the practice of social accountability viable are discussed below:

Considering citizen engagement and participation in local governance, the legal framework (UP act 2009) proposes two spaces: the Ward Shava (WS) and Open Budget Shava (OBS). These two are open forums where general people are directly involved in making policy decisions. According to the Union Parishad Act 2009, each UP organizes WS in each of its nine wards at least twice a year with at least 5% of the total voters. The respective ward member presides over the WS while the female ward member of the reserved seat acts as the advisor of the WS. The UP must make a public announcement at least seven days before the shava takes place. It was clearly stated that UP representatives shall disclose information on current development activities, financial affairs, and schemes in front of the participants during these shava Furthermore, shava attendees can propose projects, prioritize schemes and development programs to be implemented, review UP reports, and identify shortcomings. The UP Act obliges UP members to consider WS decisions and as per the law, these recommendations are not alterable.

The Government (Union Parishad) Act 2009 elaborates on organizing an Open Budget Shava (OBS) in each Union of Bangladesh. After formulating its budget based on priorities identified in the ward meetings and recommendations of relevant UP standing committees, the UP is required to have the details of the budget approved in an open budget meeting, which has to be held at the UP's premises in the presence of the voters of the UP at least 60 days prior to the beginning of the financial year.

The Union Parishad Operational Manual 2012 introduces WC at Union Parishad. It is a seven-member committee where one-third of the members are women. Ward committees include two ward members, a school teacher, a female social worker, a male social worker, an NGO representative or civil society member, and a general citizen or freedom fighter. Ward committees are responsible for local-level planning based on the demands of WS participants. Committee members can implement and supervise ward-level schemes with budgets up to Taka five lakh. Ward committees are also responsible for construction worker recruitment, material procurement for construction per rules, and supplier liaison.

Union Parishad Operational Manual 2012 provides that there should be an SSC at every ward of UP. The committee is made of five male members and two female members which takes shape in the presence of the public and UP representatives at a WS meeting. Upazilla Nirbahi Officer (UNO) nominates a technically skilled officer for scheme supervision. Neither UP representatives nor ward committee members can be SSC members. As per the manual, SSCs shall monitor project quality, timeframe, and the number of schemes at the time of implementation following the terms and conditions of each scheme.

According to Local Government(Union Parishad) Ordinance 1983, the Union Parishad, constitute Standing Committees at its first meeting in each year or as soon as may be to deal with various important sectors like finance and establishment; education and mass education; health; audit and accounts; agriculture etc. Number of members of a Standing Committee is determined by the Union Parishad itself. There is a provision of keeping general citizen as co-opted member in each standing committee.

Current abortive status of social accountability mechanisms at the rural local governance in Bangladesh:

Though the provision of participatory deliberative forums and inclusive committees have been set at the Union Parishad as the mechanisms of ensuring social accountability at the grass root level, but these are more rhetoric than the reality. From the study of various related research reports, books, journal articles, and newspapers it has been found out that these mechanisms are not working properly. Based on the relevant literature studies and empirical knowledge current abortive status of social accountability mechanisms at the UP in Bangladesh is discussed below:

Lack of interest among UP Functionaries:

Though UP Operational Manual 2012 has the provision to arrange WS twice a year and OBS once a year in each UP, the majority of the UP chairmen and members have no training or proper orientation for arranging these Shavas. They do not understand the importance of these deliberative forums and committees, which refrain them to arrange the Shavas properly. It has been found from the literature study that UP chairmen and members are not enough motivated to organize WS or OBS as there is nothing to get from the Shavas. Besides, the formation of WC, SSC, and SC does not follow the law in many cases. For political gain and personal achievement, the majority of UP functionaries are reluctant to form committees with the conscious citizenry. Instead, they are interested to keep their acquaintances in the committees. Domination by the UP leaders (especially by the Chairperson) and lack of awareness of committee members tend to limit the effectiveness of WC and SSC in holding UP Chairpersons and Ward Councilors accountable (SoG, 2018).

Avoidance by citizens:

Social accountability mechanisms have been introduced at the UP level to embed the practice of active citizen participation in the decision-making process. But when citizens find out that their presence in the WS or OBS has no output or their demands are not met up then they lose their interest to participate. Moreover, for the fear of missing daily income, the majority of the community members avoid participating in the deliberative spaces. Besides lack of enough awareness among the citizenry is another factor behind their avoidance. There was no awareness-building program for general people to improve their access to the WS and OBS. Actually, people have no or minimum expectations from the UP (Chowdhury, 2016). In many cases citizens are found to be unaware of their memberships and even when they are aware,

they are found to be ignorant of the committees' functions and their roles. These members remain inactive, rendering the committees dysfunctional as SA forums and allowing UP leaders to easily control and manipulate these forums (SoG, 2018). Besides a lack of technical knowledge citizens cannot keep the proper role to supervise the development activities as the members of SSC.

Irregularities in committee formation:

UP functionaries are not aware of the importance of including conscious citizens in the WC, SSC, and SC or do not opt to select non-partisan conscious citizens. The formation processes of these deliberative committees (WC and SSC) tend to deviate from the formal guidelines. Though these committees should be formed at WS with the consent of WS participants (general citizens), in most cases, UP Chairpersons and members themselves select their 'loyal supporters/followers' (relatives of the UP Chairperson, politically influential individuals, and people from UP Chairperson's and members' inner circle) as members of these committees (SoG, 2018). These irregularities in committee formation support UP functionaries to safeguard their own interests. As a result, deliberative committees WC, SSC, and SC remain inactive or do not perform the vested functions to assure transparency as well as participatory budgeting and planning.

Patron-client relationship:

Patron-client relationship as a mutual arrangement for personal gain has become embedded in the administrative and political culture of Bangladesh. Which makes unequal resource distribution and extends privileges to certain community members or groups. From the study of Chowdhury, it has found out that generally UP chairman members invite local elites and political leaders in the Shavas as guests and the Shavas turn to a political oration by leaders where general people do not get the scope to raise questions to UP functionaries (Chowdhury, 2016). The majority of UP functionaries perceive these deliberative forums to strengthen their political capital and patronage network. It is also alleged that ward Members, in their role as chairpersons of the WS, are able to manipulate deliberations and decisions to reflect the mandate of the political party they represent, rather than the real needs and aspirations of the community (Ahmed, 2016). Despite the provision in the UP operational manual majority of committee members in the deliberative committees are selected by their political identity

or financial solvency. These forums considerably resemble the existing political dynamics and patron-client relationships at the local level. Political leaders also use these as strategically useful public gatherings to conduct their political public relations exercises (SoG, 2018).

Irregular meeting:

For the lack of interest, necessary training, and awareness among the committee members meetings are not held regularly. As in most cases, UP Chairpersons and members themselves select their 'loyal supporters/followers' (relatives of the UP Chairperson, politically influential individuals, and people from the UP Chairperson's and members' inner circle) as members of these committees, so they are not interested to arrange committee meeting at all (SoG, 2018). As a result, committees tend to become almost inactive which damages the participatory essence of the social accountability forum.

Absence of involvement of the NGOs:

In early-stage NGOs such as CARE, Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), etc. worked in several areas of the state to train the UP functionaries and to orient them according to the law. Though NGOs' involvement may improve the situation, for lack of funding they are not working to ensure the practice of social accountability anymore. The scenario of committee governance changes substantially in UPs where NGOs work with the committees as a part of citizen members' capacity and awareness building (SoG, 2018). NGOs performed catalyst roles in the planning and budgeting process of some UPs but many UPs lack the involvement of NGO officials. As a result, those UPs do not get potential benefits including training on organizing WS and OBM, forming WC and SSC, social mapping, identifying and developing income sources of UPs, reporting procedure, etc. (Chowdhury, 2016).

Lack of resources and Govt. supervision:

Very often UP functionaries slander the resource constraint for not arranging the Shavas in time. A major disincentive for UP leaders in organizing Shavas and OBSs is the substantial costs associated with these meetings; as the central government does not have any funding allocation for them, the costs fall on the UP leaders (SoG, 2018). But in the case of NGOs' involvement in some areas UP functionaries are capable to arrange the Shavas regularly with funding from NGOs.

Lack of inclusiveness and representativeness:

Though UP Operational Manual 2012 has the provision to keep women representatives in the deliberative committees, there is clause about women's participation in the deliberative spaces. The scenario of the presence of women and poor at WS and OBS is different from region to region. In some cases where there has NGO intervention, several number of women and poor community members remain present at the Shavas. But in the areas without NGO intervention their presence remains lower. Another factor is active participation of poor and women to make the Shavas inclusive and representative. From the study of Chowdhury it has found that in some UPs, although they were informed, 4.55% of females did not attend at WS due to inconvenient meeting time and their hesitation to speak at public meetings, while 6.82% of females did not attend due to their 'Purdah' system and societal norms (Chowdhury, 2016).

Key Recommendations:

The predominant essence of SA is to make the authority accountable to society through citizens' active participation in the decision-making process and empowering citizens to monitor and supervise development works. Local Govt. (Union Parishad) Act, 2009 and the UP Operational Manual, 2012 have the rules to ensure participatory planning, and budgeting and to form WC, SSC, and SC with community members which will be inclusive. But for many reasons existing mechanisms of SA are not working properly. Summarized recommendations for the possible way forward are mentioned below:

- The political willingness of the Govt. should have to be increased to make the UP abide by the Local Govt. (Union Parishad) Act, 2009, and UP Operational Manual 2012.
- GO-NGO collaboration should be introduced to train the UP functionaries and the committee members.
- Awareness-building programs should be installed to make the citizens aware of their roles to ensure social accountability and paying revenue.
- Transparency and inclusiveness in Shava's arrangement and committee formation should be ensured.

- UP functionaries should be motivated to ensure their accountability to society and to lessen institutional corruption.
- Equal resource distribution and inclusive as well as participatory development planning and budgeting should have to be ensured.

Conclusion:

In a country where the majority of the citizens are not enough literate to be aware of their rights to take part in decision-making and to make the authority accountable, ensuring social accountability is a tough job there. Moreover, in Bangladesh, an asymmetric social stratification is prevailing based on income, religion, education, political views, etc. (Chowdhury, 2015). Besides, political leadership is not serious about the participatory and democratic local government system in Bangladesh (Sarker, 2003). In these circumstances, deliberative spaces and forums would be an inclusive platform for the citizens to raise their demands and to take part in the decision-making process at the rural local governance. By ensuring social accountability it would be possible to establish tangible decentralization by empowering local citizens which would ensure better demand-based service delivery and also more revenue generation. SDG 17.17 has the target to “encourage and promote effective public, public-private, and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships”. From the broader aspect ensuring social accountability would promote civic engagement in rural local governance which would help the Govt. to fulfill the targets of SDG 17.17. So, Govt. should take necessary steps to revive the deliberative forums and spaces to ensure social accountability in rural local governance and to make the network between citizens and local govt. institutions stronger with the views of scholars, practitioners, and development partners.

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