



বাংলাদেশ উন্মুক্ত বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়
BANGLADESH OPEN UNIVERSITY



Journal of
Social Science and Humanities
(JSSH)

Exploring People's Participation in Local Governance: A Case Study of Two Union Parishads in Bangladesh

Dr. Md. Naim Akter Siddique *

Department of Political Science, Jagannath University, Dhaka-1100

Rakiba Sultana Ratna

Department of Political Science, Jagannath University, Dhaka-1100

Abstract

This study aims to explore how people participate in Union Parishads through government initiatives in Kumedpur and Hafizabat, two rural areas in Bangladesh. It also seeks to identify the challenges and barriers that hinder effective people's participation in Union Parishads and propose strategies to overcome them. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data from surveys, interviews, and observations. The results show that there are significant differences and similarities between the two Union Parishads in terms of beneficiary selection and prioritization, committee awareness and functionality, and participation in open budget meetings. The results also suggest that there are various factors and mechanisms that influence the effectiveness and efficiency of people's participation in Union Parishads, such as awareness, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, inclusivity, representativeness, and empowerment. The study concludes by recommending a set of actions to enhance people's participation in Union Parishads, such as strengthening capacity and accountability, promoting inclusive participation, enhancing civil society collaboration, training for local representatives, context-specific development initiatives, youth empowerment, equitable beneficiary listing, committee awareness campaigns, and increased budget allocation. The study contributes to the literature on participatory governance and development, and provides insights and implications for policy and practice in Bangladesh.

Keywords: *Local Government, Union Parishad, People's Participation, Local Elections, Bangladesh.*

Introduction

Local governance is a vital component of democratic development in Bangladesh. It refers to the system of elected local bodies that are responsible for delivering public services and ensuring accountability to the citizens. However, local governance in Bangladesh faces many challenges, such as lack of resources, political interference, corruption, and weak institutional capacity. One of the key issues is the low level of people's participation in local governance, which affects the quality and responsiveness of public service delivery and the empowerment of the marginalized groups. People's participation in local governance can be defined as the active involvement of the citizens in the decision-making, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the local

*Corresponding author: Dr. Md. Naim Akter Siddique, E-mail: naimsiddique@pol.jnu.ac.bd.

Journal homepage: <https://jssh.bou.ac.bd>

development activities. Participation can enhance the transparency, accountability, and effectiveness of local governance, as well as the social inclusion and empowerment of the poor and vulnerable communities. Therefore, it is important to explore the strategies for fostering people's participation in local governance in Bangladesh.

This essay aims to conduct a case study of two Union Parishads (UPs) in Bangladesh, which are the lowest tier of local government units, to examine the factors that influence people's participation in local governance. The two UPs called Kumedpur Union Parishad in PirganjUpazila, and Hafizabat Union Parishad in PanchagarhSadare are selected based on their contrasting levels of participation, as measured by the Citizen Participation Index (CPI), which is a composite indicator of the extent and quality of citizen engagement in local governance. The essay will compare and contrast the two UPs in terms of their socio-economic and political context, institutional arrangements, and participatory mechanisms, and identify the best practices and challenges for enhancing people's participation in local governance. The article will also provide some policy recommendations for improving the participatory local governance in Bangladesh.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To investigate how people participate in Union Parishads through government initiatives in Kumedpur and Hafizabat in Bangladesh.
2. To identify challenges and barriers hindering effective peoples participation in Union Parishads and purpose strategies to overcome them.

Literature Review

The literature review on exploring strategies for fostering people's participation in local governance, with a case study of two union parishads (UPs) in Bangladesh, delves into the significance of people's participation in ensuring democratic and decentralized governance. The review acknowledges the crucial role of UPs, the lowest tier of local government in Bangladesh, in delivering public services and implementing development projects. It highlights the constitutional mandates for UPs to foster people's participation, emphasizing the importance of understanding the challenges and barriers that hinder effective participation.

The challenges identified in the literature review include legal and practical constraints, political and bureaucratic interference, lack of awareness and empowerment among the local community, and inadequate mechanisms for meaningful participation. Legal and practical constraints, such as the lack of proper training, budget, and autonomy, pose obstacles to UPs' effective functioning (Khan, 2011). Political and bureaucratic interference, particularly by members of parliament (MPs) and civil servants, undermines the independence and accountability of UPs (Rahman, 2012). Furthermore, the literature underscores the need for awareness and empowerment among marginalized groups, such as women, youth, and ethnic minorities, who often face discrimination in local governance processes (Mallick, 2017). Ineffective mechanisms, such as standing committees and open budget meetings, contribute to low attendance, poor representation, and weak monitoring.

In response to these challenges, the literature offers several strategies to enhance people's participation in local governance. These include strengthening the legal and institutional framework of UPs, reducing political and bureaucratic interference, raising awareness and empowerment of the local community, and improving mechanisms for meaningful participation. Siddique (1996)

suggests strengthening the legal and institutional framework by providing UPs with adequate resources, authority, and capacity. Rahman (2012) emphasizes the need to reduce interference by ensuring the separation of powers, the rule of law, and accountability of MPs and civil servants. Mallick (2017) highlights the importance of raising awareness and empowering the local community, especially marginalized groups.

Additionally, Ahsan (2010) and Sarker (2011) stress the improvement of mechanisms for meaningful participation, ensuring fairness, inclusiveness, and effectiveness in decision-making and development outcomes. These strategies, drawn from existing literature, serve as a foundation for the case study of two UPs in Bangladesh—Kumedpur and Hafizabat. The review sets the stage for examining the current situation and challenges of people's participation in these UPs, as well as identifying best practices and lessons learned from existing initiatives (Ahsan, 2010; Sarker, 2011).

Several key works contribute to the literature on local governance in Bangladesh. Khan's (2011) "Local Government in Bangladesh: Some Contemporary Issues and Practices" explores legal and practical constraints hindering the realization of UPs' potential (Khan, 2011). Ahmed & Selim's (2012) article on "The Working of Upazila Parishad in Bangladesh" investigates the roles and functions of elected representatives and bureaucrats, highlighting the impact of political interference (Ahmed & Selim, 2012). Siddique's (1996) "Towards Good Governance in Bangladesh" discusses general and personnel issues affecting civil bureaucracy and local government relationships (Siddiqui, 1996). Mallick's (2017) "Local Government: Local Peoples Institution" critiques the structure and services of local government bodies in Bangladesh (Mallick, 2017).

Ahsan's (2012) book on "Local Administration in Bangladesh" focuses on inter-organizational coordination at the local level, emphasizing the importance of clear division of activities and effective communication (Ahsan, 2012). The literature review concludes by recognizing the limited scope of existing studies on strategies for fostering people's participation in local governance, particularly in UPs in Bangladesh. While some secondary literature exists, there is a need for primary research to evaluate the effectiveness of development initiatives and assess the influence of community inputs on decision-making processes in Union Parishads. This sets the stage for the proposed case study, which aims to fill this research gap and provide valuable insights into enhancing people's participation in local governance in Bangladesh.

Theoretical Framework

The research conducted focuses on examining the electoral participation of people in local government in Bangladesh. Within the context of this study, the theoretical framework is centered around the theory of Participation/Electoral Participation. Noteworthy theorists such as David Smith and Horton emphasize the significance of voting as one of several essential tools for electoral participation. Furthermore, these theorists recognize various other forms of participation, including organizing rallies for candidates' supporters, conducting motivational rallies and miking, distributing posters and leaflets, establishing personal connections with voters, and engaging in political party activities. These alternative forms of participation are considered crucial in the theoretical framework (P. Panday & Li, 2014).

In addition to the contributions of David Smith and Horton, theorists Verba, Kim, and Nie provide valuable insights. They regard voting as a formal mode of political participation and expound upon its different aspects, such as candidate voting and engaging in political discussions during election campaigns. These aspects of political participation are relevant to both developed

and developing countries' political systems, thus offering pertinent insights for the present research (Rahman, 2016).

Overall, the theoretical framework of this study draws upon the theory of Participation/Electoral Participation, incorporating the perspectives of David Smith, Horton, Verba, Kim, and Nie. The framework underscores the importance of voting as well as alternative forms of electoral participation, highlighting their relevance to the participation of people in local government elections in Bangladesh (P. Panday & Li, 2014).

Conceptual Clarifications

The concept of people's participation in local government is a multifaceted and pivotal aspect of democratic governance. It underscores the active involvement of citizens in local decision-making processes, emphasizing inclusivity, transparency, and responsiveness to community needs. To gain a deeper understanding of people's participation in local government, this conceptual clarification explores the key dimensions of this concept and draws insights from renowned scholars' works.

a) Defining People's Participation in Local Government

People's participation in local government refers to the active engagement of community members in the decision-making and development processes of their local administrative units, such as Union Parishads in Bangladesh. It entails citizens taking part in activities, discussions, and decision-making related to local governance, policy formulation, and the allocation of resources.

b) The Significance of People's Participation

Scholars and researchers have emphasized the profound significance of people's participation in local government for achieving democratic and sustainable development. Pranab Kumar Panday and Shuvra Chowdhury (2018) in his book "Strengthening Local Governance in Bangladesh", highlights the transformative potential of active community involvement. The inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives ensures that policies and decisions align with the genuine needs and aspirations of the local population (Chowdhury & Panday, 2018).

c) Strategies for Enhancing People's Participation

Understanding the strategies employed to enhance people's participation is essential. Strategies can encompass a range of initiatives and mechanisms designed to encourage citizen engagement at the local government level. These strategies may include the establishment of local committees, community consultations, public hearings, and information dissemination through various channels.

d) People's Participation and Local Development

Empowerment of local communities through people's participation plays a vital role in fostering sustainable development. Siddiqui, in his book on "Towards Good Governance in Bangladesh" (1996), highlights that people's participation is an effective tool for sustainable development. It allows community members to have a direct say in local development plans, resource allocation, and project implementation, contributing to the overall progress of the region.

e) Challenges and Barriers to People's Participation

Despite the acknowledged importance of people's participation, numerous challenges and barriers can impede its effective realization. Common barriers include lack of awareness among citizens, inadequate resources, bureaucratic hurdles, and the absence of mechanisms to facilitate meaningful participation. Scholars such as Sarojini Nayak and Jeevan Nair, in their work 'Empowerment of Rural Communities: Challenges and Solutions' (2005), delve into these barriers and advocate for tailored solutions to overcome them.

f) Local Government Structures and People's Participation

The structure and functioning of local government bodies play a critical role in enabling or constraining people's participation. The nature of decision-making processes, the presence of open forums for dialogue, and the accessibility of local government officials all impact the degree of participation. Studies by Khan in 2011 have explored the relationship between local government structures and people's satisfaction with services, providing insights into the role of effective local governance (Khan, 2011).

Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively explore the strategies for fostering people's participation in local governance, focusing on the Union Parishads of Kumedpur in PirganjUpazila and Hafizabat in PanchagarhSadar, Bangladesh. The research employs both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques, including questionnaires (structured and semi-structured surveys), key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs). Structured and semi-structured surveys are administered to gather quantitative data on citizens' perceptions and experiences of participation in local governance, covering aspects such as awareness of government initiatives, satisfaction with current participation levels, and opinions on potential improvement strategies. Key informant interviews involve chairpersons of the Union Parishads, local elites, and representatives such as UP members and reserved women members, aiming to provide in-depth insights into the strategies employed and challenges faced in fostering people's participation at the local level. Focus group discussions are organized in diverse locations involving local residents, offering a qualitative exploration of community perspectives on current participation strategies and potential improvements.

Relevant secondary literature and documents are gathered for the theoretical foundation of the study through Google Scholar and library searches, encompassing books, journals, editorials, commentaries, newspapers, magazines, and provisions of Bangladeshi local government law. The non-probability purposive sampling method is employed for the survey, ensuring a targeted selection of respondents through door-to-door surveys, and a total of 142 purposively selected samples are interviewed to capture diverse thoughts and opinions on current strategies for promoting people's participation in the two Union Parishads.

Quantitative data is coded and analyzed using statistical software, primarily the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), with advanced statistical tests and models, such as regression analysis and correlation studies, employed to examine relationships between dependent and independent variables. Qualitative insights obtained through interviews and FGDs are analyzed by NVivo software thematically, providing a nuanced understanding of the experiences and perspectives of local residents.

The data collection phase is scheduled for January 2023 to ensure the relevance and timeliness of the information gathered, with interviews, surveys, and on-site observations conducted during this period, capturing real-time dynamics of people's participation in local governance. By combining these methodologies, the study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the strategies for fostering people's participation in the selected Union Parishads, contributing valuable insights into effective approaches for enhancing local governance dynamics

Sampling

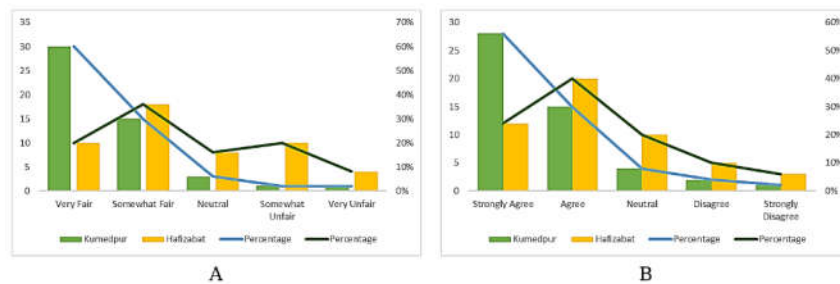
Research Instruments	Respondents	Number of Samples	Sampling Method
Questionnaire Survey	Local Citizens	50 from Kumedpur Union Parishad and 50 from Hafizabat Union Parishad	Purposive Sampling
Key Informant Interviews (KII)	Chairman, Members of Parishads, and Civil Society Representatives	2 Chairman, 10 Members of Parishads, and 10 Civil Society Representatives from both Union Parishads	Purposive Sampling
Focus Group Discussion (FGD)	Public representatives and Government Officials	20 Public representatives and Government Officials from both Union Parishads	Purposive Sampling

This table outlines the research instruments, corresponding respondents, the number of samples, and the sampling method for exploring people's participation in local governance. The inclusion of local citizens in the questionnaire survey aims to gather a broad perspective, while key informant interviews with the Chairman and members of Parishads provide targeted insights. Additionally, the involvement of civil society representatives and a focus group discussion with public representatives and government officials enriches the analysis with diverse viewpoints.

Research Findings

Figure 1

Beneficiary Selection and Prioritization of Kumedpur and Hafizabat Union Parishads



Note.(A) Equity in Beneficiary Selection and Prioritization Processes, (B) Inclusivity in Beneficiary Selection and Prioritization.

Source: Author Illustration

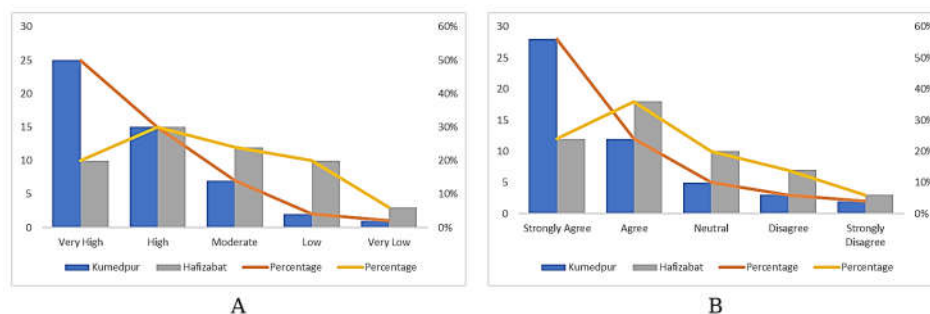
The figures show the percentage of responses for beneficiary selection and prioritization for Kumedpur and Hafizabat Union Parishads. Figure A shows the result the respondents how fair they think the beneficiary selection and prioritization process is. Figure B shows the result the respondents whether they agree or disagree that the beneficiary selection and prioritization process is inclusive and representative.

The data reveals some interesting patterns and differences between the two union parishads. For Figure A, 90% of the respondents in Kumedpur think that the beneficiary selection and prioritization process is fair or somewhat fair, while only 56% in Hafizabat think so. This suggests that the beneficiary selection and prioritization process is more equitable and transparent in Kumedpur than in Hafizabat. For Figure B, 86% of the respondents in both union parishads agree that the beneficiary selection and prioritization process is inclusive and representative, but the proportion of those who strongly agree is 56% in Kumedpur and 24% in Hafizabat. This suggests that the process of selecting and prioritizing beneficiaries is more varied and responsive in Kumedpur compared to Hafizabat.

Figure A shows the majority of the respondents in Kumedpur think that the beneficiary selection and prioritization process is fair, while the majority of the respondents in Hafizabat think that it is either neutral or unfair. This suggests that the beneficiary selection and prioritization process is more equitable and transparent in Kumedpur than in Hafizabat. For Figure B, the majority of the respondents in both union parishads agree that the beneficiary selection and prioritization process is inclusive and representative, but the proportion of those who strongly agree is higher in Kumedpur than in Hafizabat. This indicates that the beneficiary selection and prioritization process is more diverse and responsive in Kumedpur than in Hafizabat.

Figure 2

Committee Awareness and Functionality of Kumedpur and Hafizabat Union Parishads



Source: Author Illustration

Note. (A) Public Awareness of Standing Committee Functions, (B) People Perceptions on Roles and Responsibilities among Standing Committee Members

The figures show the percentage of responses for Committee Awareness and Functionality of Kumedpur and Hafizabat Union Parishads. Figure A shows the respondents how high their awareness level is regarding the functions of the Standing Committee. Figure B shows the

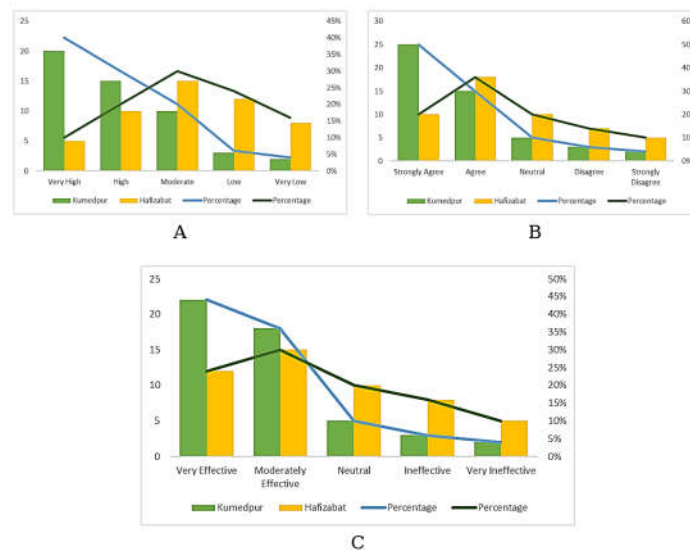
respondents whether they agree or disagree that the Standing Committee members have clear roles and responsibilities.

The information shows interesting differences between the two union parishads. For Public Awareness of Standing Committee Functions, 80% of the respondents in Kumedpur have a high or very high awareness level, compared to only 50% in Hafizabat. This suggests that the Standing Committee functions are more well-known and understood in Kumedpur than in Hafizabat. For People Perceptions on Roles and Responsibilities among Standing Committee Members, 80% of the respondents in both union parishads agree that the Standing Committee members have clear roles and responsibilities, but the proportion of those who strongly agree is 56% in Kumedpur and 24% in Hafizabat. This indicates that the Standing Committee members are more confident and competent in Kumedpur than in Hafizabat.

Therefore, for Public Awareness of Standing Committee Functions, the majority of the respondents in Kumedpur have a high or very high awareness level, while the majority of the respondents in Hafizabat have a moderate or low awareness level. This suggests that the Standing Committee functions are more well-known and understood in Kumedpur than in Hafizabat. For People Perceptions on Roles and Responsibilities among Standing Committee Members, the majority of the respondents in both union parishads agree that the Standing Committee members have clear roles and responsibilities, but the proportion of those who strongly agree is higher in Kumedpur than in Hafizabat. This indicates that the Standing Committee members are more confident and competent in Kumedpur than in Hafizabat.

Figure 3

Participation in Open Budget Meetings of Kumedpur and Hafizabat Union Parishads



Source: Author illustration

Note. (A) People's Participation in Open Budget Meetings, (B) The Inclusivity and Representativeness of Open Budget Meetings and (C) The Impact of Open Budget Meetings on Local Governance Participation.

The figures show the percentage of responses for People's Participation in Open Budget Meetings of Kumedpur and Hafizabat Union Parishads. Figure A shows the respondents how high their participation level is in the Open Budget meetings. Figure B shows the respondents whether they agree or disagree that the Open Budget meetings are inclusive and representative. Figure C shows the respondents how effective they think the Open Budget meetings are in fostering people's participation in local governance.

The data reveals some interesting patterns between the two union parishads. For People's Participation in Open Budget Meetings, 70% of the respondents in Kumedpur have a high or very high participation level, compared to only 30% in Hafizabat. This suggests that the Open Budget meetings are more accessible and attractive in Kumedpur than in Hafizabat. For The Inclusivity and Representativeness of Open Budget Meetings, 80% of the respondents in both union parishads agree that the Open Budget meetings are inclusive and representative, but the proportion of those who strongly agree is 50% in Kumedpur and 20% in Hafizabat. This indicates that the Open Budget meetings are more diverse and responsive in Kumedpur than in Hafizabat. For The Impact of Open Budget Meetings on Local Governance Participation, 80% of the respondents in both union parishads think that the Open Budget meetings are effective in fostering people's participation in local governance, but the proportion of those who think that they are very effective is 44% in Kumedpur and 24% in Hafizabat. This implies that the Open Budget meetings are more conducive and impactful in Kumedpur than in Hafizabat.

Key Challenges and Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the significance of addressing critical challenges to enhance people's participation in local governance, specifically within the framework of union parishads. Analyzing the experiences of Kumedpur Union Parishad in PirganjUpazila and Hafizabat Union Parishad in PanchagarhSadar has revealed a series of key challenges and corresponding recommendations.

One pivotal challenge revolves around the performance and responsiveness of union parishad members and officials. However, a strategic recommendation emerges: regular training, monitoring, and evaluation can significantly enhance their capacity and accountability, laying a foundation for improved governance. Another pressing issue is the low participation of women, youth, and marginalized groups in local governance. To address this, affirmative action, awareness raising, and empowerment initiatives are recommended. These measures can act as catalysts for active involvement, fostering a more inclusive and representative local governance framework.

Furthermore, the study indicates a limited role and collaboration of civil society and other actors in local governance. Therefore, a recommended approach involves strengthening collaboration through networking, advocacy, and partnership. This strategy aims to create coalitions and alliances among various stakeholders, augmenting their collective impact on local governance issues. Lack of capacity and awareness among local representatives, such as union parishad members, poses another challenge. Consequently, comprehensive training programs focusing on governance principles, participatory methods, and gender sensitivity are proposed. This targeted training can equip local representatives with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively carry out their roles.

The study also identifies a challenge related to the relevance and responsiveness of development initiatives. To overcome this hurdle, a recommendation is made to tailor initiatives to local contexts,

with an emphasis on creating income-generating opportunities at the union level. This approach ensures sustained community involvement and relevance in the development process.

A critical concern is the limited engagement and representation of the youth in local governance. To address this, the study recommends empowering the youth through training and financial support, encouraging their active participation. This empowerment can bring fresh perspectives to local governance, leveraging the dynamism of the largest segment of the population. Inclusivity and fairness in beneficiary selection emerge as challenges in local governance. Therefore, a key recommendation is to prioritize and improve beneficiary listing, ensuring representation and transparency. This can contribute to a more equitable distribution of development projects and services at the union level.

Lack of awareness about the importance of Standing Committees is identified as another challenge. To address this, the study recommends conducting awareness campaigns. These campaigns can educate community members on the functions and benefits of the Standing Committee, fostering greater community participation in union parishad activities. Financial constraints of Union Parishads constitute an additional challenge. To tackle this, the study recommends increasing and improving budget allocations. Mobilizing local resources and revenues, such as taxes and fees, is suggested to supplement and diversify funding sources for union parishads.

Finally, implementing these recommendations is crucial for bridging existing gaps in people's participation, contributing to improved governance and development outcomes in Kumedpur and Hafizabat Union Parishads. However, it is acknowledged that these recommendations are not exhaustive, and ongoing research and evaluation are essential to monitor their effectiveness, sustainability, and address emerging challenges in fostering people's participation in local governance in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore people's participation in local governance in Bangladesh, using a case study method and comparing two union parishads, namely Kumedpur Union Parishad in Pirganj Upazila and Hafizabat Union Parishad in Panchagarh Sadar. The study adopted a qualitative and in-depth approach, using multiple sources of data, such as documents, interviews, observations, and focus group discussions. The study also developed a conceptual framework for analyzing people's participation in local governance, based on the relevant literature and theories.

The study identifies some challenges and recommends strategies to enhance people's participation in local governance, focusing on Kumedpur and Hafizabat Union Parishads. Challenges include the performance of union parishad members, low participation of women and marginalized groups, limited collaboration with civil society, and financial constraints. Recommendations include regular training for capacity building, affirmative action for inclusive participation, and networking for enhanced collaboration. Tailoring development initiatives to local contexts, providing comprehensive training for local representatives, empowering youth, and ensuring transparency in beneficiary selection are also crucial. Implementing these recommendations can bridge existing gaps in people's participation, contributing to improved governance and development outcomes. Ongoing research is advised to monitor effectiveness and address emerging challenges in fostering local governance participation in Bangladesh.

The study has some limitations that should be acknowledged and addressed in future research. First, the study focused on only two union parishads, which may not be representative to the whole

country or other local governance settings. Therefore, future research should expand the scope and sample of the case studies, and compare and contrast the experiences and outcomes of different union parishads and other local governance units. Second, the study relied mainly on qualitative and subjective data, which may be influenced by the biases and perspectives of the researchers and the participants. Therefore, future research should complement the qualitative data with quantitative and objective data, such as surveys, indicators, and statistics, to measure and verify the level, quality, and impact of people's participation in local governance. Third, the study did not examine the long-term and sustainable effects of the strategies for fostering people's participation in local governance, which may vary over time and change with the external and internal factors. Therefore, future research should conduct longitudinal and follow-up studies, to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness and sustainability of the strategies, and to identify and address the potential and emerging issues and challenges in fostering people's participation in local governance.

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