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Decentralisation and Democratisation in Local Government Focusing Key Development Programs in Bangladesh

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Abstract:

The local government system is considered to be the main regulator of good governance in a country. Although the local government system in Bangladesh is very old, it has tiny achievements in terms of its effectiveness, decentralisation of power, democratic practices, and public participation. After the country's independence, almost all the governments have come up with the innovation of different levels of local government structures was just nomenclature. They never allowed the local people to enjoy autonomy by their elected representatives in the way directed by the constitution. On the other hand, various local and international development partners have been implementing various programs to strengthen the local government system in Bangladesh, decentralise it and ensure public engagement in local government. Through which some positive elements have been added to the issue of autonomy and participation of the people in the local government system; however, it is significantly minor than required. This research paper seeks to understand the process of democratisation and decentralisation in the local government system of Bangladesh by fieldwork-based research knowledge and review various initiatives taken for the development of the local government system. Besides, drawing on literature and the observations and research on Union Parishad (the lowest tier of local government in Bangladesh), the interrelationship between local government elections and power structure has also been analysed in this article. Ultimately, this paper argues that the process of decentralisation and strengthening of the local government system in Bangladesh through development interventions. Though the interventions of development programs could have been mammoth achievements in the path of democratisation and decentralisation, the party politicisation has made massive impediments to attain the targets.

Key Words:

Local government, power structure, governance, decentralisation, democratisation.

1. Introduction

Bangladesh is a long-standing local government history dating back to 1885 when the British colonial authority established the Local Self-Government Act. The local government was created in the colonial period for the convenience of the administration and not because of public desire. In most reforms to local governments that took place during the Pakistan period, the legacy of colonialism prevailed. Following Bangladesh's independence in 1971, the constitution of Bangladesh established a local government. However, the constitution does not mandate either the number of components or the tasks of any local government. Many modifications have been made in the terminology of local government systems and structures; however, none have been implemented since independence is carefully preserved to solidify local government, decentralisation, and governance in Bangladesh.

There is growing acceptance that local government structures and practices need to be strengthened to improve services, accountability and transparency. For the last almost three decades, the focus has also been paid to enhancing local governance in Bangladesh with the aid of development partners as a reaction to a crisis of governance at both national and local levels, notably in the field of service delivery. Policies have continued to advocate for a decentralised, efficient, accountable and responsive local government structure. The main questions of local government in Bangladesh had to be tackled: strengthening of local authorities, irregular elections and no elections in the established ranks of local authorities, ambiguity in power shifts, bureaucratic and national policymakers over local government institutions, participating and empowering underprivileged groups and gender equity.

This research paper is an attempt to explain local government in relation to decentralisation, democratisation and development processes. One of the main objectives of this article is to review how various development initiatives have played a role in the decentralisation and democratisation of local government in the context of Bangladesh. In almost every developed country, the participation of local people in the governance structure has been reconsidered since the 1990s what is called The Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). Basically, the context of such thinking was created for the purpose of consolidating democracy to the grassroots. The government and various international organisations have come forward to implement this new way of thinking through local government. The Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) was started with the aim of enabling the citizens to participate in the formulation and implementation of government programs. This study will mainly review the various initiatives implemented and ongoing in Bangladesh as part of the reform program. It will also shed light on how the reform process is contributing to the decentralisation of power and the consolidation of democratic practices in the local government system.

2. Formation of Local Government: An Historical overview

Decentralisation is considered as a process rather than an end-state or a specific form of government (Ahmed, 1993). Bangladesh has opened its own experimentation in the area of decentralisation and people participation just immediately after the independence in 1971. Although many policy documents were developed (GoB, 2005), there has been a limited past commitment to establishing an effective and sustainable local government. Decentralisation is the process of strengthening the local level of power. It also means transferring administrative, planning, and decision-making responsibilities from the central government to local authorities

(Conyers, 1986). Decentralisation process of power from the centre to the local authorities long before the British arrived in the subcontinent. Democratisation, on the other hand, is the participation of the people in the decision-making process. In other words, democratisation in the local government system means the engagement of the general people, civil society representatives, women and development workers in the election of local government representatives and decision making (Hossain, *The Institutional Landscape for Urban Service Delivery*, 2010). Some features of local administration and the existence of local administrative positions have existed since ancient times. Of which, the post of village head position followed in the lineage was significant. During the Gupta period, village councils were formed to administer the village and connect with the central government. The responsibility of the village councils was to collect revenue for the central government, maintain law and order and develop trade and commerce at the local level. During the Pala and Sen periods, the type of local government of the Gupta period was somewhat followed. In addition, new posts were created by expanding the activities of local units. They enlarged the administration by developing the local level public administration system and creating special divisions based on different fields. During the Sultanate and Mughal rule, medieval Bengal was decentralised to expand the kingdom, suppress rebellion, collect revenue, etc (Siddiq & Habib, 2017).

During British rule, the colonial authorities created a loyal zamindar class through the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793. Under the new zamindari system, local rural organisations in Bengal were decentralised. Its purpose was to introduce a robust financial plan for the central government and establish a basis for political support. To this end, several institutions were created, and laws were introduced to protect the colonial interests. The Chaukidari Panchayat Act of 1870, the Local Self Government Act 1885 and the Bengal Village Self Government Act 1919 are noteworthy. In 1882, Lord Ripon abolished the British-designated panchayat system in the local power structure and laid the foundations for a completely new method of local government. He reformed the panchayat system and established 'local boards' at the local level to elect representatives through elections. Where the spontaneous participation of the local people through elections began to determine the representation from them, the local power structure gets institutionalized through this. It is said that the influence of the local government structure introduced by Lord Ripon still exists in Bangladesh normatively.

From the beginning of the Pakistan period, the local government was functioning under British influence. In 1959, Ayub Khan issued the Basic Democracy Order. The first election was held in 1970 under this order. The lowest level of this structure was the Union. Nine basic democrats in each of the Union were elected by popular vote. Besides, four people were nominated. The Chairman was elected by nine elected and four nominated representatives. Money and muscle power became important in the Basic Democratic elections at the village and union level, especially in the election of the Chairman. Those who had more money and influence were elected. Apart from this, political involvement with the Muslim League was also an important aspect.

During the Awami League government of 1972-75, under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first government of independent Bangladesh, the name of Union Parishad was changed to Union Panchayat and Thana Parishad to Thana Development Committee. The government also appointed some committees in different places to run the newly declared panchayats. Article 59 of the first constitution of independent Bangladesh in 1972 provided for

the formation of local government in administrative units consisting of elected representatives of the respective areas. With the introduction of the one-party Bakshal in 1975, it was decided to upgrade the subdivision to a district and delegate local power to the governor directly appointed by the President. However, before the implementation of this system, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was tragically killed. During the rule of Ziaur Rahman, some decentralisation initiatives became visible. At this time, a three-tier local government system was formulated. In 1976, local government was introduced at the three levels of Union, Thana and Zila Parishad, which were very similar to Ayub Khan's basic democratic system. Besides, a new system called Swanirvar Gram Sarkar was introduced in 1980.

Hussein Muhammad Ershad's regime can be considered the most important period for the local government system and administrative decentralisation in Bangladesh. Soon after taking power, he formed the Administrative Reform and Restructuring Committee. Later, on the recommendation of this committee, he upgraded 460 police stations to Upazilas. Decentralisation seems to be the most effective and fruitful at this time in order to facilitate administrative work at the Upazila level and accelerate local development.

Among the successive governments of Ershad, Khaleda Zia's government (1991-96) abolished the Upazila system. The Sheikh Hasina government (1996-2001) formed the Local Government Commission. The commission recommended a four-tier local government as well as a separate local government structure for the hilly areas. These recommendations have been praised by local government experts, development agencies and civil society but have not been implemented. During Khaleda Zia's second term (2001-2006), no effective steps were seen in the decentralisation of local government.

In 2007, the caretaker government formed a seven-member committee to make local government institutions robust, effective and dynamic. In November of the same year, the committee handed over to the government some important recommendations, including increased human resources, income, and efficiency in local government. 40% representation of women, abolition of the village government system and absence of MPs in local government were also important recommendations. However, the caretaker government failed to implement the recommendations. At present, the local government system is being run in the light of the amended law of Union and Upazila (UPZ) Parishad 2009. As the effectiveness and importance of the Upazila Parishad were discussed by local government experts and civil society at different times, the Upazila system was re-introduced in 2009 through an amended law.

Local Government (LG) reform after the Awami League (AL) government assumed power following the 29-12-2009 elections, were ominous. The Local Government Commission was abolished, and all ordinances relating to local government were abrogated. However, new acts were enacted regarding Union Parishads (UPs) and Upazillas within a month of the new government coming into power. Other hopeful signs were the conduct of UPZ elections as promised in the manifesto of the AL party, which were held in January 2009 after a gap of 18 years. However, till very recently, no substantive powers were given to the UPZ chairpersons. Moreover, the government has also recently issued executive orders that provide members of parliament the powers of deciding upon a list of works within their constituencies, which the Local government engineering department will take up. It is seen as a setback to the empowerment of LGs.

The Local Government (Union Parishad) Act 2009 has introduced some significant issues, including ward meetings, standing committees, participatory budgeting and development planning. The Local Government (Upazila Parishad) Act 2009 and Amendment 2011 made it possible for the Upazila Parishad to come into force. But mistrust, suspicion, suspicion and apprehension were created among various stakeholders such as elected representatives, Upazila Nirbahi Officers and local MPs. Although the Upazila Parishad elections were held at this time after a long 18 years, the Upazila Parishad still fails to deliver the real benefits of decentralisation due to a lack of coordination among the stakeholders.

At present, there are five levels of local government in Bangladesh. There are five levels - Union Parishad, Upazila Parishad, Zila Parishad, Municipality and City Corporation. In 2015 amended laws introducing local government election using the partisan political logo. It poses the shifting of non-partisan local government to partisan local government. (Only chairman and vice-chairman in Upazila pParishad and only chairman in Union parishad, it was decided to amend the five laws and elect the local government as the party symbol/ political party logo. Besides, the law also mentions the transfer of power to the administrator if no election held after completing the term. Since 2016, elections have been held at all local government levels in Bangladesh under the party symbol. Through this, local government has been politicised or factionalised. As a result, local government is dominated by the state, the central government and the ruling political party. The agenda of decentralisation is lost. The trend of decentralisation of local government is deteriorating in the long run.

3. The Constitutional Framework of Local Government in Bangladesh

According to Article 59 in the People's Republic of Bangladesh's Constitution, every local government level will have locally elected representatives (GOB, 1972). It's worth noting that in Bangladesh, local government units were never set up at all levels of government simultaneously. In order to create these institutions, the parliament must enact legislation. These local government acts define the role, functions, relationship with the central government (bureaucracy and elected Members of Parliament), election procedures, financing, including resource generation procedures, and other relevant components of the local government system in Bangladesh. There are also many complex orders and circulars from various ministries and agencies that guide and regulate the functions of the local bodies, which often contradict the original legal framework's spirit." (Khan, 2000).

Acts, ordinances and circulars pertaining to local government reveal that the legal framework is control-oriented and does not ensure or facilitate the process of devolution; and some rules are outdated and incompatible with the spirit of decentralisation/devolution (Hussion, 2003). There are many serious lacking's in LG units because they were created in the Colonial Era to ensure government control through regulation to collect revenue efficiently. In the local government system, as a tool for implementing such governance strategies, this became apparent as well. It took Pakistan a long time to adopt a democratic government. The LG system gave a usurper of state power political legitimacy during this period. As a matter of course, these regimes had no intention of handing over power to the LG units.

After Bangladesh's independence, the same thing happened as military rule dominated the country for a large portion of its history. Similarly, politicians at the national level were/are

reluctant to delegate authority to LG units for fear of losing control over those institutions. Even despite the political rhetoric in favour of decentralisation, national-level politicians prefer centralization. A colonial-era bureaucracy is also unaccustomed to working under democratic leadership, both at the national and local levels of government (Khan & Hossain, 2001).

4. Human resource system in Local Governments

Elected representatives and appointed officials run the local government in Bangladesh. Members of the Upazila, municipalities and Union Parishads are elected by direct vote, including the Upazila Chairman, Mayor, Commissioners and Vice-President. Zila Parishad's Executive Officer is a District Commissioner (or Chief Civil Administrator), while Zila Members of Parliament (MPs) are available as Advisers to the Parishad. Local government employees hired directly by their local governments, such as the Thana/Upazila Parishad and urban local governments (Pourashavas and City Corporation), work alongside central government employees delegated by their local governments. In addition, Union Parishads appoint personnel from their locals.

As part of the new system, there would be a full-time secretary, nine Mahalladars (neighbourhood workers), and one Caretaker in Union Parishad. Their tax collector, the assistant secretary, is also a certified public accountant. The existing Chairman of the Union Parishad has all executive power. The desired new system represents all central government administrative and development agencies through the Thana/Upazila Parishad. However, they must be employed by the Thana/Upazila Parishad (except for the police and judiciary). The Parishad employs one secretary, one assistant secretary, one accountant, one security guard and a sweeper. In addition to the Chairman, three other people are working for him. All officials must answer to the Chairman. The Chairman has the final say. In the case of Zila Parishad, the secretary is a government official deputed (seconded). Each of the other officials, such as the administrative officers, is employed by the Zila Parishad. The Deputy Commissioners of the Hill Tract District Local Government Parishads serve as secretaries.

When it comes to Pourashavas and City Corporation's staffing, it's up to the government. Each of the City Corporations and several Pourashavas has a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) from the central civil service. As a result, all other officials, whether they are directly employed by Pourashavas or the City Corporation, or are seconded, report directly to the CEO in such a situation. This person assists the Pourashava or Corporation's Chairman or Mayor in administering the Pourashava or Corporation records are under his care, and he has magisterial authority.

Except for the Union Parishads, every local government body has seconded officials from cadre service. They follow the Local Council Service Rules. Pourashavas and Corporations both have service rules that govern how they should be treated. The Special Affairs Division of the Prime Minister's Secretariat supervises Hill District Local Government Parishad workers. The central personnel agency for the administration of Local Council Services, Pourashava Services, and Corporation Services is the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives.

In accordance with a set procedure, the local governments hire the general staff. There are no officers assigned to local government by the central government or the state. The government deputizes some civil servants and technical personnel from its central pool of civil

servants and technical personnel (engineers, doctors, etc.). Officially, such employees or officials are prohibited from belonging to or supporting a political party or political ideologies of any kind. Right now, there is no Local Government Service Cadre. Any local government body can hire class IV (lowest level) employees to meet urgent needs.

5. People's participation in Local governance

Almost immediately after Bangladesh gained independence in 1971, the country's constitution was drafted and approved, emphasizing that local government must have a representative character (Article 59). In addition, the people must be directly involved in forming local bodies and managing such bodies. The forms of people's participation shown in the pieces of literature (Ehsan, 2021; Alam, Alam, & Hoque, 2017; Islam, Bhuiyan, & Salam, 2019; Chowdhury, 2018) can be stated as follows:

- ✓ Elections and casting votes: The best opportunity of people's participation is made through votes during the election of local bodies. But unfortunately, elections were not held at regular intervals.
- ✓ People's participation through Standing Committees (SC): It is mandatory for the Local government bodies, particularly for the municipalities and Union Parishads, to form standing committees. The core objective of forming Standing committees at the Local government bodies is to make them more active and efficient. A range of studies has shown that most of the Standing Committees, particularly the Union Parishads SC, there are 13 SCs, were not formed and not functioning. The major reasons behind not forming and non-functioning of Union Parishad SC shown by the studies (Hossain, 2008) (Haque, 2009) are as follows :
 - Meetings of Standing Committees are not arranged regularly because the conception of SCs is not clear to its members.
 - The standing committees are formed officially but are not active because of the lack of sincerity of the chairmen.
 - Most of the Chairmen and Members are more interested in the Project Implementation Committee (PIC) or other project committees
 - and functions of SC's are not defined properly

People's participation through development partners' initiatives: A number of Development partners engaged in strengthening local governance, most of them are working at the union parishad level, works for enhancing people's participation and local democracy. For example, SDC's SHARIQUE program, in partnership CARE Bangladesh, works for strengthening people's participation engaging citizens in local planning and decision-making processes and playing a more significant role in local development processes).

However, People's participation in local bodies has not yet gained conformity in all local government tiers. For example, the newly elected Upazila Parishads (sub-district level tier of rural local government) are not functioning well. The Upazila Parishad (repealed act re-enactment and amendment) Act 2009 has made a number of ambiguous clauses that curtailed the power of Upazila Parishad (UPZ). Formation of the standing committees is not mandatory here. Hence, the people's participation is absent in this tier that hinders the people's voice and overall development.

6. Decentralisation In Bangladesh: In Pursuit Of A New Reality

There has been an explosion of interest in decentralisation of local government in Bangladesh in recent years, with many different actors getting involved (Hossain & Habib, 2018). Political considerations and a desire to improve local accountability and service delivery have driven Bangladesh's decentralisation efforts. Many new ideas have emerged in recent years about how to improve service delivery through community engagement, contracting out, various forms of delegation, and privatisation; how to involve communities and municipalities in development planning and budget management; and how to build partnerships with NGOs, the private sector, and communities in a wide range of service provision. The introduction of Union Parishad (UP) Block Grants in 2004 were one of the major steps that opened up a strategic opportunity to strengthen local governance and created space for the multiple actors. The background of the introduction of UP block grant was deeply rooted in the fiscal reality. UP's fiscal resources comprise government grants, the share of central tax, various central programme expenditures, and, own revenues. While resources passing through UPs were clearly substantial, they constituted neither a fiscal certainty for the UPs nor were UPs uniformly engaged in managing the various categories of these resources. The problems of fiscal uncertainty were mainly found in two-fold: (1) major variation in the amounts of resources available to individual UPs; (2) Variation was also pronounced in the case of own revenue generation by individual UPs.

Compounding those problems of fiscal uncertainty was the fact that on many of the expenditures, it was often a case of paper participation by UPs or participation only of individual members rather than the institution as such. This was particularly same in the cases of various development expenditures as well as the utilisation of the ADP allocation.

The most prominent of the fiscal transfers was the Annual Development Grant from Annual Development Budget of the government. It is distributed based on certain formula. Projects are selected, designed and funds are disbursed in a meeting of the Upazila Coordination Committee under the de facto supervision of the Upazila Nirbahi Officer(UNO) i.e. the main administrative functionary at the Upazila level. The ADP grant to UPs typically suffered from the following weaknesses: Grants did not take into account the fiscal gap, expenditure needs and revenue-raising capacity of individual UPs; Total grants suffered from uncertainty and adhocism; A good portion of the grant was vulnerable to political influence; MPs interference in the project selection; Very little participation of the people; No apparent link between local resource mobilisation and grant amount.

Considering the weaknesses mentioned above, GOB in the fiscal year 2004-05 provided a part of the annual development grant directly to UPs. The amount was uniformly distributed to all the UPs. Rules were framed for the utilisation of this block grant (ADPBG). The government's decision was influenced by the experiences gained from a UNDP-supported pilot project, namely 'the Sirajganj Local Government Development Fund Project.'

Studies done following the introduction of UP block grant have revealed the major constraints exist in the process of decentralisation in Bangladesh. In reality, decentralisation to enhance Local Governance in Bangladesh has always been top-down approach. Demand side for decentralisation has hardly been there – except few donors supported NGOs and Civil Society raised the issue. Paradoxically, despite high Constitutional commitment, decentralisation never got a place in their priority reform agenda (Aminuzzaman, 2008).

7. Current Key Projects, Efforts And Experiences In Strengthening Local Governments And Governance

The Bangladesh government and development partners have undertaken and implemented a number of projects regarding strengthening local governance, decentralisation, and rural development in different parts of Bangladesh. Current pieces of literature say that there are over 30 listed projects and programmes supporting local governance. This also includes the initiatives funded by GOB alone. Development Partners/donors report a total of 153 projects supporting the local government and governance including the urban areas. The Leading Development partners /donors support local governance are: WB, ADB, JAICA, UNCDF, DFID, EU, Danish and Swiss SDC. The key features of current key projects on local governance, decentralisation and rural development are given below:

7.1. LGSP (Gov- multi-donors (WB, Denmark, EU, UNCDF and UNDP)

Decentralisation is one of the recent policy focuses of Govt of Bangladesh. LGSP is one such project, which provides fiscal transfers to Union Parishads (UPs) and mounting a campaign to strengthen the process of decentralisation by strengthening the Union Parishad (UP). The 'Local Governance Support Project (LGSP)' was implemented from June 2006 to June 2011. The total amount of budget was (US\$M) 208 (GOB: 78, WB: 111.5, UN/EC: 16). The project was for Union Parishads only and implemented by the Local Government Division (LGD).

The project's main objectives were: Increase financial resources available to UPs equitably; Improve public expenditure systems through participatory approaches; Enhance mechanisms for local accountability through institutional innovations; Develop and implement a coherent national strategy for local govt. capacity development and strengthen the policy analyses and research capacities at the LG division.

The main activities of this project included the fiscal transfers to eligible LGs for local service delivery and incentives; direct mobilisation of communities; support capacity development in the implementation of the block grant; support to conduct regular evaluations; support to a Social Protection Pilot and Learning & Innovation activities.

7.2. Assessment Of Overall Importance On Decentralisation

The programmes are formulated based on the experience of the GoB in administering direct block grant allocations to UPs in 2004 and onwards. From July 2006 onwards, LGSP introduced larger fiscal transfers to UPs through predictable block grants and capacity strengthening. The deficits at the Institutional Profile of UP that exist are - UPs lack credibility and image; institutional and management capacity of the UPs is very poor; a significant portion (85%) of UP officials (Chairman, Members and Secretary) have not received any training; Female members of UP are still playing just a "symbolic" and "ornamental" role; UPs have a very weak financial and resource base; Planning of UP projects is not participatory and fails to address the dire needs of the poor and disadvantaged; There is no scope for effective community participation in planning process; and some of the assigned functions are far beyond the legal, managerial and financial capacity of the UP.

Recent studies has explored some critical areas of capacity building of the UPs that need to be addressed are - Skills related to community mobilisation and social mapping; Revenue mobilisation and collection (fiscal regulations, taxes, duties, user fees, revenue collection); Budget management (financial reports and audit, Procurement procedures) ,Project design and management (participative planning; project implementation and supervision); Inclusive strategic planning; Institutional innovation for service delivery, Monitoring and reporting system etc.

Though LGSP has sizeable constrains, it has made a significant contribution to increasing the "visibility" of UPs and has contributed in the decision making process at the local level.).

8. Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP)

DFID and GoB supported the Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP) in the year from 2005 to 2013. It was implemented by partners from governmental agencies, the private sector, NGOs, CBOs. The main objective of this program was to improve livelihood security for poor and vulnerable women, men and children living within the riverine areas of 5 districts of the northern Jamuna River. It has multi-level interventions like communities, CBOs, UP, Governmental staff, Upazila.

The key activities of CLP are mobilisation of community and group formation. CBOs at village or ward level (still not defined) mobilised by NGOs, Union development committee (UP members, community people, NGO Workers), CLP committee at Upazila level specifically for coordinating CLP activities. For capacity building, project orientation, training were key parts. Funds for Union are given directly to UP, Upazila initiative funds are given to Upazila to finance projects implemented jointly by several UPs. Responsive funds are given to finance projects involving the whole char area (infrastructure development). Assistance for development planning, activation of standing committees through capacity building, ensuring participation and transparency, coordination with governmental staff, and focus on improving female-related service providing are the key areas emphasized as project activities.

The project's local governance component has not been determined yet, and many elements are still to be defined. The main actors of implementation of this component will be governmental institutions and local governments. The project was implemented in 166 UPs in char area of Brahmaputra river on 5 Districts: Kurigram, Gaibandha, Jamalpur, Bogra and Sirajganj

9. The Learning and Innovation Component (LIC) of the UNDP, UNCDF and EU

From Sept 2007 to Dec 2011, the Learning and Innovation Component (LIC) of the UNDP, UNCDF and EU project was implemented. The total budget was US\$ 18.12 million. The key objectives of LIC mirror the SLGDFP are to apply the lessons on innovative ways in planning, financing and managing services to the LGSP and policy development. The project was funded by the UNDP, UNCDF, EC and Danida as an integral part of the LGSP.

10. WSP's Horizontal Learning Project

WSP is a global programme managed by the World Bank and implemented by WSP teams in different regions and countries. While the programme operates primarily in the Water and

Sanitation Sphere, it also works closely with the Ministry for Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives on policy matters, capacity building and empowerment. Recently, the WSP has spearheaded horizontal learning initiatives amongst the LGs. This process comprises facilitating of learning networks amongst the key WATSAN actors (local government bodies, community representatives, NGOs, projects), with a view to detect, document and disseminate best practices. The SDC supports the WSP with a contribution of 2.05 million Swiss Francs (approx. 12.3 Crore Taka) over a period of 4 years (January 2009-December 2012). In recent times, the WSP has made rapid strides in its horizontal learning (HL) approach. Ground level work has resulted in a progressive increase in the number of UPs engaged, good practices documented and disseminated. The WSP has commenced the use of multimedia and the web for its dissemination activities. Recent activities that have been warmly received by all stakeholders have been dissemination workshops where UPs have showcased their best practices to influential audiences of NG representatives, NGOs, DPs and other stakeholders. Clearly we saw that most DPs regarded the WSP, in spite of its small size as a group of innovators and experimenters, capable of out of the box thinking, with a proven record in grassroots level development work.

11. The JICA's Link Model

The JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) is running the second phase of the Participatory Rural Development Project in 15 UPs at present. The approach is a long standing one, commencing with work in two projects in 2000. The USP of the JICA's approach is the 'Link Model', which is a framework for coordination, through which various departmental and LG institutions such as the Union Coordination Committee Meeting (UCCM), Union Development Officer (UDO), and Gram Committee (GC) are linked together in participatory a forum, which ensures better coordination between them. The JICA's approach has been to work independently, keep things small and sustain high quality of outputs. Their stated niche is to develop islands of excellence, while leaving the upscaling and mainstreaming to other DPs.

12. SDC's Sharique

SHARIQUE denotes 'partner' in Bangla, operates in 130 Union Parishads and 20 Upazila Parishads in Rajshahi and Sunamganj Districts, and aims to ensure pro-poor inclusive local governance through a variety of strategies. UPs and UPZPs are encouraged to consider existing communities' initiatives regarding local development and manage public affairs more transparently, being accountable to the citizens, especially the poor, women and marginalised. The marginalized voice is strengthened by mobilising and informing communities on local governance through awareness campaigns, workshops, and meetings and encouraging them to participate in the LG development activities actively. One of the key strategies has been to encourage local revenue collections, based on the valid premise that nothing can incentivize the community more than tax payments, to take an interest in the activities of the LGs. Due to Sharique's efforts, tax-collection performance has increased considerably in the Unions of Rajshahi, and Sunamganj. Other successes have been to increase the involvement of citizens in UP, annual plan and budget development and making the UPs more responsive to the demands of the extreme poor, ethnic minorities and women. As many as 100 UPs have been documented as having increased their spending targeted to the poorest and women from 0.85% to 14.5%.

The third success has been the improved responsiveness of departmental service providers in agriculture, livestock, fisheries, primary health, family planning, education, though assured presence in the project areas.

13. Challenges In Strengthening Local Government And Governance

The constitutional provisions dealing with decentralisation are brief and merely mandates that there shall be elected local governments in every administrative unit. That parliament may by law entrust powers and functions to them. No framework of law exists here that outlines in greater detail about the institutional structure of elected local governments, the role of higher levels of government, the tax and revenue assignment system, and the regulatory structure that is to deal with issues of fiscal decentralisation, elections, audit and the accountability of LGs. Though decentralisation is a priority agenda to the government, political front and civil society advocates for decentralisation, there is no 'Decentralisation Policy' yet in Bangladesh. A 'Decentralisation Policy' is a prerequisite to move ahead with the decentralisation agenda in Bangladesh. On the other hand, what to Decentralise? These conceptual outcomes are yet to be cleared, like what level and cost and benefit of decentralisation.

There is no integrated system in local government in Bangladesh. The laws made for the Local government bodies for the different tiers in different times are fragmented in Nature. There have been noticed massive inconsistencies in the LG laws and as a result instead of parallelism there has been divergence in LG laws that upshot lack of coordination among the local government tiers and clash each other in terms of budget, jurisdiction of power, controlling authority etc. There need a mother Law/a LG framework laws that could integrate the Local government system reforming the inconsistencies of laws made for the different tiers of LG. Paradoxically in spite of high Constitutional commitment, decentralisation never got place in high priority reform agenda. Some form of in-built resistance from the political parties and Members of parliament. Decentralisation is one of the recent policy focuses of Govt of Bangladesh (LGSP is one of such policies). LGSP is mounting a campaign to strengthen the process of decentralisation by strengthening the Union Parishad (UP) but it has primarily focused on Finance. Bangladesh experiences of decentralisation as a Local Capacity building scheme grossly missed 'Functions' (with assigned authority) and Functionaries (with authority, competence and skill). One of the most important and serious challenge of recent decentralisation move in Bangladesh is capacity building in shortest possible time with quality and minimum cost. Grass-root institutions building is one of strategic incrementalism towards decentralisation in Bangladesh. The major challenges on Grass-root institutions building are - building organisations of the poor; building leadership pools; building capacities of local governments; and promoting a linkage approach to institutional strategy.

14. Discussion and Conclusion

Decentralisation is the opposite of centralisation. Decentralisation is the process of bringing services and governance to the doorsteps of the people. In modern times, decentralisation refers to the distribution of power, authority, administrative activities, service delivery, and related matters without confining them to a single-centre or process. In particular, decentralisation continues to speed up the work, immediate solution of local problems, reduce the scope of central work, develop leadership at the local level, etc. Many have spoken and written about

decentralisation in Bangladesh since independence from an administrative and academic position. Although there is some decentralisation of administrative structures in isolation, it is insignificant in the local government. The issue of decentralisation has been one of the most talked-about issues in local government research and academic discussion since the late '80s and early '90s. At this time, various international development partners were involved in the decentralisation, democratisation and strengthening of local government in Bangladesh.

Local-level development is deeply related to decentralisation. For example, LGED's development activities in rural areas, including roads and paved roads, are part of decentralisation. Even the various service activities of various private service organisations or NGOs are part of decentralisation. The idea of decentralisation in local government came to the fore to ensure primary and mass education, healthcare, women empowerment, etc.

Decentralisation is not a system or a permanent arrangement, and it is a process. This process makes it easier for the public to get services, women's participation in decision-making, and leadership development. In Bangladesh, the history of decentralisation is mainly related to the history of political change. Various NGOs were involved in conducting, evaluating and monitoring various activities of the local government. Through this, good governance, transparency, and accountability could be ensured to a greater extent. Over the past decade, NGOs have been separated from the direct involvement with local government somewhat. In the local government units, where various local or foreign NGOs are still working directly, there is more capacity and transparency.

In the post-independence period, many cooperatives were formed, focusing on the use of technology in agriculture at the local level. These cooperative leaders were the ones who held important positions in the local government. The sphere of influence of the state power was influential in the formation of these cooperative leaders (Westergaard, 1980). As agricultural technology, including irrigation equipment, became privately owned, the impact of the state power-affected cooperative-based power structure became dreamy. At this point, candidates in local government elections began to play down his political identity. This trend was influential in local government in the 80s and 90s. In other words, the empowerment of the people was visible in the local government really in this time (Westergaard & Hossain, 2005). The influence of NGOs in local government increased towards the end of the last century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Civil society has played a positive role in local government on various issues like strengthening local government, increasing efficiency, and people's participation (Lewis & Hossain, 2008). Since 2010, this trend has started to change drastically. Bi-party political polarisation was evident at this time in the local government elections. The participation and influence of civil society and the general public in local government has almost disappeared (Lewis & Hossain, 2017).

Since 2015, those elected using the political party logo are now in charge at various local government levels. All these local people's representatives belong to the party more than the people. From the time they were nominated until they won the election, they relied on the party. Many local government offices have now been converted into de facto party offices. In one of our studies, we have seen, based on the information obtained from Sunamganj, Rajshahi, Khulna and Tangail districts and our on-the-spot observation, the power of party leaders and workers are much more than the elected members in local government offices. Many members do not even get a chair to sit on the council, where the council chairman is surrounded by party

people willingly or unwillingly. The value and importance of a political party leader at the ward level are much more to the Chairman than to an elected council member.

From the history of LG reform over the last fifty years, it is clear that there has not been a consistent and sustained approach towards the establishment and empowerment of LGs. From the late fifties onwards, LG empowerment has proceeded in fits and starts, with accelerated reform alternating with periods of indifference, stagnation and setbacks to the idea of LG empowerment. There has been a consistent propensity for military regimes to constitute and strengthen LGs; which has often been interpreted as a strategic approach to secure democratic legitimacy and civilianise military rule. Military leaders might have also perceived LGs to provide the safety valve for democratic aspirations in the absence of elected legislatures. Therefore, it is not surprising that successive elected governments, particularly those that followed a phase of military rule, have swiftly dismantled and disempowered elected local governments, often seeing them as harbouring supporters of the old regime. The phenomenon of periods of inaction (broadly coinciding with the terms of elected governments) alternating with relatively more brisk reforms (broadly corresponding with periods of Military rule) has resulted in an LG institutional design that is replete with lingering inconsistencies contradictory elements.

The constitutional provisions dealing with decentralisation are brief and merely mandates that there shall be elected local governments in every administrative unit and the parliament may by law entrust powers and functions to them. No framework law exists that outlines the institutional structure of elected local governments in greater detail, the role of higher levels of government, the tax and revenue assignment system, and the regulatory structure to deal with fiscal decentralisation, elections, audit and accountability of LGs. Throughout the history of Bangladesh, there have been several commissions and committees appointed by the government of the time to make recommendations on LG reform. However, none of these are considered to have the status of representing a national consensus.

Since independence, political parties have at various times made electoral promises on the agenda of decentralisation of local government. The decentralisation program included the independence of local government, development at the rural level, the functioning of village courts, local level justice, arbitration and settlement, ensuring healthcare, and various services to the people. Instead, local government is being used as a means to consolidate central power by electing party symbols.

The paper finds a massive constraint with the legal framework of Local government and governance with regard to decentralisation. Though decentralisation is a priority agenda to the government, political front and civil society advocates, there is no 'Decentralisation Policy' yet in Bangladesh. In point of the fact that decentralisation to enhance Local Governance in Bangladesh has always been a top-down approach. The demand-side for decentralisation has hardly been there – except few donors supported NGOs and the Civil Society raised the issue. The major challenges on Grass-root institutions building are – forming organisations of the poor, creating leadership pools, improving capacities of local governments, and promoting a linkage approach to institutional strategy. The development programs in Bangladesh has supported promoting local participatory governance, local development, and improving the effectiveness of local governmental bodies. They in Bangladesh reconfirms the need to

facilitate decentralisation and devolution of power to local government bodies engaging the government, non-government and civil society actors.

15. References

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