



Enhancing Community Participation at Local Development Projects in Bangladesh: Experience from Union Parishad Governance Project

Dr. Esmat Ara, Professor
Dr. Md. Assraf Seddiky, Professor
Abdul Basit, MSS Student
Ruba Khanam, MSS Student

Department of Public Administration, Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Sylhet-Bangladesh

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Abstract

The study aimed to develop an approach for effective community participation in local development projects. Researchers conducted a field study in Sunamgonj district, one of the most vulnerable areas in Bangladesh, and collected information from Union Parishads (UP) chairpersons and members, secretaries, committee members, and local beneficiaries through interviews, and FGDs using purposive sampling and analyzed them employing thematic analysis method. Study findings revealed that although UP is considered as a close-knit community-based organization in terms of the nature of development work and geographic location, yet inclusive decentralization and democratic environment have not been established at the local level institutions for enhancing a meaningful community participation at local level development projects due to outsider interferences, nepotism, lack of knowledge and information, top-down bureaucratic decisions, gender discrimination, and corruption. It is believed that the model of meaningful decentralized participation system would help to mobilize the comprehensive local development process.

Keywords: Enhancement, community participation, local development projects, UPGP, Bangladesh

1. Background of the Study

In recent development discourse, the focus has turned to how community participation can be harnessed properly, given its importance as a key strategy for ensuring sustainable local development programs in both developed and developing countries (Wasilwa & Wasilwa, 2015). Community participation has been likened to the heart that circulates lifeblood when it comes to community participation (Waweru, 2015). Since decentralization and community participation are integral to achieving local development priorities (González Rivas, 2014), more emphasis should be placed on the need for increased proactive steps. This view is widely held among development scholars and practitioners who are constantly pleading for active community participation in development projects, considering the immense importance of ensuring sustainable grassroots development (Inkoom, 2011) as well as a democratic environment for the key stakeholders of the projects (Mohammad, 2010). Indeed, it has become a global agitation and movement with the recognition of the role of community participation in the development process and the implications of the comprehensive and participatory principles of equality, awareness, empowerment, and development (Davids, 2012). Development projects often have the potential to disrupt established cultural and belief systems, thus constituting a threat to local and internal cultures (Mbaiwa, 2005). These fears and possible damages can be counteracted by deploying community involvement in development projects to bring about positive social change without imposing external cultural influence on society (Wodajo, Yiadom, & Asfaw, 2014). Community involvement in project planning and management tends to project success, as it enhances the desired outcomes and increases sustainability (Chhetri, 2013). In terms of meeting key performance indicators and project milestones, government officials, development practitioners, and donor agencies agree that local government plays a central role in participatory local development practices (Vadeveloo & Singaravelloo, 2013). In modern development, thinking participation has enraptured the pivotal point, and participation is now generally advocated and reported as a key arrangement and approach in development (Chambers, 1994). Community participation has proven to be a burning issue that continues to attract opinions from both developed and developing countries. Despite the richness and quality of the debate around the subject, there is no unity of thought about its structure.

In ancient Greece, community participation was limited to several customary activities, such as paying taxes and levies, voting in elections, and defending the state (Mohammad, 2010).

However, the scope and practice of community participation have recently outgrown civic duties or communal activities aimed at self-preservation. Community participation is now considered a significant strategy for making local-level development projects more accountable, citizen-centric, and sustainable (Asaduzzaman, 2011). The role of the government in community participation has evolved. The prime functions of the governments and other concerned agencies are now to ensure community engagement in local development projects by introducing participatory and decentralized systems considering inclusive and sustainable outcomes (ibid). The benefits of reorientation and policy shift in community engagement and participation are immense. Community participation in local development projects acts as a watchdog and prolongs the possibilities of impeccable selection, implementation, and meticulous follow-up of the project for imperishable results (Mutie, 2022). Participation also makes the community more aware and enthusiastic about the needs and priorities of local development, which were absent before the citizen-oriented participatory approach was initiated in Bangladesh (Kassen, 2021). Samah and Aref (2009) keenly observed that community involvement in development functions not only implies the engagement of individuals or groups in planning, implementing, and monitoring the procedures of development projects, but also that they are the active agents to fulfill their collective needs and demands by overcoming the common challenges of development. One such measure is ensuring tangible beneficiary involvement in every phase of the local development project cycle for the purpose of cognizing development and achieving a worthwhile project (Jacob & Bernard, 2013). If successful project implementation, viable follow-ups, and qualitative outcomes are the goals, community participation must be a major part of the planning process. Well-implemented, it engenders good governance and local rural development in both developed and developing countries. It must be noted that good governance is an entry point for effective people's participation at the local level, with community members being more forthcoming when they believe in the government's plans and policies. In summary, community participation ensures the sustainability of projects, better decision-making, a democratic environment, effective services for the local community, mobilization of local resources, and empowerment of the community (WHO, 2002).

This study is innovative, adding value for further research that contributes to new knowledge about the measures of promoting meaningful participation of beneficiary communities in local development endeavors. It

is believed that the findings of this study will serve as a guide for future researchers, academics, donors, development workers, and practitioners willing to conduct a study on this issue from unique angles and call for action from policymakers regarding the enhancement of community participation in local development initiatives. As a close-knit community-based organization, local governments can help build a resilient community through participatory practices within all of their strategies and functions. Hence, this study's findings will inform policy recommendations regarding effective participatory development processes, strategies, and actions to boost national development.

2. Problem statement

Although participatory development practices are gaining special importance in national rural development policy (Olum, 2014), decentralized local government systems have not yet been institutionalized in Bangladesh, and they are still far from achieving the expected level of peoples' participation for different reasons (Panday, 2011). Decentralization and peoples' participation in Bangladesh acquired exceptional preference in military regimes through the formation of several reform commissions and committees (Elias Sarker, 2006) , but the prime objective of the military government was to perpetuate their power by creating a new political channel from the central to the local level (Asaduzzaman, 2008). As a result, only the strong economic and political power holders enjoyed some benefits from decentralized local government (Rigon, 2014), and the poor women who constituted almost 49% of the total population (Khatun, 2003) and the disadvantaged section of society were deprived of participation in the local development projects, except for electing local level representatives (Waheduzzaman & As-Saber, 2015). Although Union Parishad is responsible for implementing local-level development projects, and local-level development mostly depends on the functions of this local self-institution, the objectives of this decentralized local government unit have not been achieved, and poor villagers still live in vulnerable situations due to a lack of active participation in local development projects (Mohammad, 2010). This set of people is isolated from community participation (Chowdhury & Panday, 2018).The Constitution of Bangladesh recognizes the rights of citizens to meaningful channels for direct involvement in the creation and operation of local governments (Panday, 2019). However, there is a wide discrepancy between the existing provisions of the Constitution and the real picture of community participation in local development programs.

Considering the contextualized problems, the government of Bangladesh enacted the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act 2009 to ensure meaningful citizen engagement in local development programs by

creating new avenues such as Ward Sava, open budget meetings, right to information, and citizen charters (Ahmed, 2011). International development partners, including NGOs, have been undertaking various projects along with the Bangladeshi government's efforts to create a participatory local government system. Based on the success of Local Government Support Project-2, implemented by the Local Government Division of Bangladesh in collaboration with the WB, UNDP, UNCDF, and DANIDA, Union Parishad Governance Projects (UPGP)¹ initiated the strengthening of democratic accountability and local governance at the union parishad level. The UPGP operated in 571 Union Parishad of seven selective districts out of more than 5000 Union Parishad of Bangladesh. Hence, this study aimed to assess the effectiveness of the UPGP in community participation. It also attempts to develop an approach for meaningful community participation in local development projects in Bangladesh.

3. Nature and status of community participation at local development projects: a theoretical overview

Community participation in public business is integral to securing the tenable accomplishment of development policies, but in many developing countries, due to bureaucratic predominance and ill cooperation between government and people, community participation in a voluminous termination of local development projects remained only a myth (Mohammad, 2010). There is a discrepancy between the actual meaning of participation and the reality. Everyone in the community cannot be involved in the participatory development process (Cornwall, 2008). Moreover, the structure of participation is based on local power relations and gender; therefore, women are neglected in the expression of their voices (Mosse, 2001). Poor people in rural communities have few opportunities to benefit from development programs (Mansuri & Rao, 2012). The common feature of participation is that the local elite and dominant males benefit from it, and males are empowered rather than disadvantaged and women. In the participatory approach, the term empowerment is therefore in 'Foucauldian terms of subjections' (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). It is unclear to all who are empowered individuals or communities, women, and poor or socially excluded people (Cleaver, 2001). The patron-client relationship in the social influences in the negotiation process increases the conflict of group interest, providing false information to serve the interests of each other (Ansoms, 2013). Often local community participation in complex technological projects represent a potential threat to lives, health, security, and prosperity of the community people (Sips, Craps, & Dewulf, 2013). Empirical evidence

¹ UPGP-Funded by UNDP, UNCDF, DANIDA and EU.

suggests that community participation is not always desirable.

The outcomes of participatory development programs will be more sustainable through community participation if it is only possible to make the community understand its actual meaning, perspectives, objectives, and overall circumstances (Khwaja, 2004). In many developing countries, participatory practices and culture, such as meaningful democratic elections, citizen access to information and local functionaries, decentralized decisions, and freedom of local representatives, have not yet been developed (Taniguchi & Hossain, 2007). In Tanzania, the central and local management systems are very weak in combating corruption; therefore, the massive corruption in all sectors undermines the community participation process in local development projects (Estomih Muro & Namusonge, 2017). A key theme in development discourse has always been the role and extent of the involvement of women in community participation. The existence of entrenched discrimination in most communities has served as a barrier to women's effective participation. Instead, the local elite, mostly composed of men, have always been the recipients of any such benefits dispensed. In Ghana, most women and girls are influenced by older male members (Ackatia-Armah, Addy, Ghosh, & Dubé, 2016). Furthermore, the traditional socio-cultural system and family practices are also barriers to women's participation (van der Hoeven, Kruger, & Greeff, 2012). In Nepal, women and girls play an important role in rural development but are mostly unpaid and unrecognized, even facing continuous social barriers and discrimination in rural development programs (Khanal, 2015). Women face systematic violence at the hands of men and society, and they have little decision-making power in social, economic, political, and other developmental arenas (Montesanti & Thurston, 2015). In most developing countries, women cannot go out even cross the limit determined their male partners (Ahmmed, Ahmmed, & Singh, 2007). In Bangladesh, the unequal distribution of power based on gender makes women subordinate in all aspects of life, and they are the victims of subordination by society, family, and the state (Islam & Biswas, 2014). Control over property rights determines the range of participation in all stages of a development project. Women are more likely to live in extreme poverty, illiteracy, and landlessness (Ram, Strohschein, & Gaur, 2014).

Consequently, they suffer the most negative effects of birth discrimination, which prevents them from accessing all opportunities and advantages in the family and community. Land is primarily held by men because of inheritance rules, societal structures, customs, and prejudices. The struggle for existence is mostly fought by women, who are the poorest of the poor (Ebenstein, 2010). From Africa to Asia, it appears that a consistent line has been drawn that keeps women out of effective participation. The line has

been drawn with illiteracy, poverty, domestic violence, lopsided inheritance laws, and community customs as the active tools.

4. Research methodology

In this study, the philosophy of the social constructivist paradigm was employed to determine the details of community participation in local development projects. A qualitative research approach was used to explore the participants' experiences, attitudes, and interactions regarding community participation at the local level to address this study's aim and objectives. In the field of social sciences, the overall picture and situation can be better understood by applying constructivism, which aims to discover the details of the situation and the reality behind it (Wahyuni, 2012). As a social construct, the nature of community participation should be investigated to explain social phenomena. Resaerchers conducted a field study in Sunamgonj, the most hazard-prone district in Bangladesh (Figure 1). Sunamganj district has 11 upazillas or subdistricts, including Sunamgonj Sadar, Derai, Chtatak, Jamalgonj, Dharmapasha, Modhanagor, Jagannathpur, Tahirpur, Sulla, Doarabazar, and Bishamvo. With ethnic groups from nearby Indian states, including Manipuri, Khasia, Garo, and Hajong, the Sunamganj district has a rich historical and cultural legacy. Khasia and Jaintia hilly area of Meghaloya (Indian State) to the north, Habiganj District to the south, Sylhet District to the east, and Netrokona District to the west. The tiers of local government systems face various challenges when providing services to the community. A total of 54 respondents were selected, including the elected union chairman, secretary of the union parishad, president and members of the local development committees, and project beneficiaries (Table-1).

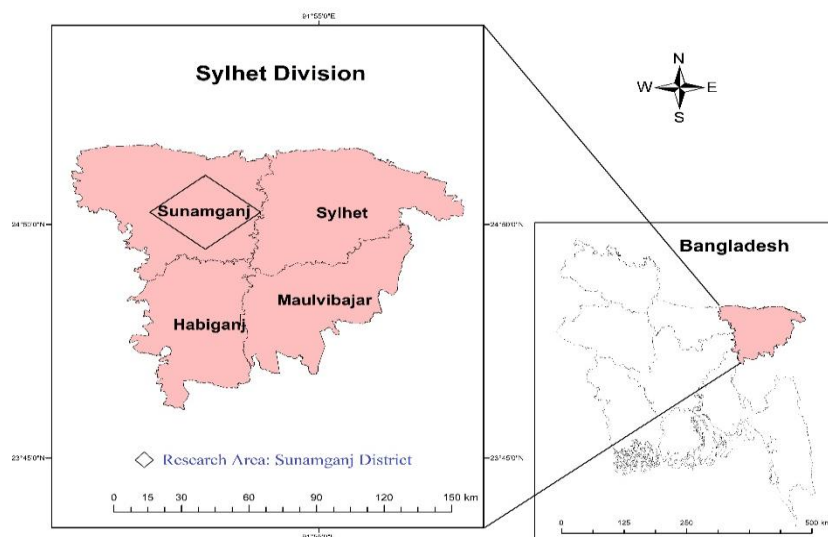


Figure 1. Map of Sunamgonj District. Source: Developed by Authors

This is because the respondents or participants must have the necessary knowledge and experience to answer the research questions (Flick, 2014). Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) rightly noted that, for subjective inquiry, particular numbers are not suggested, but they advocate considering the sample sizes of past studies with comparable plans in which saturation came to and employed a figure within the array of such sample sizes. Hence, the saturation point of view determines the sample size for this study. Researchers have used purposive (non-probability) sampling because purposive sampling should be applied in unique cases. The logic of using Purposeful sampling is used to select information-rich cases from which one can learn a lot aligned with research objectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Neuman, 2014). Based on these principles, the researcher applied purposive sampling to select specific respondents. To achieve a logical answer to the research questions, the researchers applied methodological triangulation of the qualitative approach, including interviews, document studies, and (Focused Group Discussions)FGDs.

Table 1. Number of participants of the study

Types of participants	Nature of participants	Number
Elected chairman	UP chairman	07
Secretary	Government official	08
Chairman	Presidents of development committees from union	13
Members	Members of development committee at union	16
Beneficiaries (FGDs 2*5)	Outside the committee(beneficiaries)	10
Total	-	54

Source: Authors, based on field data

Interviews are the most commonly used strategy for developing research (Willis, 2006). As Abejirinde et al. (2018) and Nilsen et al. (2018) stated, when obtaining detailed information from qualitative study participants, they should be selected based on their knowledge and experience of the particular issue to be investigated. Two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with beneficiary communities (each containing a maximum of six) outside the development committee. FGDs increase the possibility of framing a dynamic and synergic approach, as there remains much flexibility and opportunity for respondents to react to the responses of others. Researchers collected relevant documents from the Union Parishad (project plan, evaluation report, and annual progress report) to compare the document information and field information obtained from the participants.

4.1 Data analysis

In qualitative research, the data analysis proceeds throughout the data accumulation process. The researchers used a thematic analysis approach for this study because the thematic analysis method for qualitative research is more adaptable and frequently used in the case of a wide range of research objectives and topics as well as with the lack of quantitative analysis lacks (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Even though the majority of qualitative data analysis is inductive, enabling meaning (themes) to emerge from the data, as opposed to the hypothesis-centered deductive method utilized in quantitative analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018), the data analysis was performed by applying the inductive and deductive approach because the inductive approach is generally used for small samples and the findings cannot be generalized (Owi, 2020). Furthermore, inductive analysis is often data-driven, emphasizing the discovery of patterns and themes from collected data (Patton, 2002). Deductive analysis is concept- or theory-driven and drawn from the literature to link broader themes and interpret findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). To analyze the data from this qualitative study, the researchers followed the steps outlined by (Creswell, 2009). Creswell outlined six stages of qualitative data analysis (Figure 2).

Researchers have applied two-cycle coding, structural coding, and provisional coding. Provisional or selective coding is theory-driven, whereas structural coding, also known as open coding, is derived from the data (Seddiky, Giggins, & Gajendran, 2021). To categorize the various notions, researchers employed first-cycle coding (open coding), which made it easier for them to move forward with their research. The second cycle (selective) of coding was used to choose and incorporate categories of organized data that led to theories. It then developed the case's narrative at a higher degree of abstraction based on the perspectives, which is called pattern coding (Seddiky, Giggins, & Gajendran, 2020).

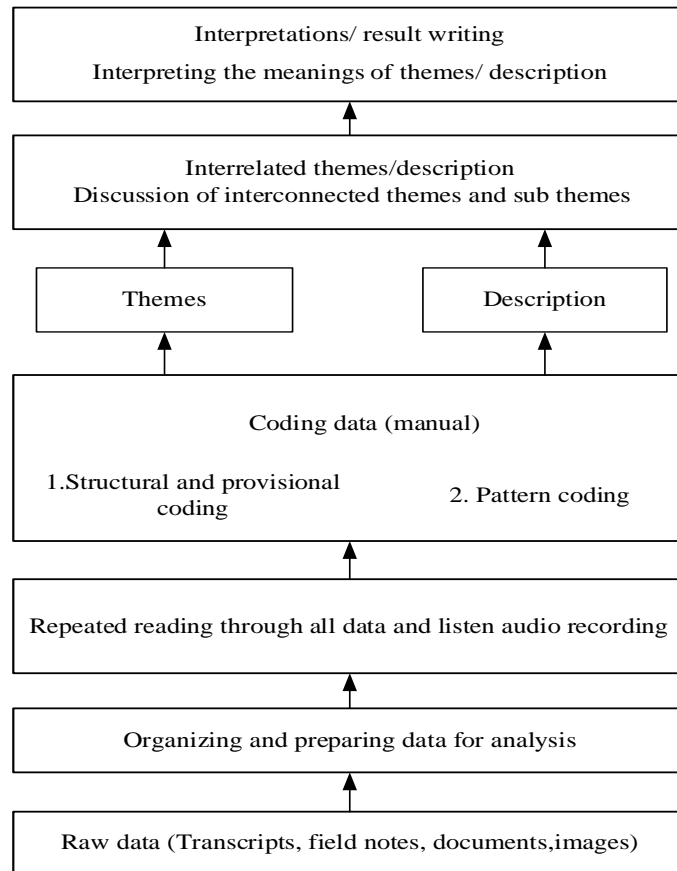


Figure 2: Data analysis process. Source: Creswell& Creswell, 2013.

Pattern coding assisted the researcher by providing crucial information for interpreting the findings of the study. Finally, they have been interrelated and interpreted the meanings of themes accordingly. Using google scholar and scopus as key resources, this study carefully identified and reviewed articles, books, book chapters, and conference papers as secondary sources. To ease and avoid duplication of references, the end note citation manager was used in this study.

4.2 *Ethical consideration*

The researchers provided informed consent to describe the objectives and effects of this study before conducting interviews with respondents. To protect the confidentiality of each respondent's personal information and contribution to the study, the researchers maintained anonymity and de-identified responses for each participant. The researchers rigorously adhered to data sharing and access regulations, maintaining the hard copy of the material in a locked cabinet and the soft copy in protected Google Drive. At

any time until the period of publication, respondents had the ability to remove, delete, or even withdraw their name from the research.

5. Findings and Discussion

Sustainable local-level development is possible if the local government system can ensure meaningful community participation in the various development activities of the local area. Open codes, selective codes, and emerging themes generated from the study findings are listed in (Table 2).

Table 2. Process of open coding, selective coding and emerging themes

Selective coding	Open coding	Emerging themes
Scope of Community participation	Raising community awareness	Although the space of community participation has been increased the meaningful community engagement has yet to establish.
	Committee formation	
	Selection and implementations of projects	
	Monitoring and Evaluation	
	Budgetary activities	
Nature of women’s participation	Increased women’s involvement	There is a far discrepancy between form and reality regarding gender inclusiveness in participating local development projects
	Unaware of women’s roles	
	Discremination in decison	
	Participation only in name	
Barriers to participation	Absolute power of chairman	Lot of challenges hinder the effective community participation in local development projects.
	Technological inadequacies	
	Lack of training	
	Political influence	
	Lack of transparency	

Source: Author, based on the filed data

In the following section, researchers discussed the emerging theories regarding the current nature and status of community participation in local development projects based on the experience of the UPGP.

5.1. *Although the space of comunity participation has been increased the meningful community engagement has yet to establish*

UPGP always emphasizes the involvement of community people from all sections of society. These local-level projects have increased the scope of community participation at different levels of local development initiatives, such as the formation, selection, and implementation of local development projects and monitoring and budgetory functions. These initiatives have also geared up community awareness regarding their roles and responsibilities in development projects. Local people know the best

about their problems; therefore, the implementation of projects based on their suggestions will result in long-term and positive impacts on rural-local development. As Ahmed (2011) stated, project cycle coordination and help are essential within and around union parishad officials, community people, and government officials engaged in different sectors to perform local development functions. Many committees and sub-committees have been formed at the union level consisting of elected UP members, civil society members such as freedom fighters, teachers, social workers, and women to operate union parishad governance projects effectively. Before the formation of different committees, the UP authority publicized the meeting date and place through miking, leaflet distribution, and verbal communication, and encouraged community members to participate in the committee formation procedure. One participant stated,

“Earlier, we didn't know what happened in the Union Parishad, but now, in addition to miking, we also get invitation letter from the up authority at homes before the formation of various committees.”

Mainly, these committees are more visible at the union level, such as the Ward Sava committee, scheme implementation committee, and scheme supervision committee. These committees have been formed to integrate opinions in the community for the success of projects. They are responsible for encapsulating the collective opinions of the community and regarding the implementation procedure and the benefits of the respective development projects. However, most community members do not know the structure and function of these committees. One participant noted that:

“Community people were not aware of the UPGP. Everything was controlled under the supervision of the UP chairman and secretary. Sometimes, the UP members even did not know about many things of the UPGP projects. Those who are very close to the chairman were only aware of the project activities, the rest of the members signed only when necessary”.

In addition, there was a wide gap between the UP Act 2009 and existing committee systems yet to be institutionalized to run local development activities smoothly with the participation of the local community. The performance of the standing committee was poor in this regard. Different types of development projects were proposed in the ward shava (meeting) of each ward of the union parishad. Although this meeting is supposed to be held in the presence of people living in a particular ward, most of the people did not attend due to a lack of information. The names of the committee members for planning and implementing local projects were also proposed in this meeting. However, the final project selection and

committee members were determined in the coordination meeting of the Union Parishad, where there was no scope for participation of the general public.

Even common people did not know who are the members of which project and how they were selected. One of the participants noted:

“I did not initially know that I was a member of any committee, I did not even attend any of the committee meetings. One day when I went to the Union Parishad for a need, the chairman told me that as a teacher, I have been placed in a committee”.

In addition, projects board, the steering committee, policy and capacity development team, technical assistance team, monitoring, and evaluation team were all formed by bureaucrats and a higher level of government officials (Figure 3). Common people could only participate in open discussion sessions to express their views about project selection and project planning through ward shava held twice a year. The local community can only express their opinion, but they have no right to vote against or in favor of the decision taken by the higher authority. Outsiders' paternalistic roles keep the community aside from development projects (Botes & Van Rensburg, 2000). Moreover, the UPGP observation committee was formed with the Upazila engineer and two nominated members from the district commissioner's office, so the remaining scheme supervision committee members from the community were performed as passive actors in this regard. One participant expressed his bitter experience as follows:

“I have never been called to any meeting as a monitoring member for a road repair project. I was only told to come and see the road works. At the end of the work, the UP chairman only took a signature from me”.

In developing nations, most local development projects fail because of a lack of active community participation and extra intervention by outside authorities (Marzuki, Hay, & James, 2012). Outsiders come without any notice and communicate with the community, and sometimes the professional experts manipulate and dominate in the decisions and other processes instead of providing the opportunity for community participation (Futrell, 2003).

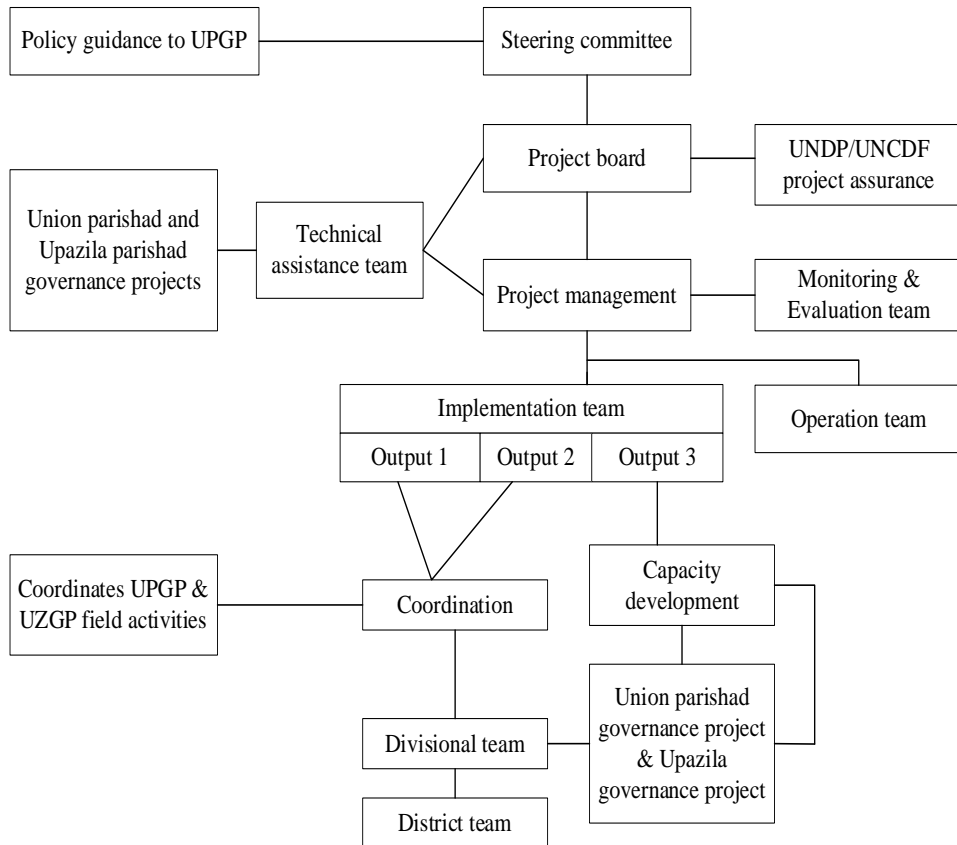


Figure 3: Organization and Management Structure of UPGP projects. Source: UNCDF (2014) Mid-Term evaluation report on UPGP .

In local development projects, all key decisions, that is resources, and allocation, come from the top level of the government, where the communities play a passive role. In the UPGP project, the fund was released to the union parishad through banks based on the recommendations of the Deputy Director of Local Government (DDLG). Sometimes, the governing authority took initiatives and organized meetings with the communities for consultation with a major view of using local and community resources (Waheduzzaman & As-Saber, 2015).

Moreover, the local elite and dominant classes influenced the overall development process. Although it is evident that, in light of the local people's experience of finding solutions to problems in their own areas, community participation is the key point of balanced development in particular regions. However, the motivation of local communities to participate in local development projects is very low because of different types of inconsistencies.

The activities and overall conditions of the projects were monitored and evaluated by the Monitoring and Inspection Wing of the local government division. These activities also include the Management Information System (MIS) officer of the project, who holds the power of information technology. The monitoring and evaluation team, which was formed by pure bureaucrats, also played a dominant role in the project. The evaluation report is open to the Ward Shava meeting for beneficiaries of local development projects. Only the Ward shava is getting prominence as a spot point for community participatory decision-making, and the beneficiary communities can write their comments on the notice board and can give an opinion in the meeting.

5.2 There is a far discrepancy between form and reality regarding gender inclusiveness in participating local development projects

Local government development projects are generally initiated to benefit everybody in rural areas, irrespective of class, caste, gender, or religion (Pless & Appel, 2012). The performance of Union Parishad in Bangladesh began during the colonial period, but the provision of women's representation at this stage was ensured in 1997. Since then, women have been struggling to ensure their rights at the local level, and the UPGP has been a part of this initiative. Although women's participation in different stages of the UPGP project cycle was observed, their decisions were not properly valued. Gender equality is a precondition and indicator of any type of development; however, in most developing countries, women's participation in planning, decision-making, and evaluation is negligible (Alvarez, 2013). According to the rules, two out of seven women members were kept in each committee of the UPGP project, but the opinion of women members was not considered seriously in terms of decision-making or project implementation. One participant narrated her bitter experiences as follows:

“Although there were opportunities for women to participate in some areas including participation in training programs, monitoring the progress of the project, in most cases there was discrimination between men and women in the implementation of the project. Even if ward members like us are made president or secretary of a project, we are not given the opportunity to work independently”.

It was observed that most of the women members of the committee had little idea about the roles and procedures of the projects. After planning everything in advance and completing the work, only signatures were obtained from the members. Echoing with this statement, one participant said:

“There was no meeting with the members of this committee, so I don't know how many male and female members there were and what my job was. A signature has been taken from me as a member of the classroom construction project that the work has been duly completed”.

Currently, four thousand nine WDF (Women Development Forum) have been organized throughout the country, under which five hundred and fifty five female representatives are involved in the Women Development Forum of Union Parishad. Although WDF is somehow effective as a pressure group in promoting gender issues at the local level, it is still immature to operate women's organizations successfully at the local level. Hence, the actual purpose of gender equality is quite unclear and ambiguous. Similarly, Cleaver (2001) stated that the objective of the local development project is unclear to all empowered individuals or communities, women, and poor or socially excluded people. Most women stay at home and are reluctant to engage in outside work. They do not want to get into trouble outside their family. Our country's social system and family traditions are largely responsible for this type of culture. Many local families showed a strict attitude towards women's participation in political activities. In addition, they do not have enough time to work on development projects after doing household chores. One participant said,

“Some committees are headed by women members of our Union Parishad. But beyond that it is difficult to keep them in the committee as ordinary members. Women are not interested in joining these places for family and social reasons, and although they are placed on the committee upon request, they are not available during working hours”.

Apart from those women elected from reserved seats, other women are not interested in participating in local development projects. However, because they come from reserved seats, their decisions are not given much importance in the project cycles. Thus, gender inclusiveness in local governance development projects remains only in the form, but the reality is very different.

5.3 Lot of challenges hinder the effective community participation in local development projects

As Union Parishad became a citizen-oriented rural local government institution, it was mostly influenced by local dominant individuals. They mainly exercise local power under the patronage of the ruling party's central

leader. Most locally elected representatives are not highly educated and are influenced by the upper-level political elite. As Asaduzzaman (2008) stated, political culture and bureaucratic dominance are major challenges to community participation in development interventions in Bangladesh. At the union level, very few people from the community are aware of the development projects, but a majority of them are ignorant about local development initiatives (Kala & Bagri, 2018), and no opportunity is created for their participation in development. Consequently, the participation of people from all sections is not guaranteed in local development projects. One participant stated,

“Poor and helpless people come to us only hoping to get something. Keeping them in the committees of UPGP is risky, therefore educated and respectable persons, who understand the work, are selected as members of these committees”.

Although it is said that the members of the committee are selected in consultation with members of the Union Parishad, in reality, the UPGP project implementation and the selection of committee members for the project depend on the sole decision of the UP Chairman (Akter & Mamun, 2018). Besides, favouritism and corruption also resist meaningful community participation at the local-level development projects. Almost all sanitary latrine installation schemes for indigent families are distributed among the close relatives and confidants of the Chairman and Union Parishad members to achieve sanitation coverage under the UPGP. Mohammad (2010) noted that community participation in the decision-making process of local development projects in Bangladesh is minimal due to nepotism, class bias, and corruption. Irregularities were also observed in the installation of arsenic-free tube wells under the supervision of the council. One participant noted that:

“The chairman used to nominate contractors for the implementation of small projects. It was also found that only one person close to the chairman was appointed as the contractor for three or four projects”.

With the signatures of all members, it was shown that the project was properly implemented, so even if there were irregularities, no one had anything to say. While providing such opportunities, it was not possible to maintain the project quality. Moreover, various obstacles were observed in informing the project committee members about the meetings. Although the Union Parishad was told to inform each member of the committee four to five days before the meeting through mobile phone, most of the members did

not get any information about the meeting and even rarely participated in the meeting. One participant expressed his views as follows:

“As a member of the standing committee on sanitation and sewerage, I was never informed about any meeting. I'm not even interested. I am fine with my profession (imam) in the mosque”.

Although the district and Upazila administrations organize training only for the Union Parishad members once a year, no separate training is provided to the general members of the project as per the UPGP scheme. There was a lack of knowledge and will among union council members to operate and manage project committees effectively. Identical to the previous statement, the common people were unaware of the procedures and benefits of local development projects. As a result, the level of people's participation in various committees that was discussed did not actually become possible. Political influence in the decision-making process discourages community participation in local development projects (Tosun, 2000). In summary, lack of awareness, unequal power structures, political influence, poverty, sense of inferiority, misuse of power, and deprivation are the key constraints of community participation in local development projects.

6. Approach for enhancing a meaningful community participation at local development projects

Community engagement in local development programs is an indispensable tool for ensuring that projects are not just successfully implemented but also hold meaning and provide the host community with a platform for sustainable growth. Although the concept of participation is fraught with inconsistencies related to its true meaning, theories, and contextual application, it does not take away the wide acceptance the concept has gained for its ability to promote transparency, development, good governance, and accountability at the local level. In recent times, the structure of local governments in Bangladesh has witnessed a reorientation with more awareness about how vital community participation and new initiatives to encourage community involvement at the union level have been birthed. Union Parishad represents a shining light among local government units in Bangladesh with its key features of grass-root engagement, high citizen orientation, as well as for its geographical and physical closeness to the rural community. Although there exist some challenges to enhancing community participation in local development endeavors, Union Parishad may provide a template for effective community participation that can be replicated across the country to ensure participatory development at every unit. The consensus from diverse scholars suggests that, without community involvement in local development projects, sustainability and success may be

a tall order for such projects. The opinions and practical experiences of the local community in the UPGP projects towards providing a model for contemporary Bangladesh to enhance the development of community-friendly environments and broaden the scope of opportunities for meaningful citizen participation are stated as follows:

Raising community awareness is the first step in fostering meaningful community engagement in local development projects. For effective community involvement, communities that host local development projects must have the full picture of what it represents, because community involvement is often hindered by a lack of information about the projects. Community members neither trust the intentions of the government nor do they understand the value that the project will provide for the community. Hence, the purpose, period, expected outcomes, cost implications, resources, and benefits should be clearly explained to them. Authorities must also create a precisely defined structure of community involvement. Bureaucratic channels of communication should be dispensed, and community members value the indigenous knowledge and practical experience they bring to the table. Proper implementation of decentralization policies by the government can reduce the citizen-government gap, intensify local development, and increase participation irrespective of gender, religion, and status (Figure 4).

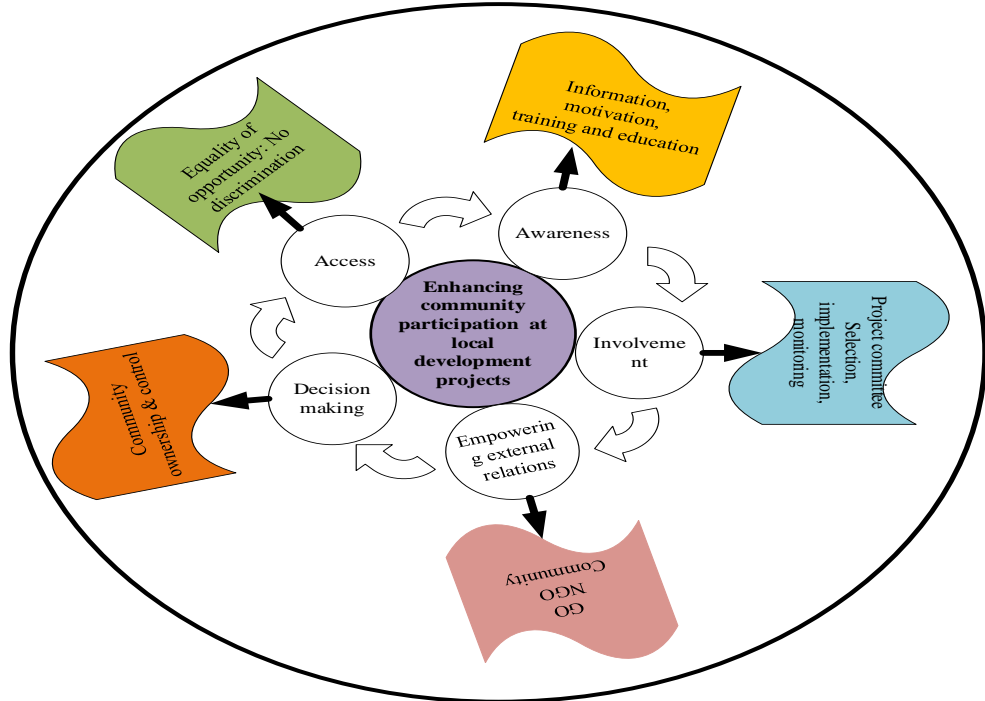


Figure 4: Effective community participation approach. Source: Author

Regardless of how well the laws and policies behind community participation are, they will constantly be undermined by the issues of domestic violence, gender inequality, poverty, illiteracy, and marginalization. By effectively deploying good governance and outreach within these communities, the government can begin a journey to tackle these issues. These lofty objectives and strategies cannot be properly implemented without a pool of experts to make it a reality. To bring the change, good governance, and effectiveness that Bangladesh deserves, the government must encourage and fund training on community involvement and participation to empower trained staff who can liaise with the community and communicate the objectives, expected outcomes, benefits, and opportunities for involvement in each project. As a close-knit community-based organization, the involvement of NGO is a key requirement for enhancing community participation.

7. Conclusion

Despite some problems, the continuous progress of local people's participation at the union level has been particularly noticeable in the present compared with the last two decades. The Union Parishad Manual 2009, in particular, is being considered as one of the tools to make the public participation process transparent in local projects. In many countries, the local level is identified and divided into small units as the focal points of rural development and upgraded its institutional capacity, emphasizing local involvement and decisions, which is called the bottom-up social system. However, in Bangladesh, active community participation in local development projects is still questioned because of traditional political culture, lack of awareness, patriarchal social structure, class discrimination, nepotism, and corruption. Community people are more aware of and experience their local problems, so their experience and decisions should be evaluated in the local development project planning and implementation process. They should be treated as owners of local projects, taking care not to be used as passive beneficiaries, and encouraged to participate in local development efforts. The development of strong coordination among the government, NGOs, and communities is one of the paramount requisites for raising awareness and developing community skills, leading to meaningful community participation. Since this study critically examines the challenges of community participation and develops an approach for meaningful community involvement in local development endeavors, the study findings can help policymakers, practitioners, NGO officials, and communities to follow and integrate this approach more effectively in local development ventures. Future researchers can apply decentralization theory, institutional theory, and elitism theory, incorporating a broader range of research areas

from different angles. This would help both dispute and support the study's conclusions, as well as fill in the gaps for perspectives in related domains. The results of this study were contextualized in the Sunamgonj district, which is representative of most rural areas in developing nations. Hence, the generalization of this study's findings to developed nations requires careful interpretation.

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