Enhancing Community Participation in Local Development Projects: The Bangladesh Context

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Abstract

        This paper focuses on developing an approach for effective community participation in local development projects. Researchers conducted a field study in Sunamganj district, one of the most vulnerable areas in Bangladesh, and collected information from 54 respondents, including Union Parishads (UP) chairpersons and members, secretaries, committee members, and local beneficiaries through interviews and FGDs using purposive sampling. Researchers also collected relevant documents from the Union Parishad (project plan, evaluation report, and annual progress report) to compare the information obtained from the participants in the field and analyzed them using the thematic analysis method. Study findings revealed that although UP is considered a close-knit community-based organization due to the nature of its development work and geographic location, inclusive decentralization and a democratic environment have not been established at the local level institutions to enhance meaningful community participation in development projects. This deficiency is attributed to outsider interferences, nepotism, lack of knowledge and information, top-down bureaucratic decisions, gender discrimination, and corruption. It is believed that the model of a meaningful decentralized participation system would help mobilize the comprehensive local development process.

Introduction

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 in community development (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 constantly advocate for active community participation in development projects, emphasizing the immense importance of ensuring sustainable grassroots development (Matarrita-Cascante, Lee, & Nam, 2020), as well as fostering a democratic environment for the key stakeholders of the projects (Waheduzzaman, 2015). Indeed, it has become a global agitation and movement with the recognition of the role of community participation in the development process, emphasizing the implications of comprehensive and participatory principles such as equality, awareness, empowerment, and development (Ezeudu & Ezekwelu, 2024). Development projects often have the potential to disrupt established cultural and belief systems, thus constituting a threat to local and internal cultures (Shrestha, Shen, & Bhatta, 2024). These fears and possible damages can be counteracted by deploying community involvement in development projects, thereby fostering positive social change without imposing external cultural influence on society (Wodajo, Yiadom, & Asfaw, 2014). Community involvement in project planning and management tends to enhance project success by achieving desired outcomes and increasing sustainability (Okunade et al., 2024). In terms of accomplishing 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 (Ansell, Sørensen, & Torfing, 2022). In modern development thinking, participation has reached a pivotal point, and it is now generally advocated and recognized as a key arrangement and approach in development (Amer, 2017). 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 (Tridimas, 2020).

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 (Costumado & Chemane, 2024). The role of government in community participation has evolved. The primary functions of governments and other concerned agencies now include ensuring community engagement in local development projects through the introduction of participatory and decentralized systems, with a focus on 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 raises community awareness and enthusiasm regarding the needs and priorities of local development, which were previously overlooked before the citizen-oriented participatory approach was initiated in Bangladesh (Kassen, 2021). Mia, Islam, Sakin, and Al-Hamadi (2022) keenly observed that community involvement in development functions not only involves the engagement of individuals or groups in planning, implementing, and monitoring development projects, but also positions them as active agents fulfilling their collective needs and demands while overcoming common development challenges. One such measure is ensuring tangible beneficiary involvement in every phase of the local development project cycle to comprehend development and achieve a worthwhile project (Flora Yvonne de, Elsyan Reinette, & Sarlota, 2016). If successful project implementation, viable follow-ups, and qualitative outcomes are the goals, community participation must be a major part of the planning process. When well-implemented, it engenders good governance and local rural development in both developed and developing countries. It must be noted that good governance serves as an entry point for effective community participation at the local level, as community members are more willing to engage 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 (Otieno & Maria, 2020).

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 interested in studying this issue from unique perspectives, and will prompt policymakers to enhance 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 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.

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 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). However, the primary 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), while disadvantaged groups such as poor women, who constitute almost 49% of the total population (Khatun, 2003), were deprived of participation in local development projects, except through the election of local level representatives (Waheduzzaman & As-Saber, 2015). Although the Union Parishad is responsible for implementing local-level development projects, and local development largely depends on the functions of this local self-institution, the objectives of this decentralized local government unit have not been achieved, Consequently, poor villagers continue to live in vulnerable situations due to a lack of active participation in local development projects (Mohammad, 2010). This group 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 actual level 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 involved in various projects alongside the Bangladeshi government's efforts to create a participatory local government system. Building on the success of the Local Government Support Project-2, implemented by the Local Government Division of Bangladesh in collaboration with the WB, UNDP, UNCDF, and DANIDA, the Union Parishad Governance Projects (UPGP)[1] were launched to strengthen democratic accountability and local governance at the union parishad level. UPGP operations initially covered 571 Union Parishad across seven selected districts out of more than 5000 Union Parishads in Bangladesh. Therefore, this study aims to assess the effectiveness of UPGP in fostering community participation and to propose an approach for meaningful community participation in local development projects in Bangladesh.

Nature and Status of Community Participation in Local Development Projects: A Theoretical Overview

Community participation in public business is integral for the tenable accomplishment of development policies. However, in many developing countries, due to bureaucratic predominance and ill cooperation between the government and the people, community participation in a significant number of local development projects remains merely a myth (WahedUzzaman & Alam, 2015). There is a discrepancy between the theoretical concept of participation and its practical implementation. Not everyone in the community can actively participate in the development process (Rosli, Omar, & Ali, 2017). Moreover, the structure of participation is based on local power relations and gender, resulting in the marginalization of women in decision-making process (Lewis & Hossain, 2017). Poor people in rural communities also face limited opportunities to benefit from development programs (Lewis, 2017). The common feature of participatory approaches is that local elites and dominant males tend to benefit, reinforcing existing power dynamics and gender inequalities (Hamlet, Gutierrez, Soto, & Dickin, 2022). The concept of empowerment in participatory approach often reflects 'Foucauldian terms of subjections' (Klestil, 2023), raising questions about who truly benefits from empowerment: individuals or communities, women, or socially excluded people (Klestil, 2023). The patron-client relationship in social influences during the negotiation process increases the conflict of group interest, often involving the dissemination of false information to serve mutual interests (Biermann, 2024). Local community participation in complex technological projects represent potential threats to the lives, health, security, and prosperity of the community people (Bolat, Yaşlı, & Temur, 2022). Empirical evidence suggests that community participation is not always beneficial.

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

The outcomes of participatory development programs will be more sustainable through community participation only if the community understands its actual meaning, perspectives, objectives, and overall circumstances (Geekiyanage, Fernando, & Keraminiyage, 2020). 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 (Panday & Chowdhury, 2020). In Tanzania, both central and local management systems are very weak in combating corruption. Therefore, widespread corruption across all sectors hampers 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, predominantly composed of men, have consistently been the primary beneficiaries of such benefits. 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 (Charway & Strandbu, 2023). In Nepal, women and girls play an important role in rural development but are mostly unpaid and unrecognized, often encountering continuous social barriers and discrimination in rural development programs (Khanal, 2015). They face systematic violence perpetrated by men and society, with limited decision-making power in social, economic, political, and other developmental spheres (Montesanti & Thurston, 2015). In many developing countries, women cannot even cross the boundaries set by their male partners (Seddiky, 2020). In Bangladesh, the unequal distribution of power based on gender subordinates women in all aspects of life, making them victims of societal, familial, and state-based subordination (Islam & Biswas, 2014). Control over property rights determines the extent of their participation in all stages of development projects. Women are more likely to experience extreme poverty, illiteracy, and landlessness (Ram, Strohschein, & Gaur, 2014).

Consequently, they suffer the most from birth discrimination, which prevents them from accessing opportunities and advantages within their families and communities. Land ownership is primarily held by men due to inheritance rules, societal structures, customs, and prejudices. Women, who are often the poorest among the poor, bear the brunt of the struggle for existence (Begum, 2023). From Africa to Asia, a consistent barier exists that keeps women out of effective participation. This barrier is reinforced by factors such as illiteracy, poverty, domestic violence, lopsided inheritance laws, and community customs.

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 employed to explore the participants' experiences, attitudes, and interactions concerning community participation at the local level to address the study's aims and objectives. In the field of social sciences, a better understanding of the overall picture and situation can be achieved through the application of constructivism, which aims to discover the details of the situation and the underlying reality (Wahyuni, 2012). As a social construct, the nature of community participation should be investigated to explain social phenomena. Researchers conducted a field study in Sunamganj,the most hazard-prone district in Bangladesh (Figure 1). Sunamganj district comprises 11 upazillas or subdistricts: Sunamganj Sadar, Derai, Chatak, Jamalgonj, Dharmapasha, Modhabpur, Jagannathpur, Tahirpur, Shalla, Doarabazar, and Bishwamvar. With ethnic groups from nearby Indian states, including Manipuri, Khasia, Garo, and Hajong, Sunamganj district has a rich historical and cultural legacy. It borders the Khasia and Jaintia hilly areas of Meghalaya (Indian State) to the north, Habiganj District to the south, Sylhet District to the east, and Netrokona District to the west. The tiers of the local government system face various challenges in providing services to the community. A total of 54 respondents were selected, including the elected union chairman, union parishad secretary, presidents and members of local development committees, and project beneficiaries (Table-1). Data were collected in the field from July to December, 2023.

This is because respondents or participants must possess the necessary knowledge and experience to answer the research questions questions (Flick, 2014).
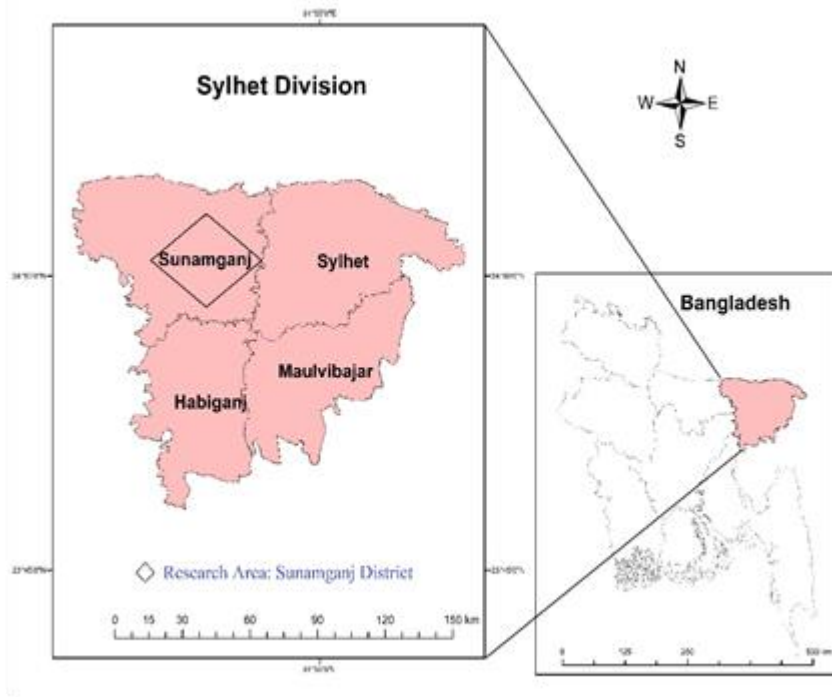
Figure 1 : Map of Sunamganj District
Source: Authors

Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) rightly noted that for subjective inquiry, specific numbers are not recommended. However, they advocate considering the sample sizes of previous studies with comparable designs, in which saturation was achieved, and using a sample size within this range. Hence, the saturation point of view determines the sample size for this study. Researchers have employed purposive (non-probability) sampling because it is appropriate for unique cases. The rationale for using purposive sampling is to select information-rich cases from which one can learn a great deal, aligned with the 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 employed methodological triangulation using a qualitative approach, which included interviews, document studies, and Focus 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 comittees from union	13
Members	Members of development committee at union	16
Beneficaries (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 stated by Abejirinde et al. (2018) and Nilsen et al. (2018), when obtaining detailed information from qualitative study participants, they should be selected based on their knowledge and experience of the particular issue under investigation. Two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with beneficiary communities, each containing a maximum of six participants, outside the development committee. FGDs increase the possibility of framing a dynamic and synergic approach, as there is considerable flexibility and opportunity for respondents to react to each other's responses. Researchers collected relevant documents from the Union Parishad (project plan, evaluation report, and annual progress report) to compare the information gathered in the field from participants.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, the data analysis proceeds throughout the data accumulation process. The researchers employed a thematic analysis approach for this study because it offers flexibility and is widely used across various research objectives and topics, particularly where quantitative analysis is not applicable (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). While qualitative data analysis is primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than following a hypothesis-centered deductive method used in quantitative analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018), the researchers used both inductive and deductive approaches. Inductive methods are typically situable for small samples where findings are not generalizable (Owi, 2020). Furthermore, inductive analysis is data-driven, focusing on discovering patterns and themes from collected data (Patton, 2002). Deductive analysis is concept- or theory-driven, drawing from the literature to connect 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), who delineated six stages of qualitative data analysis (Figure 2).

Researchers employed two-cycle coding, consisting of 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 utilized first-cycle coding (open coding), facilitating the progression of their research. The second cycle (selective coding) was used to choose and incorporate categories of organized data that contributed to theoretical frameworks. Subsequently, they developed the narrative of the case at a higher degree of abstraction based on perspectives, which is called pattern coding (Seddiky, Giggins, & Gajendran, 2020).
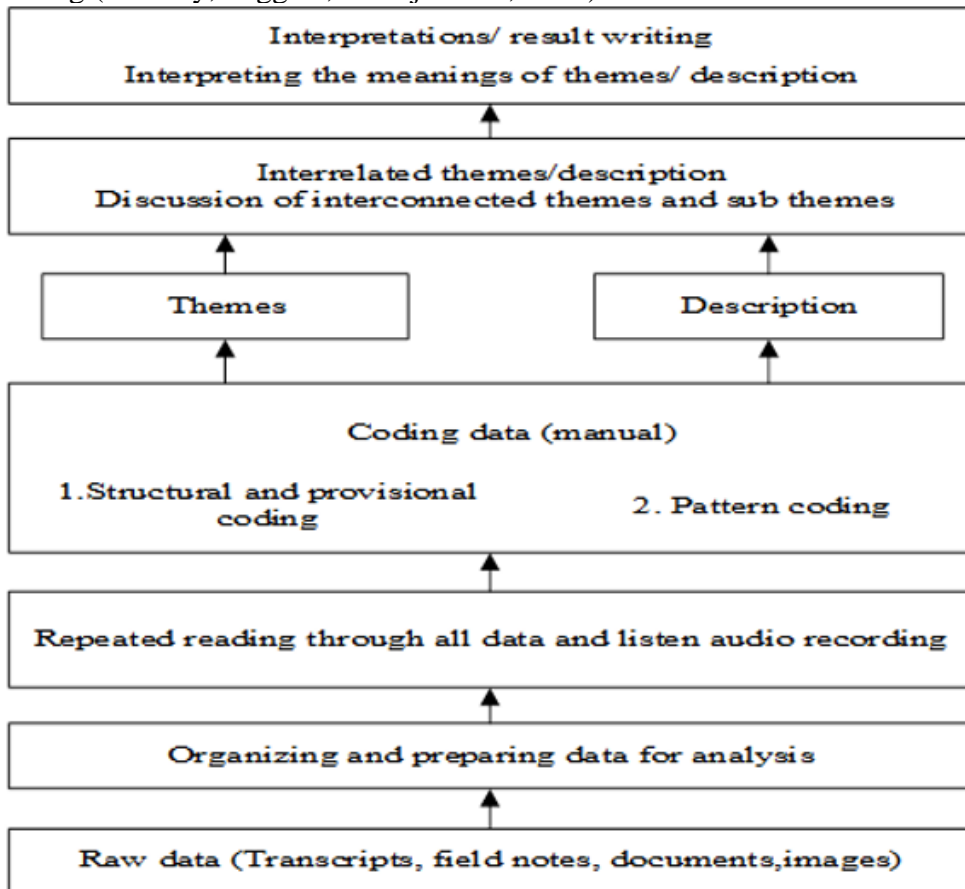

Figure 2: Data analysis process
Source: Creswell & Creswell, 2013

Pattern coding assisted the researcher in providing crucial information for interpreting the study findings. Finally, they 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 facilitate and prevent duplication of references, the EndNote citation manager was used in this study.

Ethical Consideration

The researchers obtained informed consent by describing the objectives and impacts of the study before conducting interviews with respondents. To protect the confidentiality of each respondent's personal information and contribution to the study, the researchers ensured anonymity and de-identified responses for each participant. They rigorously adhered to data sharing and access regulations, storing hard copies securely in a locked cabinet and soft copies in protected Google Drive. Respondents had the option to remove, delete, or withdraw their names from the research at any time up until publication.

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 for community participation has increased, meaningful community engagement has yet been established.
	Committee formation	
	Selection and implementations of projects	
	Monitoring and evaluation	
	Budgetory activities	
Nature of women's participation	Increased women's involvement	There is a wide discrepancy between form and reality regarding gender inclusiveness in local development projects.
	Unaware of women's roles	
	Discrimination in decision	
	Participation only in name	
Barriers to participation	Absolute power of chairman	Lots of challenges hinder 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 emerging theories regarding the current nature and status of community participation in local development projects based on the experience of the UPGP.

Although the Space for Community Participation has Increased, Meaningful Community Engagement has yet been Established

The UPGP consistently emphasizes the involvement of community members 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 projects, as well as monitoring and budgetary functions. These initiatives have also geared up community awareness regarding their roles and responsibilities in development projects. Local people possess intimate knowledge of their challenges; therefore, implementing projects based on their suggestions will result in long-term and positive impacts on rural-local development. As Ahmed (2011) emphasized, effective coordination through out the project cycle is crucial among union parishad officials, community people, and government officials from different sectors involved in local development functions. To enhance the governance of union parishad projects, numerous committees and sub-committees have been formed at the union level. These include elected UP members and civil society representatives such as freedom fighters, teachers, social workers, and women. Prior to forming various committees, the UP authority publicized the meeting dates and locations through miking, leaflet distribution, and verbal communication. They 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."*

Primarily, these committees are more visible at the union level, such as the Ward Shava committee, scheme implementation committee, and scheme supervision committee. These committees have been formed to integrate community opinions for the success of projects. They are responsible for encapsulating the collective community feedback regarding the implementation procedure and the benefits of respective development projects.   However, most community members are unfamiliar with 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 the existing committee systems, which had yet to be institutionalized to facilitate smooth local development activities and community participation. The performance of the standing committee in this regard was poor. Various types of development projects were proposed in the Ward Shava (meeting) of each ward within the union parishad. Despite the expectation that these meetings would involve residents of specific wards, attendance was low due to lack of information. In these meetings, names of committee members for planning and implementing local projects were also put forward. However, the final project selection and appointment of committee members were determined in the coordination meeting of the Union Parished, where there was no opportunity for public participation. Even common people did not know who the members of each project were or 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, the projects board, steering committee, policy and capacity development team, technical assistance team, and monitoring and evaluation team were all formed by bureaucrats and higher-level government officials (Figure 3). Common people could only participate in open discussion sessions twice a year during the Ward Shava to express their views on project selection and planning. The local community can voice their opinion, but have no voting rights for or against decisions made by higher authorities. Outsiders' paternalistic roles often marginalize the community 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, leaving the remaining scheme supervision committee members from the community as passive participants in this process. 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 due to insufficient active community participation and excessive intervention by external authorities (Marzuki, Hay, & James, 2012). Outsiders arrive unexpectedly and communicate with the community, and sometimes professional experts manipulate and dominate decisions and processes instead of fostering community participation (Futrell, 2003).
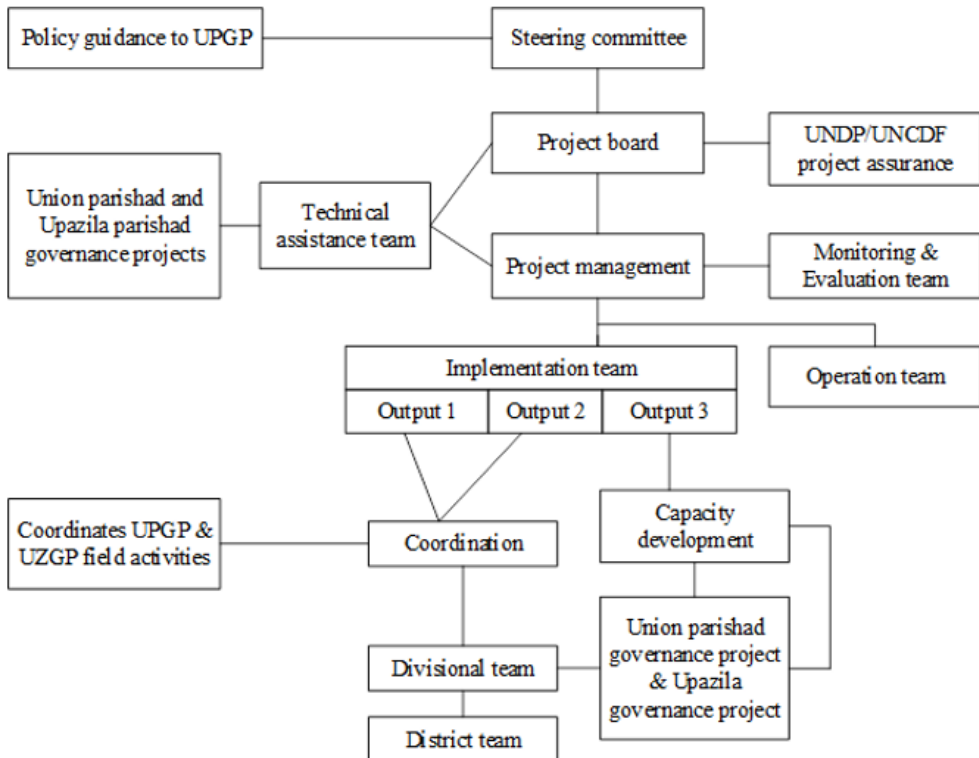

Figure 3: Organization and Management Structure of UPGP projects
Source: UNCDF (2014) Mid-Term evaluation report on UPGP

In local development projects, all key decisions, resources, and allocations come from the top level of the government, with communities playing a passive role. In the UPGP project, funds was released to the union parishad through banks based on recommendations from the Deputy Director of Local Government (DDLG). Occasionally, the governing authority took initiatives and organized meetings with communities for consultations, primarily aimed at utilizing local and community resources (Waheduzzaman & As-Saber, 2015).

Moreover, the local elite and dominant classes have influenced the overall development process. It is evident that community participation is crucial for balanced development in particular regions, as local people have valuable experience in addressing problems in their own areas. However, the

motivation of local communities to participate in local development projects is very low due to various inconsistencies.

The activities and overall progress of the projects were monitored and evaluated by the Monitoring and Inspection Wing of the local government division. This oversight also included the Management Information System (MIS) officer of the project, who wields significant power in information technology. The monitoring and evaluation team, composed primarily of bureaucrats, also played a dominant role in the project. The evaluation report is presented during the Ward Shava meetings for beneficiaries of local development projects. The Ward Shava holds prominence as a focal point for community participatory decision making, allowing beneficiary communities to post comments on notice boards and provide opinions during meetings.

There is a Wide Discrepancy Between Form and Reality Regarding Gender Inclusiveness in Local Development Projects

Local government development projects are generally initiated to benefit everyone in rural areas, irrespective of class, caste, gender, or religion (Pless & Appel, 2012). The role of the Union Parishad in Bangladesh began during the colonial period, with women's representation being ensured in 1997. Since then, women have been striving to assert their rights at the local level, with the UPGP being part of this initiative. Although women's participation at various stages of the UPGP project cycle was observed, their decisions were not adequately valued. Gender equality is a precondition and indicator of any development; however, in many developing countries, women's participation in planning, decision-making, and evaluation is negligible (Alvarez, 2013). According to regulations, two out of seven committee members in each UPGP project committee were women, but the opinions of women members were not given serious consideration in 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 everything was planned in advance and the work completed, only signatures were obtained from the members. Echoing this sentiment, 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 Women Development Forums (WDFs) have been organized throughout the country, involving five hundred and fifty-five female representatives in the Women Development Forum of the Union Parishad. Although WDFs act as pressure groups in promoting gender issues at the local level, they are still immature in successfully operating women's organizations at the local level. Hence, the actual purpose of gender equality remains unclear and ambiguous. Similarly, Cleaver (2001) stated that the objectives of the local development projects are unclear to all empowered individuals or communities, including women, the poor or socially excluded people. Most women prefer to stay at home and are reluctant to engage in outside work, featuring conflict outside their families. The country's social system and family traditions largely influence this cultural dynamic. Many local families maintain strict attitudes towards women's participation in political activities, and women often lack time to engage in development projects after completing 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 women elected from reserved seats, other women are not interested in participating in local development projects. However, since 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 form, but the reality is quite different.

Lots of Challenges Hinder Effective Community Participation in Local Development Projects

As Union Parishad evolved into a citizen-oriented rural local government institution, it became heavily influenced by local dominant individuals who 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 elites. As Asaduzzaman (2008) stated, political culture and bureaucratic dominance pose major challenges to community participation in development interventions in Bangladesh. At the union level, very few community members are aware of development projects,

and a majority remain ignorant about local development initiatives (Kala & Bagri, 2018). There is little opportunity created for their participation in development. Consequently, the participation of people from all sections is not guaranteed. 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 claimed that committee members are selected in consultation with Union Parishad members, in reality, the implementation of UPGP project and the selection of committee members depend solely on the decision of the UP Chairman (Akter & Mamun, 2018). Furthermore, favouritism and corruption hinder meaningful community participation in local-level development projects. Almost all schemes for installing sanitary latrines for indigent families are allocated to 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 decision-making process for 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, thus even if irregularities occurred, no one raised any objections. Despite providing such opportunities, maintaining project quality was challenging. Moreover, various obstacles were observed in informing project committee members about meetings. Although the Union Parishad was instructed to inform each committee member four to five days in advance via mobile phone, most members did not recieve any notification and rarely attended the meetings. 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 sessions for Union Parishad members once a year, no separate training is provided for general project members under the UPGP scheme. There was a lack of knowledge and motivation among union council members to

effectively operate and manage project committees. Similarly, the general public remained unaware of the procedures and benefits associated with local development projects. As a result, achieving the expected level of participation in various committees discussed was not feasible. Political influence in the decision-making process further discourages community participation in local development projects (Tosun, 2000). In summary, the key constraints to community participation include lack of awareness, unequal power structures, political influence, poverty, sense of inferiority, misuse of power, and deprivation.

Approach for Enhancing Meaningful Community Participation in Local Development Projects

Community engagement in local development programs is an indispensable tool for ensuring that projects are not just only successfully implemented but also meaningful, providing 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, this does not diminish its wide acceptance for promoting transparency, development, good governance, and accountability at the local level. In recent times, the structure of local governments in Bangladesh has undergone reorientation, with increased awareness of the importance of community participation. New initiatives have been launched to encourage community involvement at the union level. Union Parishad represents a shining light among local government units in Bangladesh due to its key features of grass-root engagement, high citizen orientation, and its close geographical and physical closeness to rural communities. Although challenges exist in 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. Consensus among diverse scholars suggests that without community involvement in local development projects, achieving sustainability and success becomes increasingly challenging. The opinions and practical experiences of the local community in UPGP projects provides a model for contemporary Bangladesh to enhance community-friendly environments and broaden the scope of opportunities for meaningful citizen participation.

Raising community awareness is the first step in fostering meaningful community engagement in local development projects. For effective community involvement, communities hosting local development projects must have the full picture of what it represents, as community involvement is often hindered by a lack of information about these projects. Community members neither trust the intentions of the government nor 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 establish a well-defined structure for community involvement. Bureaucratic channels of communication should be dispensed, and community members should be encouraged to contribute their indigenous knowledge and practical experience. Proper implementation of decentralization policies by the government can reduce the gap between citizens and government, enhance local development, and increase participation irrespective of gender, religion, and status (Figure 4).
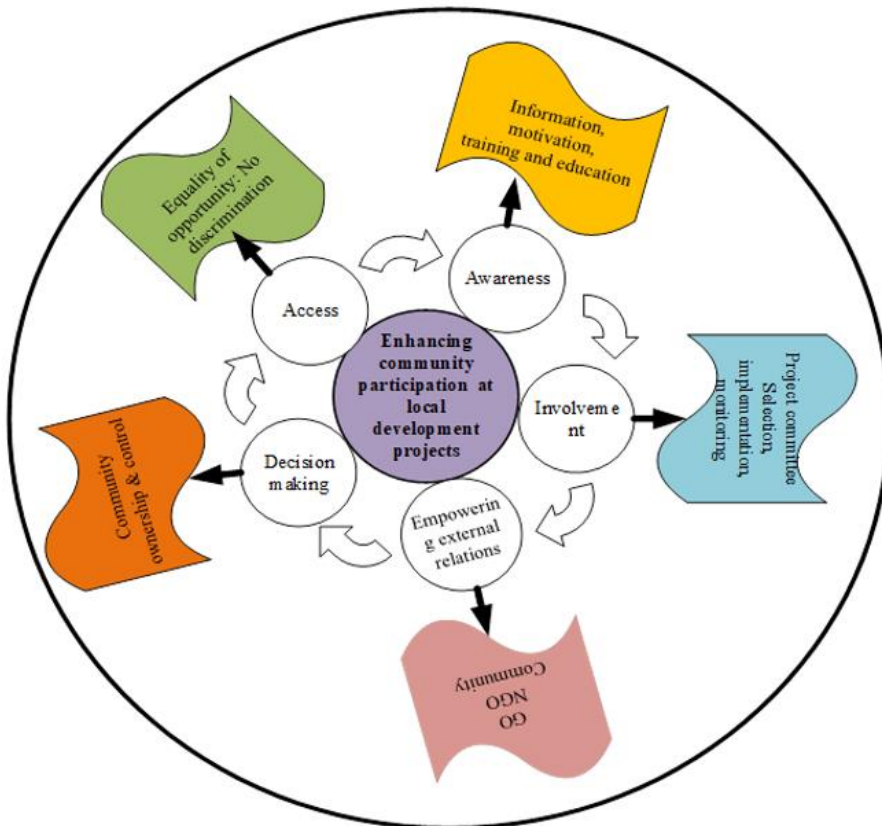

Figure 4: Effective community participation approach
Source: Authors

Regardless of the strength of laws and policies supporting community participation, they are constantly undermined by issues such as domestic violence, gender inequality, poverty, illiteracy, and marginalization. Effective deployment of good governance and outreach within these communities is essential for the government to address these issues. However, achieving these lofty objectives and strategies requires a competent pool of experts. To bring

about the necessary change and effectiveness that Bangladesh deserves, the government must prioritize and fund training programs on community involvement and participation. These programs will empower trained staff to engage with the community effectively and communicate the objectives, expected outcomes, benefits, and opportunities for involvement in each project. The involvement of NGOs, as close-knit community-based organizations, is a key requirement for enhancing community participation.

Conclusion

Despite some problems, the continuous progress of local community participation at the union level has been notably advanced in recent years compared to the last two decades. The Union Parishad Manual 2009, in particular, is seen as a tool to enhance transparency in public participation process for local projects. In many countries, the local level is identified and subdivided into smaller units as focal points for rural development, thereby upgrading institutional capacity and emphasizing local involvement and decision making – a model known as bottom-up social systems. However, in Bangaldesh, active community participation in local development projects still faces scrutiny due to traditional political culture, lack of awareness, patriarchal social structure, class discrimination, nepotism, and corruption. Local communities possess deep awareness of their own issues and experiences, necessitating their involvement and decision-making roles in local development project planning and implementation. They should be treated as stakeholders rather than passive beneficiaries, encouraged to actively participate in local development efforts. Strengthening coordination among government entities, NGOs, and communities is crucial to raising awareness and developing community skills, fostering meaningful community participation. This study critically examines the challenges of community participation and develops an approach for enhancing meaningful community involvement in local development initiatives. The findings can guide policymakers, practitioners, NGO officials, and communities in adopting and integrating effective approaches in local development projects. Future research could explore decentralization theory, institutional theory, and elitism theory, incorporating a broader range of research areas from different angles to both challenge and support the study's conclusions and fill gaps in related domains. The results of this study were contextualized in Sunamganj district, which is representative of most rural areas in developing nations. Hence, careful interpretation is necessary when generalizing these findings to developed nations.

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