Achieving Millennium Development Goals through Ensuring Sustainable Development: Challenges for Local government and Possible Interventions for Policy Reformation

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Abstract

Effective and autonomous local governance was supposed to be an integral part of the Bangladesh constitutional system. Since everywhere in the world most challenges people face are mostly local, therefore, the best way to solve them is through local initiatives and local leadership by awakening and mobilizing people. The importance of local bodies is at the management of local affairs by locally elected persons as they are the persons who can demonstrate their efficiency locally if proper environment and avenues are given to them. This is why decentralization is seen as an immensely important issue for developing countries like Bangladesh. Local government by definition is democratic self-governance that must be accountable to the people. But in Bangladesh, we observe a sheer mismatch and discrepancy in this regard. This research tries to emphasize on empowerment of local government which bring sustainable development and achieve Millennium Development Goals.

Keywords: Millennium Development Goal; United Nations Development Program; International Monetary Fund; Development Assistance Committee; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; United Nations; The Fourth Five Year Plan; National Institute of Local Government; Center for Policy Dialogue; Nongovernment Organization

1. Introduction

An effective and efficient democratic local government will definitely be able to reinforce the importance of government transparency and ultimately improve the quality of life for average citizens. In Bangladesh, democratic local institutions still remain weak due to overshadowing dark cloud of political corruption resulted in the low level of confidence in the government. Bangladesh faces problems of widespread corruption, lack of clear representation of citizen’s interests by their elected officials, a highly centralized government and a promising local government movement that is still learning how to exercise its rights. What our country needs at this very moment is increasing the ability of these targeted local governments to plan, manage and generate additional resources; then their efficiency capacity to deliver services will improve, which led to the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The eagerness for strengthening local governments is in an increased trend in developing countries who share certain common characteristics, such as:
• Larger part of the country consists of villages,
• Most of the population lives in rural areas,
• Agro-based economy with poor economic and social condition,
• Lack of communication, resources and support services.

In this context, “the demand for decentralized and efficient local governments cannot be ignored. For supporting people both forms of decentralization, bureaucratic, and democratic are necessary.
Financial resource, technical knowledge and practical experience, these are the elementary things for development. Through bureaucratic and democratic decentralization governmental officials and local people might have a scope to make contact and share their knowledge, which is not the reality of many third world countries like us. This will help them to take development activities in a reciprocal way, where governmental officials may help local people through governmental resources and technical knowledge, and local people would help officials through local resources and practical experiences” (Hussain, 2008).

1.1. Statement of the problem

Local governments of Bangladesh are highly inefficient and incapable of achieving development goals through huge opportunity and potential is unrealized and untapped.

1.2. Rationale of the study

This research will try to shed some light on the challenges of local governments of Bangladesh on the way to achieve MDGs. A number of burning issues encircling our local governments that are seen to be the major impediments will be discussed analytically in this paper.

1.3. Objectives of the study

To scrutinize the current local governments’ bodies of our country and the policies adopted by the government regarding local governance, its financial mechanism, its current capacity, pattern of accountability, nature of transparency, and many more. And also to analyze the potential challenges that are needed to overcome by the central and local government.

1.4. Review of literature

Lasna (2006) focus was mainly on the resource mobilization of Union Parishad. Her study can be summed up as follows:

The local governments depend to a considerable degree on grants from the central government. Although there are provisions for a variety of taxes, rates, and fees, only a few are utilized. Then again, either tax on valuation or transfer of property is the main source of own generation of income. The income from these sources is probably quite below their potential because of suspected large-scale undervaluation. Taxes such as those on profession, trade, and callings have not been tapped well. On the expenditure side, public works and similar activities are of significance in all tiers of local government. Establishment expenditures are alarmingly high in the case of Union Parishads. There is a gross imbalance both in generation and expenditure of resources. To remove the imbalance on the generation side, to streamline the collection of taxes and to improve administrative efficiency policy reformation is essential.

In “Country Reports on Local Government Systems: Bangladesh” of UNDP (2005), we can get a deep insight on the local government structure and an overall idea has been given on how the local governments functions, what are the structures of it, what are the main features and functions of both the rural and urban local government, its’ financing mechanisms, personal systems for example, service conditions and discipline, local autonomy, extent of public participation, etc. Local government, as a political institution to ensure public participation in development activities, is yet to take proper shape in Bangladesh. Since Independence in 1971, successive governments have tried to use the local government system for their own political interest. The party or regime in power has wanted to make the local government representatives their power base and manipulated the system to this end.

Rahman (2006) explained that accountability and transparency are the preconditions of empowering local government. Rahman (2006) also sketched the backdrop to the discussion by providing a brief history of the evolution of local government in the country. Since the emergence
of Bangladesh, different forms of local government were shaped at various levels - i.e., Union Parishad, District (Zila), and Thana (Upazila). Real, effective power, however, was always vested in the center and, therefore, the objectives of local government were never achieved in the past. Citing the problems local government faced by the Union Parishads in the process of implementation of the measures, Professor Khan noted that the bodies suffered from basic structural loopholes. For instance, problems which cropped up in the matter of authority regarding the appointment and payment of personnel lied at various levels both at the Union Parishad and at the center. The Union Parishad budget is examined at different levels, and the system suffers from lack of monitoring and assessment process. Predominant authority of the Union Parishad chairman, absence of financial authority, lack of people’s participation and vaguely defined circulars at times hinder the effective operation of Union Parishads.

Moreover, the participant in this session discussed about the politicization of local government, transparency and accountability which they deemed as preconditions for local government empowerment, lack of local level initiatives and resource mobilization, gender conflict: Discouraging women participation, and so on.

Most of these papers are the detailed analysis of the structures and functionalities of local governments along with some vital but common analysis. When it came to the weaknesses of local government, most of the papers talked about decentralization due to which the local government bodies are becoming inefficient, politicized by different political regimes, lack of resource mobilization, lack of local autonomy, and many more.

Now, we have to concentrate on MDGs. The “United Nation’s Millennium Declaration 2000” marked a strong commitment to the right to development, to peace and security, to gender equality, to eradication of many dimensions of poverty, and to sustainable human development. Embedded in that declaration which was adopted by 189 states, were what have become known as the MDGs.

To monitor progress toward the goals and targets set in MDGs, the United Nations system, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as well as Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, assembled under the office of UN Secretary General agreed a set of time-bound and measurable goals to assess progress over the period from 1990 to 2015 (See World Bank and BCAS, 1998). A framework of eight goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators to measure progress toward MDGs was adopted. The eight goals of MDGs are as follows:

- Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education
- Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women
- Goal 4: Reduce child mortality
- Goal 5: Improve mental health
- Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
- Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability
- Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development.

To attain the MDGs properly, we have to ensure sustainable development. Moreover, decentralize; autonomous, participative, financially solvent, effective, and efficient local government is an essential prerequisite for accomplishing sustainable development.

1.5. Research gap

This research has to emphasize some decisive insight regarding the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of our Union Parishad. Noncompliance to constitution, insignificant policy reforms, outmoded Union Parishad ordinance, absence of intergovernmental fiscal transfer, financial problems made by dependency, less focus on the economic development, lack of coordination among and within various government and non-government departments/agencies are few of the crucial findings that have come out in this research.
1.6. Methodology and data collection

Basically, this is a descriptive type of research. Secondary data are absorbed from related books, reports, journals, seminar papers, online journals, case study analysis, etc.

1.7. Scope and limitations of the study

This study investigates the local government structure, its empowerment, operating areas, and overall management. The major constraints of the study are unavailability and inconsistency of appropriate data; obviously time and resources are another two components of constraints.

2. Political and Administrative Structure of Bangladesh

Bangladesh has a unitary form of government. For the convenience of administration, the country is divided into eight Administrative Divisions: Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, Barisal, Sylhet, Rangpur, and Mymensingh. Each Division is placed under a divisional commissioner and is further subdivided into districts with a district commissioner (DC) as the chief administrator. After the administrative reorganization conducted in 1982, the country was divided into 64 districts. 20 of these districts existed for a very long period while the rest are the ones upgraded from former subdivisions.

Below the district level, there are the Thanas which number 490 in the country. During 1982-1990, 460 of the Thanas were upgraded to Upazilas or subdistricts. With the abolition of the Upazila system in 1991, the “Upazila Regional Administrative System” reverted to the earlier Thana structure. All divisions and district headquarters and most of the Thana headquarters are urban centers. Below the level of Thana, there are rural micro areas known as Unions (4553 in number) and Grams (more or less 86,650).

The divisional level is the highest tier of administration, after the national level. The divisional commissioner (popularly known as the commissioner) is the head of the divisional administration. She/he only plays a supervisory role over all the departments and agencies in the Division, as the divisional office of each department is directly linked to its national office. She/he also coordinates the functions of the district administration in the division. The commissioner became involved in development functions only since the establishment of the “Regional (divisional) development boards” in 1976. The “regional development boards” are responsible for those projects of the district boards which the latter cannot finance or do not have expertise to look after. The “regional development boards” are somewhat less active at present. The district has been the focal point in the administrative system of Bangladesh. The head of the district administration is known as the district commissioner. The office of the DC is divided into a number of divisions and sections. These include the planning and implementation section, which prepares the annual and midterm plans; the rural development section; the physical infrastructure section. When construction is small scale, it falls under the jurisdiction of the Thana or Upazila administration. The administrative head of the Thana is known as Thana Nirbahi Officer (TNO).

The district and Thana/Upazila executives are assisted by a large number of officials as well as professional and technical personnel appointed by the central government. Local government in urban and rural areas is entrusted to bodies elected by the people. Such bodies are called Pourashavas or City Corporations (numbering 11 in 2015) and Municipalities (numbering 323 in 2015) in urban areas, and Gram Parishads/Sarkers Union Parishads or Union Councils Upazila Parishads and Zila Parishads in rural areas. With the passing of the Union Parishad Bill (on September 04, 1997) and the Gram Sarker Bill (on February 26, 2003) in Parliament, local government structure is to be implemented at the grass roots level. 11 largest municipalities had been given metropolitan status as city corporation. All the corporations and municipalities were run by elected mayors although members of the city corporation council (ward commissioners) used to be elected from the respective wards. In recent years election was held, mayors, ward commissioners, chairmen and members of several city corporations, municipalities, and Union Parishads were elected directly by the people. A few acting mayors by virtue of administrative legislation are working on behalf of elected mayors.
3. Recent History of Local Government in Bangladesh

Since 1971 there has been three major attempts by successive governments to strengthen local government in Bangladesh and deliver services more effectively.

3.1. The first experiment (1972-1975)

Began in 1972 and ended in 1975, Bangladesh was divided into 61 districts. Each district was to be headed by a governor. The purpose was to bring about political control over district administration. However, this did not have much impact because the government was toppled by a military coup shortly the system was announced. (Election 2001: National Policy Forum, Seminar in Dhaka, 2001).

3.2. The second experiment (1976-1971)

Began in 1976, local government was to consist of Zilla, Thana and Union Parishads for the rural areas and Pourashavas for the urban areas. The local government system was to be based on the concepts of Gram (village) Sarkar and Swanivar (self-reliance), to strengthen local government, provide more autonomy, and help mobilize people at the village level for development works. Gram Sarkars were to be organized around increasing food production, expanding mass literacy, promoting population control/family planning activities and maintaining law and order. However, the system of elections to the local bodies was never implemented, so local government was dominated by the bureaucracy. In 1981, a change in the form of government did not allow this system of local government to be fully implemented.

3.3. The third experiment (1982)

Began in 1982, this upgraded the 464 Thanas of Bangladesh into Upazillas or subdistrict units. The Upazillas were to become central of all development activities, policy planning, and implementation. Each Upazilla had an elected-cum-nominated council, with a separate staff led by TNO functioning as its secretariat. This plan for strengthening local government brought together, for the first time, two conflicting elements: Popular participation and merit-based administrative units, implementing development plans. Local government units were also maintained at the Union level, albeit with reduced powers. Pourashavas in the urban areas were also maintained.

Between 1992 and 1996, the Government of Bangladesh focused on how to meet the requirements of Article 11 of the Bangladesh Constitution, which provides that the local government bodies should be composed of elected persons, vested with necessary powers, and able to impose taxes for local purposes.

As an introductory strategy, the democratically elected government in 1990, constituted a high powered 17 members “Local Government Structure Review Commission,” to suggest and recommend an effective system of local government. In the process of reviewing and implementing selected recommendations of the commission, the Government of Bangladesh determined that the focal point of local government in Bangladesh should be the Union Parishad (Union Council). The Union Parishad has had the longest and most continuous existence of the various tiers of local government although its name has occasionally changed and its power, authority and responsibilities have been reduced or augmented by successive governments. The Government of Bangladesh also decided to abolish the Upazila (Thana) system to ensure that people’s participation in decision-making was concentrated at the point of the primary contact, namely, the Union.

The current structure includes Union Parishads for the rural areas, municipalities (pourashava) for smaller urban areas and corporations for the large metropolitan areas. As required by the 12 Constitutional Amendment, each of these bodies is headed by elected representatives. The Union Parishads have elected representatives that give them a democratic framework, they have 12 standing committees that give them a parliamentary configuration, and they have their own sources of revenue.
that give them a resemblance of independence and autonomy. Pourashavas and corporations have similar structures.

There are elected bodies at the Union Parishads, thana and district levels. Still it is too early to predict the nature of or developments in the local government system. However, supportive and complementary structures considered to strengthen local government system include a district Parishad and a Development Committee at the Thana level to link unions and the districts, as well as villages. These committees will be primarily geared at coordination, administrative efficiency, and smooth interaction between elected representatives, national and local bureaucracies, and nongovernmental organizations.

4. Local Government Structure of Bangladesh

There is now local government at four tiers the zilas, the thana/upazilas (*The Upazila system was abolished in 1992, the term Upazila was replaced by Thana. Again in 1998, the Upazila system has been re-established. However, it refers to an administrative unit in between zila and union. Both Upazila and Thana refer to the same territorial and administrative configuration), the unions and the municipalities. The first three are rural local government; the last one obviously refers to urban areas (Table 1).

Although the research has already explained the very structure of our local governments along with the political and administrative structure, the main focus and concentration would be on Union Parishad afterward. The basic reason behind that the Union Parishads suffer the resource mobilization problems severe than the rest of the three.

4.1. Union Parishad

As per local government (Union Parishads Amendment Act, 1993) Union Parishad consists of a chairman and 12 members. They should be elected on the basis of adult vote. To look after Union Parishad office management, it has one secretary, and to maintain law and order, it has village policeman (1-2 Dafadars, 5-9 Chowkidars). To assess and collect tax, a Union Parishad can appoint one principle officer and three tax collectors temporarily on the basis of commission at a rate of 15-20% of tax collected (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Organizational structure of a Union Parishad

![Organizational structure of a Union Parishad](image)

Source: Local Government (Union Parishads Amendment Act, 1993, Section 42)
5. Findings

5.1. Challenges of the local governments of Bangladesh

Since we observe lots of mismanagement, insufficiency, mistrust, and corruption in the rural and remote areas of Bangladesh, which in fact could have been or could be the most effective fundamental tier to ensure development and attain MDGs. This research tries to focus on the most potential challenges that our Union Parishad tier is facing that would definitely die down the progress toward achieving MDGs if not proper measures are taken on due time. The following challenges are:

5.1.1. Noncompliance to constitution

Noncompliance to our constitution seems to be the major and most primitive confronting problem that we need to meet bravely and with honest and sincere intention. Our constitution is very much precise and progressive particularly about the roles and responsibilities of the local governments and wider and comprehensive roles of it. However, very unfortunately, these comprehensive laws have failed to represent the very spirit of our constitution. Among us those who were given the responsibility to run the local governments, their performances and activities do not go with the very spirit of our constitution. We observe sheer lacking, inefficiencies, corruption, etc. in their activities. Therefore, the very spirit of our constitution has nominally acknowledged. All the tiers of our government from top to bottom have already ignored the driving force of our constitution.

5.1.2. Insignificant policy reforms

One of the major reasons for local government in Bangladesh being weak and continuously dependent on central government through various means of political and administrative control. “In almost all the policy reform attempts taken by our government, the secondary issues were being focused on. Issues - such as number and level of tiers, relationship between tiers, composition, distribution/share of functions among the tiers, and central government - have been given priority at the expense of the substantive and core issues like delegation of authority for enabling local government to operate in an autonomous manner. For example, personnel management, accountability of deputed government officials and other personnel whose recruitment are finally approved by the national government functionaries; the other issues such as, resource generation, management, and utilization remained out of the preview of the reform agenda” (CPD, 2000).

5.1.3. Outmoded Union Parishad ordinance

The latest revision and upgrading of Union Parishad ordinance took place in 2009. Ironically, almost 95% laws and acts of this latest ordinance are word-to-word similar with the Union Parishad ordinance of 1959. Apparently, the greatest fallacy regarding the Union Parishad ordinance is that our central government still finds 95% similarity between the realities of colonial period and the present time.

5.1.4. Unwillingness of the political parties to strengthen local government

After the independence of Bangladesh, we experienced a sheer nature of corruption, administrative inefficiencies and many more in the local and central governance and politics. Since then, it is quite distinct and visible that almost all the political parties were not and still are not willing to take any effort

Table 1: Rural local government structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of unit</th>
<th>Number (approximate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Districts</td>
<td>64 (average population 2,300,000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanas/Upazilas*</td>
<td>490 (average population 300,408)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unions</td>
<td>4553 (average population 32,330)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villages</td>
<td>86,650 (average population 1699)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

to restructure and remodel the local governments vibrantly. The main reason behind such a malicious intention by the political parties is that in case if the local bodies become efficient and trustworthy, the selected and representing members of parliament of the respective political parties will lose their bases, and thus their importance in the local levels would be lessened. This happens to be the very reason for which all the political parties still remained to be unwilling to take any sincere initiative which would lead to efficient local bodies.

5.1.5. Mistrust of local government

In general, the local governments thought of our country are not to be vibrant and efficient and are highly dependent on the central government. Since local governments rely heavily on the central government in terms of planning, budgeting, implementation, and many more, local governments have become ineffective and inefficient. Therefore, mass people think that local governments of our country are of no use to ensure development. They do not have the spirit and capacity to initiate a sustainable change. Such mistrust on the local governments is also shown in our social drama and movies where we see that local government offices are infested with thieves, oppressors, etc. Often we see in the drama that in the rural places the matubbars, members of the Union Parishad, etc., are the actual oppressors. Moreover, the coercion falls on feeble, especially women. This reflection of the reality in our dramas and movies gives us the feeling that we usually do not trust our local governments. Ideally local governments should have been the nursing home for national leadership just like many other developed countries. National leaders should go all the way up from local level to the national or central level. However, this is not the reality; we know the extent of inefficiency of our local governments’ officers and leaders.

5.1.6. Absence of intergovernmental fiscal transfer

It is a global experience that local governments always generate their own revenues and that is an ideal scenario as well. Local governments should generate their own revenues as well as they should know about the budget they will be allocated each year, which is called the “intergovernmental fiscal transfer.” However, this ideal set-up is absent in our country. Our local governments do not even know how much tax they can generate and how much they will be allocated for various developmental activities and programs. And for such a gap and mismanagement, the entire planning process of local governments in our country is disrupted. Since the local governments have no precise idea regarding budget and money, they are also not being able to do the projection properly, and this leads toward a state of “no proper planning.”

5.1.7. Failure to optimize resource mobilization

The Fourth Five Year Plan (FFYP 1990-1995. p. 111) states that: “A major constrain on economic growth and development in Bangladesh has been the low level of domestic resource mobilization.” As a result, there has been heavy dependence on foreign aid in financing various programs undertaken in the country. It is estimated that a large amount of the annual development expenditure in Bangladesh has usually been financed by foreign aid. It is, therefore, imperative that various means of domestic resource mobilization are optimally employed in attaining a greater degree of self-reliance.

On the other hand, a fundamental prerequisite to the successful working of local self-government institution is the matching of obligations with resources. Hume and Martin (2009. p. 187) mentioned that: “The authority or the competence to undertake functions is generally useless unless the local units have the financial power or means to undertake them.” Usually, local government receives finance from the central government in the form of grants. However, the financial power of local government does not necessarily mean increasing grants from the central government, which is against the spirit of local autonomy and self-reliance. According to Robson (2011. p. 150): “When the ratio of grant to local taxes is <40:60, the local authority is in a position of dangerous subordination.” Thus, the local authorities should secure finance as far as possible from their own independent sources. In reality, though the Union Parishads are given a lot of functions, they have not been able to meet the expenses for performing their functions from their own sources of income. Union Parishads have been suffering
from a chronic shortage of fund. Their financial resources were never found adequate to perform the functions assigned to them. “Union Parishads cannot yet generate enough revenue even to meet the establishment expenses” (The Fourth Five Year Plan: 1990-1995. p. xvi-4). There are many reasons for this, including a poor assessment system, lack of efficient manpower and legal issues (more than 50% of property assessments are appealed with proceedings taking time and judgment generally going against the municipalities). Corruption is another major reason for low collection of taxes. Apart from these, one key factor for not being to collect revenue is due to the fear of the local bodies to lose popularity. That is why they always look ahead toward the central government and financial aid.

5.1.7.1. Case study 1: Tax-laden tale of a remote Mognama union
Mognama union is under Pekua upazila of the Cox’s Bazar district. Union Parishad officials of this union are laden with the responsibility of not being able to collect taxes. One of the main reasons for such deficiency is the fear of losing popularity of the mass people since Union Parishad members are peoples’ representatives. The members and secretary of this Union Parishad said that if the administration from the district levels helps them to collect taxes, they could at least tell to their people that it is a government requirement. Moreover, most of the people of this union do not even have any idea about giving tax; most of the people do not even know that they are bound to pay tax as citizens. Therefore, awareness building is also necessary.

5.1.8. Financial problems made by dependency
Islam (1993) calculated that average annual income of the Union Parishads in Bangladesh from taxes, fees, etc., was Tk. 378.88 million while the establishment and service costs computed at Tk. 437.74 million during the period from 1985 to 1990. This has made the Union Parishads to depend heavily on government grants not only for local development works by also to meet compulsory payments such as wages and salaries of staff and compulsory services. Under such a poor revenue and expenditure pattern, local government cannot be autonomous nor can it undertake all the tasks currently assigned to them. On the other hand, the national government is depending on the foreign donor agencies for financing the Union Parishads expenditure. Hence, this has created a cycle of dependency which is paradoxical to the development of self-reliance among the people. The problems relating to local resource mobilization are pointed out below:

- The chairmen and the members of the Union Parishad do not show any interest in mobilizing local resources, specially collection of taxes, due to the lack of government compulsion and narrow political outlook/attitudes
- In the year of, election, the local leaders do not show interest to realize the Union Parishad taxes because they fear that this would loosen their popularity
- Some of the taxpayers usually stay outside the union. Union Parishads fail to collect taxes from them
- Poor financial condition of the taxpayers and natural disaster from time to time hampers regular tax collection
- Reluctant attitude of taxpayers to pay tax
- Absence of proper assessment of the Union Parishad taxes; and
- Lack of permanent and required number of trained tax collectors
- Non-realization of arrear taxes may be attributed to non-accountability of the Union Parishad for this default.

A certain amount of pressure from the higher authority sometimes gives a positive result in inducing the union leaders to be more active in realizing their internal revenues.

5.1.9. Poor financial management of local government
Local governments in Bangladesh are in constant shortage of funds. The sources of their income are generally taxes, rates, fees, and charges levied by the local body, and rents and profits accruing from properties of the local body and sums received through its services. Contribution from individuals and institutions, government grants, profits from investments, receipts accruing from the trusts placed with
the local bodies, loans raised by the local body, and proceeds from such services are other sources of income. In reality tax management of local bodies is weak, resulting in poor collection. They hardly maintain ledger book against financial transactions. Furthermore, no regular audit is also done in this regard making the local bodies far more inefficient.

5.1.10. Less focus on the economic development

In the article 59 and 60 of our constitution, local bodies have to work and finance for economic development of the country. However, “local government focuses more on civil development and infrastructural development, not on socioeconomic and human capital development. Municipal expenditures are mainly geared toward physical infrastructure (equaling 30-40% of total expenditures). Public health expenditure accounts for 15-20% and administrative expenditure between 7% and 16%. Expenditures on social sectors are negligible” (Chowdhury, 2012, p. 42). Moreover, whatever economic development takes place; local governments do not even know the importance of it.

5.1.11. Lack of participative mechanism

Local government, as a political institution to ensure public participation in development activities, is yet to take proper shape in Bangladesh. Since Independence in 1971, successive governments have tried to use the local government system for their own political interest. The party or regime in power has wanted to make the local government representatives their power base and manipulated the system to this end. The Constitution of Bangladesh (1972) categorically emphasizes the need for establishing local government with a representative character (Chapter 3, Article 59). It also implies direct participation of the people in constituting the local body and in managing the affairs of such bodies. However, the adoption of the constitution, the spirit of people’s participation in local bodies was not always adequately maintained. Frequent changes in the local government structure are partly responsible for this. The extent and quality of people’s participation have also been variable. The best manifestation of participation was the opportunity of casting votes during the election of local bodies. However, elections have not been held at regular intervals.

The existing administrative structure and elected local bodies do reach the grass roots level and have almost all the features necessary for participatory decentralized administration. However, this structure has failed so far to perform efficiently for two reasons. “Despite the strong support for local government preserved in the constitution, the central government has compromised these advantages by exercising control over local government and starving these agencies of resources. Most administrative decisions still remain to be taken centrally. Several abortive attempts have been made at decentralization, but the system has remained highly centralized. As of such, local bodies are characterized by weak administrative capacity, a limited financial and human resource base and little public participation” (Ahmed, 2000).

5.1.11.1. Case study 2: Shiddhirganj - A model pouroshova for participative mechanism

Shiddhirganj is a pouroshova under Narayanganj district of the Dhaka Metropolitan. The way local government of this pouroshova encourages participation of the local people, it really gives us the inspiration for making of healthy local governments. In the last fiscal year, Shiddhirganj-pouroshova has declared the budget amounting BDT 3 crores. And for the proper resource mobilization, the officials has been announcing across the pouroshova with mike requesting the senior citizens to participate in the meeting and give their inputs as how to spend the resources, where to spend the budget properly. This particular activity taken by the local government of Shiddhirganj-pouroshova gives us the impression of a well functioning and participative local body. We can feel the spirit of the local bodies over our people, all we need to do is to ensure proper training and avenues for our local people and governments.

5.1.12. Poor training facilities for the local government officers

Training of local government staff is generally limited to officers and conducted at the National Institute of Local Government (NILG), Dhaka (Noor, 2004). Elected representatives, as well as appointed and nominated personnel, are provided training at NILG. Some are also sent abroad for short-term training.
Nongovernment Organizations (NGOs) and research organizations often provide training services to local government personnel. Lower level technical or general staff are rarely given any training or chance to improve their skills.

5.1.13. Lack of administrative accountability
Government policy decisions are implemented through bureaucratic mechanisms, and in this regard, administrative accountability is essential for good governance. In developing country, there is a tendency of the public bureaucracy to exercise power in an authoritarian manner. Bangladesh bureaucracy is also no exception to that. Authoritarian organization culture still persists. Democratic values are barely present. This is due to the colonial legacy that the administration inherited and lack of experience of the bureaucratic system to function under broader democratic political environment. There is an imbalance between the role of bureaucracy and the role of public representatives and political leaders in the policy making and overall governance system. No systematic measures have been taken so far to streamline the institutional integration of popular interests and technical expertise at all levels of government. This lack of accountability issue becomes more severe in the Union Parishad level since, local bodies are the rudimentary nursing home for future leaders. As a result, efficiency and accountability suffer under democratic political leadership. The arrogance of high office, unethical behavior, failure to respect legislative intent, and apathy toward work has been rampant (CPD, “Administrative Reform and Local Government”).

5.1.14. Lack of coordination among and within various government and nongovernment departments/agencies
It is found that various line departments of the government lack proper coordination among themselves and also with the NGOs to facilitate sustainable development at the local levels. As it has been emphasized by the development practitioners that development needs to be ensured and concretized at the local level first, but unfortunately, we observe that multiple governmental agencies and departments make plan on their own without even consulting or coordinating with one another. Same instances take place even at the NGO level. Planning and execution of the NGOs often collide with that of the government departments.

6. Recommendations
i. All the major political parties should exert their commitment in the election manifestos to strengthen the local governments and work in accordance to it. Honest political intention by the major parties will unquestionably guarantee healthy local governments in Bangladesh
ii. Tax collection procedures need to be strengthened through fair and just implementation of tax rules and regulations backed with punitive measures, such as the enforcement of distress warrants
iii. The central grants system should be structured to encourage mobilization of additional resources
iv. More regular assessment will provide local governments with a level of stability and self-reliance in their own resources and capacity
v. The Union Parishad personnel need training on planning mechanism, local finance, administration of rural local government, mechanism for monitoring, and evaluation to enable them to discharge their responsibilities more effectively
vi. Continuous research on their problems and evaluation of their performances seem to help them grow as effective institutions for the development at the local level
vii. The power of municipalities and corporations needs to be enhanced in both political-administrative terms as well as economic terms. Higher degrees of self-reliance on the part of the urban local bodies would be necessary for their autonomous existence and reduction of central control
viii. Elaborate measures should be undertaken to curtail bureaucratic excess. Its role should not go beyond the limits that may frustrate democratic ideals and practices. Some of the measures could be through the effective roles of the parliament, media, and the civil society
ix. Cooperation and coordination among all the line departments of the governments and NGOs to ensure development at the local levels
x. Training institutions for local government should be well equipped and full of competent staffs.
7. Conclusion

Under this circumstances and condition of Bangladesh, we can barely expect for a politically empowered and financially viable local government system in near future. The insincere and corrupt political regimes of Bangladesh have repeatedly failed to live up to their commitments in establishing truly decentralized and highly efficient local government system in the country since, the very beginning of our country. This has happened due to the fact that the country experienced long spells of military rule. As a result, politicians at the national level feel insecure in sharing powers and authorities with local government units. It is recognized by all that for the sustenance and institutionalization of democratic tradition, values and culture in the politics, an efficient, result oriented, gender sensitive, transparent, corruption-free and neutral public administration and a participatory and decentralized local government system are the essential prerequisites. The colonial legacy and the long absence of political leadership at the state power even after the creation of Pakistan in 1947 and emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, in turn, strengthened the already powerful bureaucracy. The lack of confidence and sense of insecurity of the national level politicians combined with bureaucratic unwillingness to extend supremacy of the national representatives down to the local level perpetuated the practice of having weak and centrally controlled local government system. The major challenges of our local governments are acting as potential impediments for achieving a vibrant and healthy local government that can effectively take care of the local affairs. Unless and until these challenges are not met successfully, we cannot make ourselves worthy to ensure sustainable development or, another way stating, attain MDGs.

References

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