

Incoherence Among The Rural Local Self-Government Bodies of Bangladesh

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Abstract: The three tiers of rural local government entities in Bangladesh namely the Union Parishad, the Upazila Parishad and the Zila Parishad which is suffering from jurisdictional problem i.e. which authority would be provided to them and which authority will lead them. With the help of literatures this study diagnosed, the formation and electoral process of these bodies are different as per their own 'Ordinances'. No one of the bodies can enjoy full autonomy due to various interferences by different authorities. It is considered that the Union Parishad is comparatively successful despite many drawbacks. The partial success of this body cannot do enough to institutionalize democracy and ensure good governance. It was observed, that there should be an utmost attempt to make sure the coordination among the rural local bodies under the same unique arrangement. They mainly identified the problems of coordination and address the areas of non-coordination as well as provided some policy suggestions in this regard.

Keywords: *Local Government; Local Self-government; Coordination; Union; Parishad; Upazila Parishad; Zila Parishad.*

Introduction: There is a unitary form of government in Bangladesh. For facilitating the administration of the country seven administrative divisions namely Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, Barisal, Sylhet, Rangpur, and Maymensingh have been formed. These are governed by 8 divisional commissioners. These divisions are subdivided further into 64 units which are called Zila (district), these are currently governed by 64 District Commissioner (DC). Basically they act like the chief administrator. Afterwards, 495 sub-districts called Upazila will be found among these districts. The chief administrator in paper is and elected chairmen who is assisted by an Upazila Nirbahi officer (UNO). These UNOs are basically those government administrative officers or bureaucrats who are mostly in deputation. Furthermore there are other government appointed officers dealing with health, education, agriculture and fisheries in the district and Upazila levels looks like law enforcement agency.

Now for local government, there are two spatially different institutions in Bangladesh: local government for rural areas and urban areas. A three tier hierarchical system can be found in the rural are: Union Parishad (4,498 units), Upazilla Parishad (482 units), Zilla Parishad (61 units) and Wards (4562). On the other hand, the urban is combined of Pourashavas (municipalities) and City Corporations. There are categories of Pourashavas and City Corporation but these are according to their area and economic strength. Irrespective to their differences each of these units is governed by elected representatives [1]. As it can be seen that, there are jumble of elected and government appointed members among the governing bodies incoherence is inevitable.

Societies today suffer from a host of challenges, including preservation of nature, combating poverty or reducing unemployment, which often turns out extremely difficult for a single authority to handle. Therefore, paramount importance has been given to the concept of "inter-organizational coordination"[2].

Liberated in 1971, Bangladesh has not yet succeeded to developed institutional necessities and appropriate policies to cope with local self-governance. Centralized policy-making and resource allocation strategies have been adopted by the country resulting inter-governmental transfers being unstable, inadequately defined, and lacking an adequate incentives system. Despite having a legal-institutional structural outline of a system which is decentralized, the local government is struggling. Besides, the lack of fiscal allocation of resources and extremely specified decision-making power, the level of decentralized government which currently exists has largely been ineffective [3]. Apart from an extreme central dependency Bangladesh also suffers from a lack of coordination among its local self-governing bodies.

Coordination, on the other hand, is a complex and unavoidable issue that is required in both terms i.e. policy framing and their day-to-day exercise. Problems of coordination take place due to the involvement of multiple institutions and their overlapping nature in jurisdictions [4].

Besides, coordination is inevitable in bringing disparate agencies to extract more compatible effort out of them e.g. in equity interest and their efficacy [5]. Without coordination, the threat of collapsing into chaos and inefficiency often hangs above the shoulder [6]. Coordination among the rural local self-government tiers is very essential for its proper functioning and effectiveness [7]. Proper functioning and effectiveness highly depend on the empowerment of the system [8]. But how to achieve

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empowerment is the main question in this regard. Independent decision-making, financial capability and administration which is free of bureaucratic influence are some of the major pre-requisitions for the empowerment of respective tiers of local self-government [9]. It is popularly said about the three tiers of local self-government i.e. the Union Parishad (UP), the Upazila Parishad (UZP) and the Zila Parishad (ZP) in rural Bangladesh - there is no proper coordination among them. The tiers work differently under different laws or ordinances. The Upazila and the District are the two administrative units where the government has set up a local government system as per constitutional [10]. The UP is a different local self-government system where there is no administrative unit. UP is a comparatively effective local government organ having autonomy power and implementing capacity than the other two [11]. To make the local bodies effective, a chain of command should be set among them under a single law. Because of a lack of coordination and having no chain of command the development activities of local areas are being hampered and dependency is being increased on the central government. It can be said that coordination may be more important in the question of the effectiveness of local bodies. The mentioned bodies are facing a lot of challenges and drawbacks right from the beginning of their journey. There is no alternative way of local self-government for implementing local development activities in developing countries like Bangladesh. This local self-government system is also needed for democratic practices and principles. As a result, the central government can be able to concentrate more on national issues and international affairs. So, it is high time to address the basic problems of coordination among the tiers and should take the initiative for proper coordination and cooperation so that the local bodies would be successful in their functions [12].

The electoral process and formation of local bodies may be changed also. The public representatives of the UP are elected by a direct vote whereas the representatives of the UZP are elected both by direct and indirect vote. On the other hand, the representatives of the ZP are elected by indirect vote like the Basic Democracy of the Aiyub Khan Regime of Pakistan era. The formation of local self-government bodies of Bangladesh is almost the same except for the City Corporation and the Pourashavas [13]. Perhaps the government tries to maintain uniqueness in terms of the formation of local bodies due to establish a balance within the system [14]. The study tried to highlight the drawbacks of coordination among the tiers of rural local self-governments of Bangladesh by reviewing the real nature of the rural local self-government in Bangladesh focusing on the overlapping functions of the same.

Materials & Method: This is a qualitative research based on secondary data. At first research question was developed from the existing literature which basically focused the setbacks related to the efficacy of Local Government of Bangladesh. Then, study tried to illustrate the poor coordination among local governing tiers by reviewing further relevant articles and books. Primary source of literatures were the laws: Local Government Union Parishad, Upazila Parishad and Zila Parishad Acts from where the jurisdictional shortcomings were formulated. Argumentation was made by following inductive reasoning process with the help of contemporary issues which are included from the observation of the researcher and relevant literatures. Chicago style of referencing is used in this article.

Result and Discussion: Incoherence of the Local Bodies of Bangladesh:

Decentralized Local Governing Structure: Figure 1 clarifies the fact that there are two distinct forms of decentralized local government bodies, i.e. devolution and decentralization are coexisting here simultaneously. In other words, field administration at the Division, the District, the Upazila and the Union level are examples of decentralization that mainly operate with delegated authority, while LGIs both at the urban and rural levels are attempts at devolution. The various tiers of field administration are headed by the appointed officials (bureaucrats) from the government, i.e., the Division, the District and the Upazila are headed respectively by the Divisional Commissioner, the Deputy Commissioner and the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO). These local administrative units are responsible for the delivery of various public services like health, education, agriculture, and family planning. They are also responsible for undertaking various development works at the local level they have the role of monitoring, reporting and coordinating those development programs as per the direction of the government. In the local government system of Bangladesh, rural local self-government institutions are comprised of the Union Parishads (UPs), the Upazila Parishads (UZPs) and the Zila Parishad (ZPs). A graphical presentation of the rural local government bodies of Bangladesh is given below articulating their method of election, duties which are assigned, revenue authority and heads of the bodies including the laws which operate them [15].



[Developed by the Researchers, 2022]

Fig. 1: An overview of local self-government and local administration in Bangladesh.

Personnel and Functions of Rural Local Self-government: From table 1, it seems that Bangladesh is at least structurally a decentralized country, having well-defined local government tiers for rural areas [16]. However, responsibilities assigned especially to the rural local government bodies are not well distributed and thus resulted in overlapping. On the other hand, three laws work as the provision of three bodies does not offer proper hierarchical order as it appears.

Table 1: Law, Personnel, Policies and responsibilities of Rural Local Governments of Bangladesh at a glance.

Name	Union Parishad	Upazila Parishad	Zila Parishad
Headed by	Elected Chairman	Elected Chairman	Elected Chairman
Election Method	Direct election	Direct election	Indirect election
Functional observation	Participatory planning and implementation, small investment, service monitoring in limited capacity	Devolutionary integrated planning and thus implementation, small investment and service monitoring powers	Planning, coordination and oversight
Revenue authority	Limited revenue authority and scope but doesn't have sub-national borrowing authority	Widespread revenue authority and scope but doesn't have sub-national borrowing authority	revenue authority and scope without sub-national borrowing authority
Acts in operation	The Local Government (Union Parishad) Act, 2009	The Local Government (Upazila Parishad) Act, 2009	The Local Government (Zila Parishad) Act, 2009

[Source: Ehsan, 2021]

Streams and classifications of LGIs in Bangladesh: The existing four streams and classification of LGIs in Bangladesh may be observed in the above Table.

Table 2: Bangladesh: Reform Agenda for Local Governance.

General LGIs	Special Purpose LGIs	Territorial LGIs	Traditional Rural-Urban Divide
Zila Parishad (61) in plain and 3 in Hill Districts	Hills and Plains (both) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City Corporation • Pourashava Special LGIs for Hill District <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Regional Council (1) 2. Three Hill District Councils (Rangamati, Bandarban, Khagrachari) 3. Circle Chief (Raja) at three Hill Districts and Headman-Karbari at Mouza levels (customary). 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Zila Parishad in plain (61) and 3 in Hill Districts (BD info. portal) 2. Upazila Parishad (495) (Banglapedia) 3. Union Parishad (4554) (BD info. portal) 	Rural <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zila Parishad (61) • Upazila Parishad (495) • Union Parishad (4554) Urban <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City Corporation • Pourashava

[Source: Ahmed, 2015]

The Statutory and the customary can be the fifth stream. Customary LGIs in Bangladesh are only seen in three Chattagram Hill Districts which are known as 'Circle Chief (Raja) and Head man-Karbari system which is shown in location-specific LGIs stream as well. Despite the fact of the different streams being separately shown, overlap among the streams can easily be understood. The discussion on local administration and LGIs shows a parallel institutional presence with identical activity. An environment of unhealthy competition and conflict between the two is created perennially by the parallel presence [17].

Inadequate Coordination: Overlapping and non-coordination are present among the rural local government bodies. For example, as per the Ordinance, the Zila Parishad can review the development project of the UZP, but there is no instruction mentioned in the ordinance of the UZP in this regard. In the same way, the UZP can coordinate the development activities of the UP and can provide necessary assistance as per its ordinance, but no instruction was mentioned in the ordinance of UP {The Local Government Ordinance Union Parishad, 1983; Upazila Parishad 1998; and Zila Parishad 2000 [18]. Rather the LGIs are fully dependent on the central government. It can be mentioned as an example that a Union Parishad may, and if so, required by the government shall prepare and implement development plans for such periods as may be specified. Such plans shall be subject to the approval of the respective Deputy Commissioner {The Local Government Ordinance (Union Parishad), 1983} [19]. If any conflict arises between Parishad and any other local authority, it will be sent to the government to mitigate the conflict and the decision of the government shall be considered to be final. Therefore, inadequate coordination seems inevitable. On the other hand, the UP is a different local government system where there is no administrative unit. The UP is a comparatively effective local government organ having autonomy power and the implementing capacity than the other two. With the presence of a strong bureaucracy, interference of local Members of Parliament (MP) and no working chain of command between local administration

and local self-government, both organs are facing a lot of challenges in the question of effectiveness. [20-21]. On the other hand, as the UP is the root level local government organ, they can implement all the development activities assigned by the respective authority or accordingly their plan. An Upazila is organized with some Union and the district is also organized with some Upazila [22]. So, if a UP is capable of implementing all development activities and looking after all local matters, the question may arise that what is needed for the UZP and the ZP. Having no coordination, the influences and dependence on the bureaucracy are increasing. This is not a good sign for autonomy and democratic principles. Thus, the development activities of the local area are not only hampering but also creating many problems in local areas. Procrastination and slow pace of development work are the common features of drawbacks. In this way, governmental assets are misused and local level sources of income are being narrowed due to non-cooperation from both sides [23].

The local government in Bangladesh can be addressed as a chaotic system. Government and other public sectors involvement at the field level administration units, different streams of LGIs, exponential private sector and resilient organizations of the citizens are not in order. But the effective engagement or a strong collaborative framework is missing among them. Confusion, Conflict, and contradiction in role defining, setting jurisdiction, assigning functions and expanding assignments highly contribute to chaos in the general. Scarce resources are not utilized in properly, and the deficits of capacity are not unbundled and tied by tracing out each other's areas of strengths and privileges. Above all, the weaknesses and interferences of the central government in local affairs make the situation even more chaotic [24]. There is legal hollowness, policy confusion, and absence in differentiating the roles all of which are adding to the conflicts and degrading the situation resulting from the democratic deficit and lack of vertical and horizontal accountability [25]. The Local self-government institution (LGI) in Bangladesh does not appear to be functioning under a uniform and composite governance structure. Rather it works in a scattered manner with a similar manifest [26,27] The UP, the UZP, the Pouroshova and the City Corporations (CC) are considered to be local self-government altogether and they have different provisions offered by the legislature. Seven different laws and a bunch of rules paved the fate and destiny of LGIs within the same jurisdiction but a clash is seen in functions and territorial jurisdiction with one another [28]. Ahmed pointed out that in India, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Indonesia in Asia and South Africa and Uganda in Africa, LGIs are governed under an integrated and uniform legal framework called 'framework law'. He also argued that during Pakistani time,

we also had an LGI framework called 'Basic Democracy Order 1959'; under the single legal instrument Divisional councils, District Councils, Union Councils, Town Committee and municipalities were being organized and governed [29].

The institutional organogram of the local government system of Bangladesh is strong in institutional and organizational features, but it is disappointing in terms of role, function and authoritative perspective. Unlimited central control over the LGIs is the main cause of the failure of local self-government in Bangladesh. Such type of control comes from the central authority and the bureaucracy. Financial dependency in this context has made local self-governments obliged to be controlled by the central authority. This control must be decreased for the effectiveness of local self-government. The interference of local Member of Parliament (MP) in the local self-government bodies is also the cause of the failure in this regard. They want to be a catalyst of central allotments or investment. It has been claimed their jurisdiction of power and authority has been provided as per the constitution. But, their desires and interferences on local self-governments are contradictory to the spirit of autonomy of local self-government. The Union Parishad is a historically animated tier of local self-government though its effectiveness is being hampered due to the miserable condition of its budget. At the same time, a huge number of conflicting elements have been injected into the Upazila Parishad. This is not effective. So, if both the local self-governments (the UP and the UZP) are accepted as associating institutions of the ZP, all the local self-governments can be more effective and powerful. The capacity of local self-governments is being strangled by the legal, functional and financial limitations, where the local self-governments were supposed to do general development activities, public services and good governance. However, LGIs are still contributing immensely in terms of flourishing democratic governance, maintaining social order and cohesion as well as contributing to infrastructural and economic development [30].

Above all, LGIs in Bangladesh are day by day transforming into hollow political institutions with shallow administrative, financial and functional responsibility [31]. They are given a long list of functions with inadequate provisions. The functions of the central government have been expanded to a great extent over the Upazila administrations. The responsibility of power and authority of central government is everywhere. So, the responsibility, the budget and the manpower should be distributed equitably between the central government and local government [32].

The functions are not according to finance and vice-versa. The functions which are allocated for LGIs are very general. For instance, in most cases ambiguous and general guidelines, like developing the social, educational and cultural scenario, can be found inside the list of functions allowed by the provision for the LGs. The infrastructural development, maintaining the law and order monitoring child marriage, dowry and other social and criminal offences have gained more priority in the list than the specific target-oriented guidelines. A standardized specification needs to be unbundled to balance with management strength, financial capability and consideration of recipient or services.

Conclusion and Recommendations: As per the discussion above it can certainly be felt that the loopholes in the services which exist among the agencies of local government institutions have to be spelt out specifically and responsibilities have to be distributed on a unifying principle. The competition and the plurality can however be promoted among various agencies but

duties and responsibilities have to be allocated from an identical point. Under the existing circumstance, neither the government nor local government; neither civil societies nor community-based organizations along with the private sectors are offered a clear ground to stand to for cooperating and coordinating with each other. There has already been a delay in the rule to engage.

The only answer can be to ensure the betterment of the local people through development activities and other socio-economic programs. The local bodies should be formed based on the total number of populations. How many public representatives will be in the respective body, would depend on the number of voters. Legacy of presidential form of government still cast a big shadow. As a result of that influence one chair of the body has got priority over the body under the existing system which is totally against the principles of the parliamentary form of government. So, the formation and electoral process should get concentration on reformation as per democratic principles of the local bodies. Lastly, reconsideration can be helpful.

- The democratic spirit should be upheld not only in the election process but also in the governing process.
- The allocation of duties and responsibilities among the tiers of local government must be revisited and the amendment should be called for if necessary.
- Above all the level of autonomy should be extended by ensuring decentralization not rhetorically but in practice for the elected authority in the local constituency.
- Finally, reformation priorities should be traced out which will make the coordination process among the local government tiers smooth and linear so that incoherence can be minimized.
- Aligning with the parliamentary form of government in its all terms is a crying need.

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