

Measuring Quality of Public Participation in the Local Government of Bangladesh

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Abstract

Public participation in local government is considered very crucial for ensuring good governance and quality service at the local level. This study aims to measure the level of public participation in the local government of Bangladesh. For this purpose, Arnstein's citizen participation theory is used in this study. A cross-sectional quantitative approach has been followed in this study. To fulfill the research objectives, 400 samples were collected using the survey method from two divisions of Bangladesh, namely Dhaka and Rangpur. A semi-structured questionnaire was used in this study for conducting the survey. Major findings of this study revealed that existing mechanisms for citizens' participation in the local government of Bangladesh are merely for eye-washing rather than for ensuring actual citizen participation. People cannot influence local government decisions through these existing mechanisms. In terms of Arnstein's citizen's participation theory, the level of public participation in the local government of Bangladesh is at the therapy level. It indicates that

the existing mechanisms are only for making people cured by showing that the people have the opportunity to participate rather than using these mechanisms for ensuring actual citizens' participation. However, the government and other respective authorities need to take necessary measures to ensure public participation in the local government of Bangladesh.

Keywords: citizens participation, local government, democratic decentralization, public accountability

1. Introduction

Having a well-functioning local government is essential for ensuring good governance and strengthening local government bodies (Huq, 2016). The central government has less influence under this system because of the devolution of authority and power to local governments rather than the cult of sovereign supremacy (Erb et al., 2005). In Bangladesh, the local government system can be divided into two main categories: rural and urban. Zilla Parishad, Upazila Parishad, and Union Parishad are the three levels of local government in rural areas, whereas City Corporation and Paurashava are the two tiers of local government in urban areas (Hasina & Hasan, 2015).

Local Government in every administrative unit of the Republic should be entrusted to bodies composed of individuals elected in conformity with the law, declares the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (GOB, 1993:43). To achieve greater socio-economic emancipation for the people of the nation, these elected local representatives may help to maximize the use of both men and women for the country's overall growth. As a result, new-institutional perspectives have paved the way for administrative reform, notably the delegation of power at the local level with a focus on regional development (Hadiz, 2004). The engagement of the general population is a key factor in this regional development (Rasyid, 2003). People's engagement in local government is an important step toward equitable development and the protection of citizens' fundamental rights. It is true that public involvement is a doorway that not only pushes people to participate in political and economic processes but also an umbrella stands for democracy and bureaucracy (Arnstein, 1969).

As a result, it's still unclear whether participation in local government is genuinely representative of the people's will or is simply a tool of the state for its own ends (Ansell & Gash, 2008). This participatory process will develop into a frustrating one unless power is redistributed and disadvantaged people are empowered. Therefore, it is hoped that this research would shed light on the degree of local people's engagement in local government decisions and activities, allowing policymakers to grasp better the actual scenario of people's participation in Bangladesh.

1.1 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study include:

- To measure the level of public participation in the local government of Bangladesh.
- To explore the gender differences in public participation at the local level.

· To explore the differences between rural and urban people in terms of public participation in local government decisions and activities.

1.2 Literature Review

Decentralization of power is very crucial for ensuring quality service delivery at the local level. Democratic decentralization helps to build a reciprocal relationship between government and citizens by increasing citizens' participation in local-level decision making and holding public representatives accountable to their constituency (Barnett et al., 1997). Promotion of democratic decentralization at the local level enables close contact and interaction of local residents with governmental institutions and functionaries that will have a positive impact on the local governance, exercise of democratic value in political parties, and local development works (Khan, 2009).

Good governance is a priority for the Bangladeshi government, which is attempting to improve decentralization and local governance reforms in the same way as other developing nations (Siddiqui, 2005). However, Bangladesh's democratic decentralization remains a major difficulty since every new administration has made numerous steps to build a new system of local government. Almost all governments have implemented new policies or narrowed the scope of existing ones to preserve their power (Siddiqui, 1994).

Power must be shared across the different levels of government if the government is to function effectively. Delegation and decentralization of authority in the hands of local governments were made possible by the central government's policies (Cheema & Rondinelli, 2007; Panday, 2011). Local politics and public participation in local governance are undercut by poor policies and a wicked government structure. Interference and factionalism have been utilized to expand central government control over local administration via decentralization and delegation programs (Siddique, 1994).

However, people's participation in the local government of Bangladesh is still lacking (Mahmud, 2004). Asaduzzaman (2008) stated that the engagement of local people in various development initiatives is still an elusive golden deer, which was one of the primary concerns of the government for the previous three decades or more. As a result of Bangladesh's undemocratic political system, he saw clientelism undermining residents' opportunity to participate in development initiatives.

Union Parishad, the lowest tier of local government in Bangladesh, has different mechanisms to ensure citizens' participation in local government in Bangladesh. These mechanisms include direct participation of people through local elections, Ward Shava, open budget discussion, different standing committees, etc. In practice, these mechanisms are not properly functioning (Uddin, 2019). Among different mechanisms, Panday (2019) found that people's participation in local elections was very high between 1991 and 2013. However, the introduction of a party-based electoral system in Union Parishad and Upazila Parishad in 2016 significantly hampered the people's participation in local elections. Another important mechanism for people's participation in local government is open budget discussion. Ahmed (2016) found that holding an open budget discussion meeting by UPs was only to comply

with the legal requirements rather than to allow people to provide their opinion regarding the proposed budget. Local elected representatives are responsible for ensuring reflection of people’s expectations in local government activities. Islam et al. (2019) found that local representatives have limited access in the decision-making process of different standing committees as these committees are mostly non-functional in practice. In addition, they found that local representatives are reluctant to participate in meetings as most of the standing committees are not related to monetary issues.

A key role of local government is to make sure that the aspirations of local women are reflected in the operations of local government. Women's involvement in Bangladesh's Union Parishad was studied by Khan and Ara (2006). Women's involvement in Union Parishad's elected officials is still quite low, according to this report, even though women make about half the country's population. It's not uncommon for their male counterparts to criticize and denigrate elected female representatives as well.

Arnstein (1969) had developed a ladder of citizen’s participation where she classified peoples’ participation level in government activities into eight broad categories, namely Citizen Power: Citizen Control, Delegated Power, Partnership. Tokenism: Placation, Consultation, Informing. Nonparticipation: Therapy, Manipulation. Citizens’ control is the most powerful form of participation where citizens can involve and influence local government decisions. Subsequently, manipulation is the lowest form in citizens participation rung, which denotes people are not interested in taking part in local government bodies and their decisions are not valued at all by the people in power. She believed that these typologies could help determine citizens’ position to involve in local development planning and implementing activities.

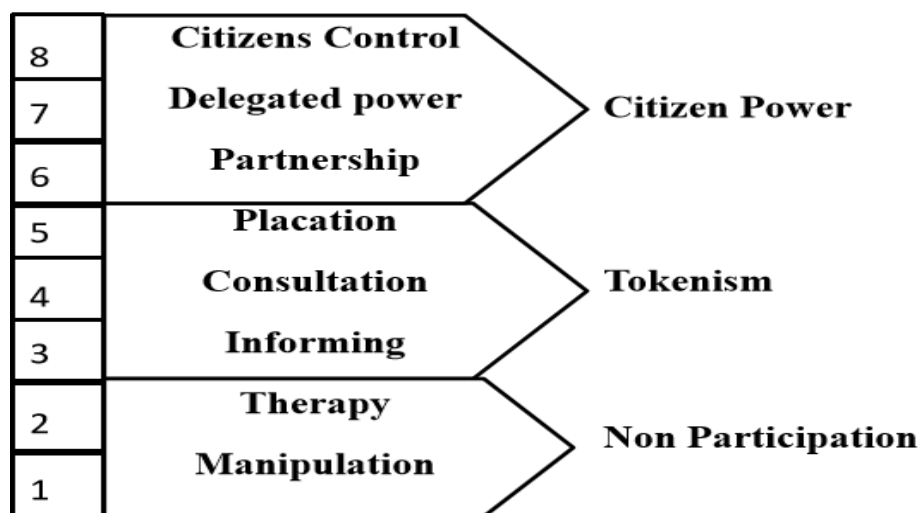


Figure 1. Arnstein Ladder of Citizen’s Participation

1.3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning for the study was Sherry R. Arnstein's topology of citizens partnership, which portrayed the engagement of individuals in shaping program and policy

choices as rungs on a ladder of participation (Gershman, 2013). In this concept, each rung represents the degree of citizen power over the process, allowing citizens to exercise influence over authority and bring about important societal changes (Arnstein, 1969). As a result, the results were analyzed using Arnstein's ladder participation model to determine the degree of citizen involvement in local government institutions, which was based on the framework adopted by Yani et al. (2017) for measuring the quality of citizen participation in WS under these four components (access, awareness, benefit, and citizen control). It's important for people to understand what these terms mean when they're used regarding local government.

Access- The term "access" refers to the process of encouraging citizens to participate in the discussion, planning, and monitoring of a local development project. The quality of community engagement in local government activities will be good if access is high.

Awareness- Awareness refers to citizens' understanding of their position as part of a state system within the framework of democratic decentralization. If the awareness is high, the local people will have the interest to know more about the local government development activities.

Control- Control describes the position of local citizens in creating a space for placing demands and taking part in local decision-making. If the level of control is comparatively less, the citizens will have less authority to change the decisions of local representatives. They may be informed for their awareness, but ultimate decisions will be of those who are in power,

Benefit- Benefit component was measured by citizens' appraisal of their involvement in the local development activities. If the local people think that their participation is well accepted and their decisions are considered while taking development initiatives, then people will have a positive response on the benefit component.

2. Method

2.1 Research Method

In this cross-sectional study, a quantitative approach has been followed by conducting a social survey among the respondents. For conducting a social survey, a semi-structured questionnaire was prepared based on the previous study and the context of Bangladesh. However, secondary data was also analyzed in this study for supporting the primary data, which were gathered from the review of the literature.

2.2 Research Site

For this study, one Paurashava and one Union Parishad, the lowest unit of local government, was chosen from the Dhaka and Rangpur division of Bangladesh. As Dhaka is the capital of Bangladesh, its people are more privileged compared to the people of the Rangpur division, which is situated in the northeastern part of the country. Researchers believe that this diversity has helped to reveal the real scenario of the whole country regarding people's participation in the local government.

2.3 Data Collection

The survey questionnaire had a Demographic information section along with another four sections: Access, Awareness, Control, and Benefit aspects. Each of these four sections is composed of eight close-ended questions. Following Godden's sample size formula for the infinite population with a 95% confidence level and 0.05% margin of error, a total of 384 was the sample for the study (Godden, 2004). However, 400 respondents were chosen for the study, hoping that 96% filled the questionnaire perfectly.

2.4 Data Analysis Table

Collected data were analyzed by using descriptive data analysis techniques to measure the level of participation according to the typology category of Eight Participation Ladder of Arnstein. In the survey questionnaire, every question had eight answer options with a score ranging from 1-8. The minimum answer for one respondent was 8, and the maximum was 64 in each section of the questionnaire. The distance of the interval score in the ladder was determined by this distance of minimum and maximum score (maximum score – minimum score / 8), which was 7. The total score of the respondent in every section was divided by the sample number to reach the average score of that section. The sum of the minimum and the maximum score of the four sections was 32 and 256, and the interval of the score was 28 in the typology category of the participation ladder. The sum of all sections' average scores determined the typology of the respondent's participation at the local level. (See **Table 1**)

Table 1. Interval of Eight Ladder and Typology of Arnstein

Scores	Typology scores	Ladder Participation
57-64	228-256	Citizen Control
50-57	200-228	Delegated Power
43-50	172-200	Partnership
36-43	144-172	Placation
29-36	116-144	Consultation
22-29	88-116	Informing
15-22	60-88	Therapy
8-15	32-60	Manipulation

3. Results

For measuring the quality of people's participation in the local government tiers in Bangladesh, the researchers collect a set of questionnaires from a diversified background of respondents so that the actual picture of the society can be reflected through the study. (See **Table 2**)

Table 2. Demographic information of the respondents

Variables		Frequency	Percent
Division	Dhaka	191	48.8
	Rangpur	200	51.2
Area of residence	Paurashava	144	36.8
	Union	247	63.2
Sex	Male	326	83.4
	Female	65	16.6
Education	None	119	30.4
	Primary School	112	28.6
	Secondary School	85	21.7
	Higher Secondary and above	75	19.2
Family type	Nuclear	172	44.0
	Joint family	198	50.6
	Extended Family	21	5.4
Residence condition	Terraced House	21	5.4
	Tin-shed	252	64.5
	Mudhouse & Other	118	30.2

Section A: Demographic Information

Among 391 respondents, 36.8% respondents are from the Pourashava area, and the rest, 63.2%, are respondents from the union. 83.4% of respondents are male, while 16.6% of the respondents are female. In terms of the educational background of the respondents, 30.4% respondents are illiterate. 28.6% and 21.7% of respondents have completed primary and secondary education, respectively. 19.2% of respondents have completed higher secondary or above higher secondary level. Half of the respondents are from a joint family, and 44% respondents from a nuclear family. Most of the respondents (64.5%) have tin-shed houses.

The level of public participation in local government activities in Bangladesh is measured from four aspects. These four aspects include the access, awareness, control, and benefits aspects. (See **Table 3**)

Table 3. Accessibility of respondents to local government

Indicator	Score (Mean)	Std. Deviation
There was an option to participate, but it was limited to formality	2.64	.612
Get invited to engage in	2.52	.701
Being notified of engagement opportunities	2.86	.570
Had the opportunity to communicate and haggle	2.51	.675
Had option to make suggestions, even if it's not always implemented	2.43	.581
Had chance to speak and haggle	2.51	.726
Had possibility of taking an active part in decision-making	2.39	.635
Had the freedom to ascertain a decision	2.42	.711
Total value	20.28	

Section B: Access Aspects

Access is the fundamental element of participation. Access means having the opportunity for people to be involved in different levels of local government development activities. In this study, the total value of the access aspect is 20.28, which indicates the therapy level. It means that people can not involve or influence the decision of local government activities in Bangladesh. However, people have the opportunity to indirectly influence local government activities through the local elections. A score of 2.64 at the indicator of having the opportunity to engage indicates that people could engage in local government activities in Bangladesh. People can engage in local government activities in Bangladesh through Ward Shava, different standing committees led by Union Parishad members, and open budget sessions. However, a very low score at the indicator of having people's role in decision making (2.39) and deciding local government activities (2.42) indicates that previously mentioned participation mechanisms are merely for eye washing.

Section C: Awareness aspect

Awareness is an important element of participation that moves individuals to engage in development activities. The overall value of the awareness aspect is 20.73, which means therapy level. As local people have no power to influence local government activities, they are less interested in being involved in local government development activities. The lowest scoring indicator of the awareness aspect involves the indicator of people's involvement in giving advice in social and government activities (2.38). people are less interested in giving advice in social and government activities as people know that their advice will not be taken into consideration. **(See Table 4)**

Table 4. Awareness of respondents to local government's activities

Indicator	Score (Mean)	Std. Deviation
Uninterested in social and political issues	2.63	.583
Social and political activities did not pique their interest	2.87	.603
Participation was determined by the level of their curiosity	2.75	.662
Engaged solely in social and political activities	2.56	.695
Contributed to social and political activities by providing advice	2.38	.582
Participated actively in social and political activities	2.40	.672
Participated in and was highly engaged in social and political activities	2.37	.643
Being aware of their fundamental rights as citizens to participate in and influence	2.77	.695
Total value	20.73	

Section D: Control aspect

Control refers to the position of citizens in controlling local government decision-making. If the level of control is high, people will be more interested in participating in local government activities. In this study, the total value of the control aspect is 20.35, which indicates the therapy level. It means that local people have no control over local government decision-making. Different mechanisms (such as Ward Shava, local standing committees, open budget discussion) are created by the government for ensuring people's participation in local government activities in Bangladesh. These mechanisms, in practice, don't have any power to influence local government decisions. (See Table 5)

Table 5. Respondents' control over local government's decision

Indicator	Score (Mean)	Std. Deviation
All development initiatives were predetermined by the government	2.47	.544
People were just engaged in deciding on development initiatives	2.56	.657
Government just kept the public aware of developmental initiatives	2.55	.565
Only a few persons were involved in defining development initiatives	2.77	.606
People are involved, yet their opinions are not considered when determining development initiatives	2.51	.607
The government created a space for discussion for defining development initiatives	2.58	.658
Government gave space for people to decide development initiatives	2.38	.569
People determined all development initiatives	2.53	.704
Total value	20.35	

Section E: Benefit aspect

The last aspect of this study is the benefit aspect. This aspect refers to the people's perception of the benefits of local government development activities. If people feel positive impacts or benefits, they will be more interested in participating. The total value of the benefit aspect is 23.23, which refers to the informing level. People feel that the benefits of development have already met some of their expectations (score 3.14). However, these benefits have not met people's expectations (2.87). (See Table 6)

Table 6. Respondents benefit from collaboration with local government

Indicator	Score (Mean)	Std. Deviation
Benefits of development initiatives were not perceived by the people	2.88	.547
Only a few individuals or small groups of people benefited from development initiatives	3.07	.651
People were informed about the benefits of development initiatives but were not directly impacted by them	2.84	.682
Despite the benefits, the problem has not been solved	2.84	.704
Benefits exist, but they fall short of what people had hoped for	2.87	.676
Some of the people's hopes have already been met by the benefits of development	3.14	.724
People's expectations for the benefits of development initiatives were met	2.88	.680
People's expectations were met, and the benefits of development initiatives are managed by the community in a sustainable way	2.71	.781
Total value	23.23	

The typology score or a combined score of four aspects is 85.04, indicating the therapy level of participation. In the therapy level of participation, the government thinks that the powerlessness of the people in terms of participation can be cured. Government arranges different community meetings. But these community meetings are not used to ensure participation. In Bangladesh, the government has created different mechanisms (such as Ward Shava, open budget discussion, different standing committees) in order to ensure people's participation in local government activities. In practice, these mechanisms are not used in order to ensure people's participation in local government activities in Bangladesh. (See Table 7)

Table 7. Quality of citizen participation

Variable	Score	Level of Participation
Access	20.73	Therapy
Awareness	20.73	Therapy
Control	20.35	Therapy
Benefit	23.23	Informing
Typology score	85.04	Therapy

4. Conclusion

Local government is considered as one of the most important elements for ensuring good governance and quality service at the local level. Citizens' participation in local government activities is considered very crucial for ensuring good governance and making public representatives accountable to their constituency. The government of Bangladesh is also trying to ensure good governance through people's participation in local government functions. However, in practice, citizens' participation in local government activities is still not satisfactory in Bangladesh. The government has provided different mechanisms for ensuring citizens' participation in local government activities, but people have little opportunity to play a role in decision making through these mechanisms. In terms of the awareness aspect, people are less interested in being involved in local government activities as they have no power to influence the decisions. Though the government has provided the people the opportunity to engage in local government activities through different mechanisms (such as local election, Ward Shava, open budget discussion, and different standing committees), the typology score of 85.04 (Therapy Level) indicates that these mechanisms are merely for eye-washing. These mechanisms are only used to show that people have the opportunity to participate in local government activities rather than using these mechanisms to ensure public participation in the local government of Bangladesh.

The findings of this study will help the government understand the real picture of citizens' participation in the local government of Bangladesh. This study will help the government in taking necessary measures for ensuring citizens' participation in local government activities in Bangladesh.

This study has some limitations. The limited study area is a major weakness of this study. This study has been conducted only within two divisions among seven divisions in Bangladesh. Anyone might argue that the findings of this study can't be generalized to other parts of the country. Another weakness of this study includes using only quantitative research techniques. This study is only based on quantitative data. Using the mixed method of both qualitative and quantitative research could have been helpful in getting more accurate findings. Time and monetary constraints were also major problems in conducting this study on a broader scale.

5. Recommendations

Citizens' participation in local government activities is very important for ensuring good governance at the local level. Despite having some existing mechanisms, citizens' participation in local government activities is still not satisfactory. According to Arnstein's citizen's participation theory, this study found the citizen's participation in Bangladesh at the therapy level. It means that existing mechanisms for citizens' participation are only for making the people convinced that they have the opportunity to participate rather than using these mechanisms to ensure actual citizen participation. Some measures need to be taken in order to ensure citizens' participation in the local government of Bangladesh. Some relevant measures are recommended for ensuring citizen participation as follows.

- Strong willingness of the major political parties is deemed necessary for ensuring public participation in the local government of Bangladesh
- Quality education and political awareness of villagers are one of the preconditions of establishing the foundation of participatory government in rural Bangladesh. Government should take suitable policies to ensure quality education and effective participative mechanism in rural local governments.

Participatory avenues especially Open Budget meeting, Ward Shava, Village Court needed to perform well for gaining trust and confidence of the local people over these avenues. If any mechanism needs to be reformed, the relevant reformations must be done.

- Civil society, community-based organizations, and NGOs should work to make the people conscious about the benefits and necessity of participating in local government activities, also help them to learn skills of advocacy and effective policy influence, as well to guard against co-optation.
- To be able to organize local peoples' own convention, build their own network, and use village-to-village peer education and support approaches to strengthen their ability, it will be extremely beneficial to train and sensitize local elected and government officials.
- Promoting transparency of local government officials' activities especially in the use of local funds to ensure accountability of the elected officials to citizens.

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