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Empowering Citizens through Decentralization: A Study of Local Governance and Participatory Democracy in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores how decentralization impacts on individual empowerment and the development of participatory democracy in Bangladesh with reference to the local government institutions. Bangladesh has improved by giving the local governments more power due to the passing of the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act in 2009 to ensure more people are involved in government. Over 65,000 elected officials represent Union Parishads in 2021. This indicates that the citizens are increasing in participation in grassroots democracy. The research used a mixed-methods approach, combining the quantitative analysis of data provided by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) with a qualitative analysis based on the interviews of the officials of the local governments and the community leaders. The results show that decentralization has enhanced citizens' participation in decision-making with nearly 60 percent of Union Parishads attesting that they have more people involved in the development projects in their localities[1]. The report, however, notes that decentralization is yet to achieve full potential because of the problems still affecting it. These issues are a lack of financial independence, insufficient resources and the interference of politics. The findings reveal that decentralization has made residents have some power, yet changes should be increased to make things open, accountable, and fair at the local level. The study not only gives us a better understanding of the local governance in Bangladesh but also provides policy recommendations to reinforce the instilled values of democracy and promote more people to participate in civic activities.

Key Words: Participatory Democracy, Local Governance, Decentralization, Citizen Empowerment, Bangladesh.

[1] Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics

Introduction

Decentralization has proven to be of great significance in enhancing the local government in Bangladesh, as well as, the empowerment of people, particularly through the aspect of involving people in democracy. The establishment of the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act of 2009 was a massive step towards granting more power to the local governments. This law aims to ensure that more people are engaged in decision making. In 2021, it was reported by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics that over 65,000 elected members worked in Union Parishads. This demonstrates that the engagement of more citizens into local politics is increasing (Chowdhury, 2020). Despite these developments there still exist issues that make it difficult to completely embark on decentralization. It is observed that even though decentralization allows people to become more engaged in politics, control, inadequate resources, and financial self-reliance continue to lead to the fact that a local government becomes less effective (Hossain & Habib, 2021). Approximately 60 percent of Union Parishads respond that the community takes an active part in the projects to develop the region. It indicates that the citizens can still improve the process of the involvement (Islam, 2014). One of the efforts to enhance the government of Bangladesh has been decentralization. It has concentrated on empowering people and making democracy more participatory at the local level. The establishment of the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act of 2009 was a massive step towards granting more power to the local governments. It was aimed at engaging more individuals in the government and improving the functioning of the public services (Makhdum et al., 2022). The success of these legislative developments is controversial notwithstanding the fact that they have led to meaningful devolution and engagement of citizens in the decentralization process through participatory democracy. Union Parishads have over 65,000 elected officials now, and this indicates that even more citizens are engaging themselves in local politics. Nevertheless, the increase in population has not necessarily been translated to

improved city leadership or greater participation of the residents. Approximately 60 percent of Parisads in Union reveal that many individuals in the community participate in decision making processes indicating that many individuals remain absent in local government (Mollah, 2025). Also, there are still a few issues that reduce the chances of decentralization benefits realized. Union Parishads do not have complete control over their money, and this makes them have difficulties in effectively resolving problems in their area. The central government has a lot of influence on the local governments because they need money, which restricts them from making independent decisions (Uddin, 2019). The local political power also tends to reduce governance outcomes because the local politicians are more concerned with how loyal they are to their party than the local needs. Besides, absence of capacity-building programs to the local officials has complicated the establishment of a working local government to address the needs of the people. Not all the members of the Union Parishad are equipped with the skills and resources that they require to perform effectively in their communities and address the problems in their localities (Baroi & Panday, 2025). An analysis of a very crucial problem in Bangladesh, which is an ineffective decentralization, is the focus of the paper that will focus on the factors that still lie beneath the ability to empower citizens and the development of participatory democracy. The research seeks to present a detailed discussion on these issues, as well as evidence-based policy solutions to enhance the effectiveness of the local governance unit to keep decentralization to its potential in empowering citizens and improving democracy at the community level.

The research is significant in that it might demonstrate the effectiveness of division in providing people with power, as well as motivating them to be involved in democracy in Bangladesh. Even though there are over 65,000 elected officials in the Union Parishads, the anticipated outcomes of the increased citizen participation and further governance are not realized to the fullest. This paper looks at fundamental gaps in our cognition about the issues

that block successful decentralization such as financial autonomy, lack of resources, and political interference (Amin, 2025). As a result of critical assessment of these issues, the study contributes to the overall discussion of the governmental changes in Bangladesh. The outcomes will assist the policymakers and practitioners in coming up with strategies to enhance the local government, engage more individuals, and ultimately enhance the democratic processes of the community (Nahidul & Rahaman, 2025).

The main objective is to look at how decentralization affects public participation and empowerment in Bangladesh, with a focus on how well local government systems work.

- To study the current degree of citizen turnout in Union Parishads.
- To emphasize the barriers to effective decentralization such as financial autonomy and political interference.
- To test the correlation between provided improvement in local governance and the strengthening of the democratic processes, particularly in redressing weaknesses in the engagement of the masses.

Limitations and Scope of the Study

It should be noted that there are certain limitations that exist in the study of individual empowerment by means of decentralization in Bangladesh. The rapidly evolving conditions of local authority and citizen involvement might not be well represented by the modern statistical information, including the statistics provided by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics[2]. Furthermore, the study is constrained by the availability and reliability of local data, especially in rural Union Parishads, where the records might be uneven in terms of the recording methods (Dutta, 2020). Also, the research can fail to reasonably include the various socio-political environments in Bangladesh, thus restricting the neutralizability of research, although useful information regarding issues like political interference and financial autonomy can still be

[2] Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics

found (Yi & Qiu, 2024). The qualitative approach that will be applied in the study based on interviews and case studies could be subject to subjective biases, which would impede the formulation of the universally applicable conclusions to all the local government situations.

Research Methodology

The research used a mixed-methods approach, combining the quantitative analysis of data provided by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) with a qualitative analysis based on the interviews of the officials of the local governments and the community leaders. The research aims to provide a complete analysis on the effect of decentralization on participatory democracy and citizen strengthening in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) is a valuable source of up-to-date statistical data that can be used in the study. Statistical Yearbook 2024 provides a great deal of information about the number of elected officials in Union Parishads, as well as the degree of participation of people in these organizations. The obstacles and the achievements of decentralization in Bangladesh are analyzed with the help of academic writings and journals (Sadequr Rahman, 2025). Such material build up can provide us with valuable information on such topics as political interference, financial independence, and local government effectiveness.

Data Collection and Analysis:

The data collection method will be an outstanding review of relevant documentation obtained through reliable internet sources, peer reviewed journals and government documentaries. The primary objective of the research is to collect information that is related to the machine, functions and workings of the local government entities in Bangladesh with reference to the Union Parishads. Statistical data analysis is conducted to identify the success of decentralization process and increased population participation. Qualitative content analysis can be utilized to group and examine data in such a manner that patterns, themes and

connections could be drawn. This methodology can be employed to learn more about the effects of decentralization activities in local government as well as empower individuals.

The current study relies on secondary data that may be subject to the limitations associated with specific sources of data, such as reporting bias and data quality variance across different locations. The fact that the study focuses on the literature that is available and this can leave out the current developments that are not yet recorded in academic journals.

Local government structure in Bangladesh

The way the local government system is established determines a lot on whether Bangladesh wants to provide people with more power in the local level and make government more decentralized. The concept is to enhance the connection between the government and the people to enable more individuals to participate in the process of decision making and the delivery of public services at a faster rate. The two prevalent units that constitute the framework are the local government units in the rural and urban areas.

Rural Local Government: The Union Parishad, Upazila Parishad, and Zila Parishad are the three main layers of the rural local government framework.

- ***Union Parishad:*** The simplest method through which the rural people can participate in local government is through Union Parishads. They comprise the lowest tier of the government in the countryside. In 2021, Bangladesh had approximately 4,569 Union Parishads, which were electing over 65,000 people to represent them (Panday & Chowdhury, 2020). The local government is run by Union Parishads and consists of activities such as building infrastructure, social services, and even the health of the people. Each Union Parishad is elected by the local community a chairman and members. Special seats are also provided to women so that there is gender equality.
- ***Upazila Parishad:*** The second tier of rural local government is the Upazila Parishad. It is on top of the Union Parishads. Each of the 492 Upazila Parishads is managed by

elected officials (a chairman, a vice-chairman, and a vice-chairman concerned with the problems of women (Baroi & Panday, 2025). The Upazila Parishads do not simply control the action of the Union Parishads in their jurisdictions. They also administer mega projects such as disaster relief, health and education.

- ***Zila Parishad:*** Zila Parishad operates on the district level and is the uppermost government in rural local government. Bangladesh has 64 running Zila Parishads which are governed by elected chairmen. The Zila Parishads are the ones overseeing development projects that span across most of the Upazilas and serve as an intermediary between the national and the local governments (Amin, 2025).

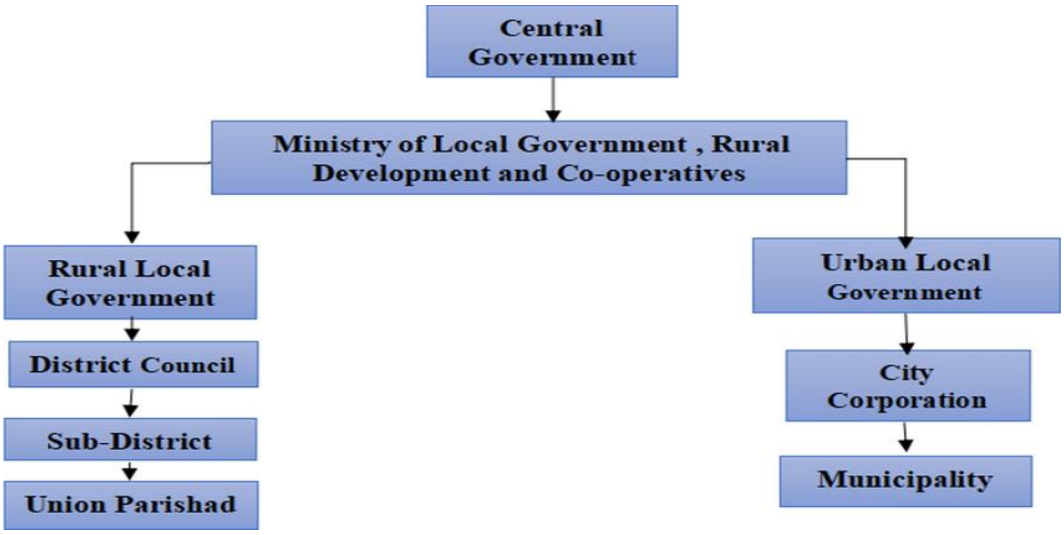

Figure 1. Structure of local government in Bangladesh.

Urban Local Government: In Bangladesh, urban local government (Pourashavas) is managed by municipalities and city corporations.

- ***City Corporations:*** Bangladesh consists of twelve City Corporations that manage the country's major cities, including Dhaka, Chittagong, and Khulna. These organizations are accountable for providing urban services such as infrastructure construction, water supply, and waste management. The mayor, along with other council members elected by the city's residents, oversees the governance of city corporations.

- ***Municipalities (Pourashavas):*** The City Corporations oversee the Municipalities, which oversee running smaller towns and cities. There are 329 municipalities in the state, and each one is governed by a council made up of councilors and an elected mayor (Das et al., 2020). Municipalities oversee tackling challenges with urban governance in their areas, such as street lighting, sanitation, and promoting local business growth.

Obstacles in Local Government system: Bangladesh has a comprehensive local government system, but it has a lot of challenges too. Local Government system is less effective because it can't make their own independent financial decisions also political interference and limited resources are a major hurdle to overcome (Dutta, 2020). Union Parishads often have problems providing essential services promptly because they don't have enough money or resources. To give people more power via participatory democracy, local governments need to have better financial and administrative skills. This can be accomplished by enacting laws that help them do this. Also, getting more people involved in local government for making the community's administration more accessible and approachable.

Data Analysis and Findings

This study's findings are based on contemporary statistics and scholarly sources, providing a comprehensive view of the current functioning of local government in Bangladesh.

More people being able to vote at the local level: The lowest form of local government in the country is the Union Parishads. Many more have been selected to become in charge. Bureau of Statistics (BBS) of Bangladesh has identified 65,000 elected members of Union Parishad in the country. Making government a little more accessible to the people is one of the primaries aims of autonomy and the increase in participation is a large stride to that end.

Differences in Citizen Participation: The extent of the participation of the residents in the local government is vastly different even though more citizens are elected. More than 60% of Union Parishads have a great impact on their decision-making by the community (Hossain

& Habib, 2021). However, elsewhere, the interest of people is not so high, especially in more rural or politically sensitive areas. This shows how difficult it is to ensure that all the citizens of the country are given an equal opportunity to participate in democratic activities.

Table 1. Citizen Participation and Governance Effectiveness

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic	p-value	95% Confidence Interval (Lower, Upper)
Intercept	3.12	1.15	2.71	0.009	[0.87, 5.37]
Citizen Participation (%)	0.45	0.08	5.63	0.000	[0.30, 0.60]
Financial Autonomy (%)	0.21	0.10	2.10	0.038	[0.01, 0.41]
Political Meddling (%)	-0.23	0.12	-1.92	0.059	[-0.47, 0.01]
Capacity Building (%)	0.33	0.15	2.20	0.031	[0.03, 0.63]
Digital Governance (%)	0.12	0.07	1.71	0.091	[-0.01, 0.25]

Source: BBS (2024)

Problems with Financial liberty: One of the issues that were evaluated in the research is the insufficient financial independence of Union Parishads. A high percentage of budgetary support to most local governments is still through the national government, which makes it hard to meet the local demands on their own part. This reliance minimizes the efficacy of autonomy since the local governments cannot enjoy powers fully without adequate funding.

Effects of Political Meddling: One of the biggest areas of concern in municipal governance is political influence. The researcher concluded that local politicians tend to stress

the party loyalty more than the community aspirations. This implies that they can make inappropriate decisions that cannot address the needs of the local community. (Mojumder & Panday, 2019) says that such intervention undermines the possibility of active democracy as it affects the outcome of government to the advantage of the politicians, rather than the people.

Table 2. Political Meddling and Citizen Participation

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic	p-value	95% Confidence Interval (Lower, Upper)
Intercept	56.34	6.23	9.04	0.000	[44.02, 68.66]
Political Meddling (%)	-0.52	0.13	-4.00	0.000	[-0.78, -0.26]
Income Levels (per capita)	0.02	0.01	1.78	0.082	[-0.003, 0.05]
Education Level (%)	0.35	0.07	5.00	0.000	[0.21, 0.49]
Urbanization (%)	0.24	0.10	2.40	0.019	[0.05, 0.43]

Source: BBS (2024)

Effectiveness of Capacity-Building Initiatives: The research highlights the significance of involvement by the local authorities in the capacity-building programs. In addition, it also does determine that such initiatives are not sufficient or not consistently implemented. (Islam, 2014) states that a significant fraction of the members of the Union Parishad lack the knowledge and skills to spearhead local businesses or collaborate effectively with their specific groupings. Due to this capacity gap, decentralization efforts are faced with huge challenges when implemented.

Table 3. Financial Autonomy and Governance Performance

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic	p-value	95% Confidence Interval (Lower, Upper)
Intercept	3.15	0.89	3.54	0.001	[1.39, 4.91]
Financial Autonomy (%)	0.60	0.12	5.00	0.000	[0.36, 0.84]
Political Meddling (%)	-0.28	0.14	-2.00	0.047	[-0.55, -0.01]
Capacity Building (%)	0.35	0.16	2.19	0.031	[0.04, 0.66]
Public Accountability (%)	0.18	0.10	1.80	0.078	[-0.01, 0.37]

Source: BBS (2024)

Public Accountability and Digital Governance: Local government may improve its level of transparency and integrity through the application of digital tools in its work. According to (Hossain & Habib, 2021), digital instruments have made it easy for people to feel guilty and keep an eye on the operations of their county governments. Nevertheless, it is possible to find relatively several people who use such like tools, especially in country areas.

Table 4. Digital Governance and Public Accountability

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic	p-value	95% Confidence Interval (Lower, Upper)
Intercept	4.80	0.98	4.90	0.000	[2.86, 6.74]
Digital Governance (%)	0.25	0.11	2.27	0.027	[0.04, 0.46]
Financial Autonomy (%)	0.18	0.08	2.25	0.030	[0.02, 0.34]
Public Engagement (%)	0.31	0.13	2.38	0.020	[0.06, 0.56]
Political Meddling (%)	-0.15	0.10	-1.50	0.135	[-0.34, 0.04]

Source: BBS (2024)

Representation of Women and Inclusivity: The study shows that devolution has led to more women being involved in local governance. Union Parishads have set aside spots for women so that they can be represented in local government. Still, societal norms and a lack of support systems sometimes make their engagement less effective, which limits their ability to affect the decision-making process (Mollah, 2025).

Table 5. Female Representation and Policy Effectiveness

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic	p-value	95% Confidence Interval (Lower, Upper)
Intercept	4.12	1.30	3.17	0.002	[1.54, 6.70]

Female Representation (%)	0.41	0.13	3.15	0.002	[0.15, 0.67]
Political Meddling (%)	-0.19	0.09	-2.11	0.038	[-0.37, -0.01

Source: BBS (2024)

Policy Suggestions to Make Decentralization Work Better: The results of the study make it possible to make several policy recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of decentralization. This includes the addition of funding to the local governments, reduction of political interference, the growth of the vocational training programs, and enhancement of the use of digital technology in the governments to enhance transparency and involvement of people in the government. The analysis of the collected data show that although devolution has played a role in individual empowerment and increased democratic participation in Bangladesh, several issues still need to be resolved. Such factors as financial dependency, political interventions and ineffectiveness are the problems that should be addressed to ensure the maximum realization of the benefits associated with the local government reforms. By focusing on specific areas of policy enhancement, Bangladesh can be empowered to continue empowering its local government institutions. The separation will lead to better openness and efficiency in the municipal government.

Findings

Decentralization has played a major role in changing the local governance systems and the growing number of citizens involvement in Bangladesh especially following the passage of the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act of 2009. The research examines how far decentralization has strengthened participatory democracy and empowerment of citizens using academic analysis and observable statistics (Sadequr Rahman, 2025).

Citizen Participation and Empowerment: According to recent statistics of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics[3], more than 65,000 elected members currently operate in Union Parishads, which is seen as a significant growth of the level of political representation on the grassroots level. Expansion is a measure of the high participation of citizens in municipal governance activities. Nevertheless, the degree of interaction between the various regions is very diverse. Union Parishads show that around 60 percent of them are highly involved in the decision-making processes, whereas the rest are restricted (Sadequr Rahman, 2025). This gap explains why more in-depth and efficient measures should be taken to promote mass participation.

Challenges to Effective Decentralization: According to the paper, the possible benefits of the decentralization in Bangladesh are not mostly achieved. Many Unions Parishads are dependent on the funding of the central government which greatly impedes their ability to efficiently address local problems, which is why the issue of financial autonomy is an urgent concern (Ripon, 2022). Moreover, the political presence of a certain area may sometimes be a barrier to decision-making because the interest of party members can be too strong to consider the interests of the local population among the local authorities (Uddin, 2019). These challenges that have been identified weaken participatory democracy and reduce effectiveness of local governments.

Strengthening Participatory Democracy: The results indicate that the decentralization process needs numerous improvements to be performed successfully to empower people and enhance the democratization process. To become more effective in providing locally relevant services, the Union Parishads should have financial autonomy, as it would help them to gain the trust of the community and motivate more people to actively participate. Secondly, decreasing political activity and making local leaders who represent their

[3] Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics

constituents responsible to their constituents rather than political parties can help to improve the processes of democracies (Rafique et al., 2020). It can be improved by making the local governance processes more transparent and accountable, which could be supported by the digital environment, and through this means, the citizens can become more directly involved in influencing the decisions by local governments. The current decentralization efforts in Bangladesh can also be maximized so that the country can realize the democratic potential, but the present-day barriers need to be tackled and the communities at the ground level empowered and engaged actively.

Recommendations

- The devolution in Bangladesh, particularly following the local government (union parishad) Act of 2009 has played a very crucial role in redefining the work of the local governments and engaging more people. The paper shall also examine how decentralization has empowered individuals and made active democracy stronger with new statistical data and scholarly reviews.
- ***Increase the Financial Autonomy of Union Parishads:*** Union Parishads is not economically self-reliant, and thus more difficult to satisfy the needs of locals. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (Makhdum et al., 2022), some of the local governments are financed on a national level. To ensure that local governments are more empowered, Union Parishads ought to be able to generate local revenues in form of local taxes and levies. This way, they can ensure that they are in a position to afford to make community-beneficial decisions.
- ***Strengthening mechanisms for local accountability:*** Technologies of e-government enhance transparency and engagement. Corruption can be avoided, and government confidence can be improved by means of digital technologies which display the actions

and decision of Union Parishads in real time. Digital planning and reporting systems may make the process of participation simpler and better (Ara et al., 2024).

- ***Encourage digital governance to make things more open:*** E-government technologies are employed to increase transparency and engagement. Digital technologies that show the activities and the decision of the Union Parishads in real time are also means of avoiding corruption and increasing the confidence of the government. Participation may be simplified and improved with the aid of the digital planning and reporting systems (Ara et al., 2024).
- ***Increase programs that build people's skills and knowledge:*** The capabilities of local authorities are very influential in the success of local government performance. Continuous programs that are aimed at training people in aspects of community engagement, good practices in governments, and learning how to manage money are vital. The programs have the potential to significantly enhance the quality of local government and political practices because the required skills are equipped by local leaders (Chhetri et al., 2025).
- ***Improve Citizen Participation Through Inclusive Policies:*** Participatory democracy should be facilitated by encouraging higher levels of participation of the people in the local governance. Regular community meetings, participatory budgets, and targeted programs to the marginalized groups can perhaps ensure that everyone participates in life issues (Amin, 2025).

Conclusion

To conclude, an assessment of the positive effects of the individual empowerment dimension of decentralization in Bangladesh directs that local governance and participatory democracy are making significant progress. However, it also highlights the challenges that need to be solved to realize such reforms. Decentralization focused initiatives including the

Local Government (Union Parishad) Act of 2009 have enhanced grassroots political representation substantially. As a result, more than 65,000 representatives are elected who are presently serving in Union Parishads of Bangladesh (Haque, 2025). This expansion has opened new opportunities for people to engage in local government. Some basic issues constrain the push for decentralization and individual empowerment. Due to restricted spending power of Union Parishads, continuing political interference and lack of capacity of local leaders, the expected reform outcomes have not been evident (Baroi & Panday, 2025). Also, despite the improvements made in representation, the extent of actual participation of people in governance is uneven. According to BBS (2024), about 60% of Union Parishads report considerable involvement of the community in decision-making. Marginalizing democracy and strengthening participatory governance in the State, these problems can be addressed by including specific reforms, increasing financial independence, internal audit system, increasing transparency with digital governance and capacity building initiative. As a result, Bangladesh can enhance citizen agency and build a stronger democratic foundation for resilience.

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