

How Far the Local Government Institutions Ensure Public Accountability? An Analysis of Upazila Parishads of Bangladesh

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Abstract

Public accountability mainly relates to subjects of public concern domain, such as the spending of public funds, the exercise of public authorities, or the conduct of public institutions. All countries all over the world strive to ensure the accountability of public officials by adopting different kinds of mechanisms. Therefore, public accountability is the hallmark of effective good governance. In reality, Bangladesh is one of the most governance deficit countries in the world. Whereas, Upazila system, as an intermediate tier of the local government unit, there exists due accountability system of Upazila officers. By focusing on these rationales, the study attempts to explore the reality of ensuring accountability for citizens by the local government bodies through a comparative analysis. The study also tries to find out what factors responsible for hindering accountability practices in local government institutions. However, the study found that local government institutions in Bangladesh are very weak in providing basic services to the citizens and in promoting good governance to their constituencies due to a variety of constraints, including a lack of revenues, a low level of human capital in the local government bodies, the absence of participatory decision-making, and the lack of accountability and transparency. Therefore, the paper aims to provide practical solutions. It reveals some strategies to overcome the accountability challenges of local governance at the Upazila system and also highlights the tools for fighting against these challenges.

Keywords: Accountability, Citizens' Engagement, Transparency, Local Governance, Upazila Parishad.

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Introduction

Accountability is a central tenet of democratic governance. It is essential in democratic systems in fostering transparency¹ and trustworthiness in government in the course of ensuring control over a government's actions (Bovens, Schillemans, & T'Hart, 2008; Lindberg, 2013). Again, public accountability originates within the state and is initiated by public officials and service providers (Malena, 2004). Public accountability is specifically about the spending of public resources, the execution of public duties, and responsibilities that serve the public (HELVETAS, 2011(b):3). The fundamental purpose of accountability is found in principles of democracy, the rule of law, and effective and good governance (Manzetti, 2003). In recent years, the new model of public governance has brought new dimensions for ensuring public accountability (Haque, 2000, 2007). However, in order to hold the government accountable, transparency is essential. It also involves a relationship between actors in terms of responsibility for action and the targets of that action (Ebrahim, 2003).

The structure of government in Bangladesh has undergone changes frequently in the early years. Immediately after independence, Bangladesh adopted a system of multi-party parliamentary democracy in which the legislature, the cabinet of ministers, and the opposition in the parliament had a major role to play in ensuring accountability (Constitution, Part V)². As in all bureaucracies, the first and foremost mechanism for accountability in Bangladesh is the administrative hierarchy. The bureaucracy at the central secretariat is organized into Sections, Branches, Wings, Divisions, and Ministries. In each unit, there are arrangements for supervisors to ensure accountability of the officials under their charge. For the purpose of field administration, Bangladesh is divided into divisions, districts, and upazilas (sub-districts). Divisional Commissioners supervise the work of District Commissioners who, in turn, supervise Upazila Nirbahi Officers. Likewise, the supervisors at the highest level of Secretariat/Ministry and field administration are accountable to the respective ministers (Mollah, 2008, pp. 92-93). In addition, bureaucratic agencies have other arrangements to ensure accountability. The elements of a code of conduct for public servants are incorporated in the Government Servants Conduct Rules 1979 (GOB, 1979), and the Government Servants (Discipline and Appeal) Rules 1985 (GOB, 1985), but there is no integrated code of conduct that contributes to accountability in public administration in Bangladesh.

¹ Transparency refers to norms and practices for legally legitimate centers of powers to disclose information about their decisions, actions and states of affairs to the public (Holzner, 2001, p.1).

² Constitution of People's Republic of Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, accountability has special significance at the local level as national development planning is largely based on the inputs of local governments. However, Local government Institutions (LGIs) in Bangladesh show a meager record as efficient, accountable, and responsive providers of public services (Zafarullah and Siddiquee, 2001). There is no denying that for bringing the government's services to the common people's doorstep decentralization is the strongest means (UNDP, 2002 and 2007). It also ensures the accountability and transparency of local government as well as citizen's participation in local level development (UNDP, 1993). At the central level, the concerned agencies arrange pre-budget dialogues with the professional bodies and civil society organizations including traditional NGOs³. An organization like Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) and SHUJON (Citizens for Good Governance) has been working on different issues on good governance. Their main role is to expose the government and make people alert (Ahamed, 1988).

Like many other developing countries, Bangladesh engaged in decentralization for a democratic and participatory local government system that could sustain development and deliver services efficiently and effectively to the people. Besides the transfer of power from central to districts, political control at the local level, enhancing local economic development, and improving local capacity in managing resources, that may envision the improvement of accountability and responsibility at the local level. In Bangladesh, UZPs have faced several institutional challenges like lack of authority and power, authoritative central and local relationships, inadequate financial resources, lack of transparency and accountability (Panday, 2011). Likewise, a lack of vision, a lack of commitment as well as dishonesty of the leadership of UPZs are observed. In some cases, the accountability of the elected leaders of UPZs is not visible practice (Aminuzzaman, 2011). All the LGIs have their own sources of revenue. But they hardly can generate a sufficient amount of revenue to meet their actual demand. The problem arises due to their low capacities of revenue mobilization or unwillingness to mobilize revenues (Bhattacharya, 2003). Though there is a provision of the UZP Act 1998 and 2011 to be transparent and participatory⁴ people have a very low level of access in the project selection as well as in other decision-making processes. The Corruption Perception Index (CPI) of Transparency International⁵ listed Bangladesh as one of the most corrupt nations in various consecutive years. Corruption takes many forms in the public

³Traditional NGOs refers as those non- governmental organizations that existing in or operate in a country as a part of that country's tradition like...BRAC, Prashika etc.

⁴ (schedule 3 UZP Act 1998 amended in 2009 and 2011)

⁵(www.transparency.org. various years)

sector and has rendered the framework of accountability weak (Zafarullah and Siddiquee, 2001& 2008). Therefore decisions are made by people in authority without consulting stakeholders, and the network of corruption protects its members from being exposed or prosecuted. Consequently, accountability suffers as the existing channels and frameworks are never put to use. Numerous obstacles exist in the way of ensuring accountability through internal mechanisms, and it is pertinent to consider the extra-bureaucratic options. While the level of effectiveness of bureaucratic mechanisms for accountability appears to be low. On the other hand, citizen awareness is a significant element for ensuring accountability and various NGOs have raised the level of awareness among the citizens but each civil society organization may drive by its own agenda in ensuring accountability. The present study tries to analyze these factors and how these ensure accountability in UPZs in Bangladesh. The main objective of the study is to find out the level of accountability that ensured by the LGIs of Bangladesh for the citizen. Specifically, the study will focus on these objectives:

- To find out whether the introduction of citizen charter enhanced better provision of public services
- To explore what are the factors responsible for hindering accountability practices in the LGIs
- To examine the factors that promoting accountability at the UPZ level who serving as LGIs

This paper is structured as follows. Following the introduction, section two provides a brief description of the theoretical framework. The third section provides a methodological statement, while section four examines the data and gives a summary of the study findings. The last section provides some conclusions and recommendations.

Theoretical framework

Public accountability

Accountability has gained eminence in modern public administration theory and practice. Public accountability is the hallmark of effective good governance (Sarker, 2008). Accountability is a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgment, and the actor can be sanctioned (Bovens, 2005). The nature of the interaction between ‘the forum’ and ‘the actor’ frequently revolves around a ‘principal-agent relation’. Bovens(2010) has developed accountability into two forms namely accountability as a virtue and accountability as a mechanism. In this case, accountability is used primarily as a normative concept, as a set of standards for the evaluation of the behavior of public actors (Bovens, 2010: 946). The second school of thought sees accountability as a social ‘mechanism’, as an institutional

relation or arrangement in which an agent can be held to account by another agent or institution (Aucoin and Jarvis 2005; Bovens 2007; Day and Klein 1987; Goodin 2003; Mulgan 2003; Philp 2009; Scott 2000 cited in Bovens, 2010:948). This study is to draw aspects from these two concepts of accountability as they are both useful for the study. However, the main argument for the focus of the study is accountability in the narrower sense (as a social relation). This concept of accountability as a social relation can also be explained here in the context of the institution.

Bangladesh has institutionalized accountability both in central government and in the local government structures. Formal institutional mechanisms of public accountability are present in Bangladesh (Sarker, 2008). The parliament has the power to criticize the government on issues of importance and investigate any government action (Khan, 2006). Like all other administrative systems, Bangladesh's public administration has also bureaucratic means of accountability in place. Despite the existence of adequate rules and regulations, bureaucratic means of accountability remain ineffective in Bangladesh (Ali, 2007; Huda & Rahman, 1989; Siddiquee, 1999). Lack of bureaucratic accountability can be attributed to other factors such as clientelism and corruption (Jamil, 2007). However, the judicial control of administration remains ineffective (Blair, 2004; Siddiquee, 1999; World Bank, 2002). Some deviations like the dismal performance of such formal institutions as the parliament, the judiciary, and the bureaucracy in ensuring public accountability, though they are the prime institutions for doing so.

In general, accountability takes four different forms namely: bureaucratic, political, professional, and legal (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987:228) and it has two dimensions in public administration. The first dimension, bureaucratic accountability entails government workers being answerable to elected officials and political accountability involves elected leaders being answerable to the citizens who elect them (DTT, 2012). Therefore, the focus of this study has been on both bureaucratic and political or democratic forms of accountability to get a clear picture of why variation exists in Bangladesh's local government.

Therefore, it is a common practice to analyze accountability relations using principle-agent models. The agency models are part of the rational choice institutional school of thought (Eckardt, 2008:61). The agency model has two major assumptions: First, that there is a conflict of goals between the principal and the agent. This assumption is based on the premise that principals and agents each have competing interests. Eckardt (2008:62) observe that the only restriction on agents (who are seen as self-seekers) is their relationship with their principals. The second assumption is that agents have more information than their principals, which results in the unevenness of information between them. The

implication of this is that agents will always try to exploit this information to their advantage to satisfy their own self-seeking behaviors.

In light of this model, citizens who are the principal; are expected to hold their leaders (appointed and elected /bureaucratic and political leaders) to account. This model will therefore be used to analyze accountability relations in the selected LGIs in Bangladesh. The World Development Report (2004) also places emphasis on accountability as a fundamental concept in public service delivery (Eckardt, 2008:29). The argument here is that citizens are at the center of accountability. Therefore, empowering poor citizens (the principal) by increasing their influence in policymaking and aligning their interests with those of the non-poor can hold politicians and their bureaucratic counterparts (the agents) more accountable for universal service delivery. This framework has been adopted with modifications to operationalize the dependent variables for this study. The dependent variable in this study is accountability. This study in line with three aspects will focus on transparency, participation, and complaints and response mechanisms as the dependent variables for the study. The cardinal aim of this study is to find out to which extent the Local Government Institutions of Bangladesh ensure Public Accountability. To achieve this objective, the study attempts to find the connection between the level of awareness, LG capacity, political ambience, and accountability. The study tries to hold constant some variables that are known to affect performance and accountability in local governments.

Research Methodology

The paper is based on both primary and secondary sources of data and it involves a qualitative research approach⁶. The methodological choices which have been profoundly carried out for the research are illustrated in the following portions. A self-administered questionnaire, in-depth interviews, and observations were the tools for collecting primary data. Whereas secondary data has been collected through books, journal articles, research reports, newspapers, activity reports, and internet browsing, etc. The main research question of this study is “what are the gaps in the formal accountability structure (laws, rules & regulations) in relation with the departmental activities at the Upazila level” and “what factors promote or hinder accountability in local governments and what are the challenges faced by UPZ in terms of better service delivery? To explore the answer, the study proposes to analyze local government organizations, i.e. Upazila Parishad, thus the unit of analysis that is an

⁶ Gay (1996) states that qualitative methods go beyond just mere descriptions of events and provide in depth understanding of the situation being studied.

“institution”. The second unit of analysis is “individuals related to the institution”. There are 492 Upazila Parishads in Bangladesh. Due to this largest area of the study and diverse types, this study was only conducted with two Upazila Parishad in two different districts that are purposively selected as the study area of the research. They are Barishal Sadar Upazila in Barishal District and Rajoir Upazila in Madaripur District respectively. The choice of two Upazila Parishads is influenced by their accessibility with the physical infrastructure, availability of officials, service delivery mechanisms, and responsiveness towards people amongst other influences.

Here, the procedure for the selection of the respondents was based on the research questions mainly targeted to achieve the purpose of the study. Furthermore, during the study, the selection of respondents is based on two groups such as officials (service providers) and non-officials (service seekers), of all which helped to generate relevant information by telling whether they get services as expected or not in their area. Therefore, the current research involves a single-stage⁷ sampling design as respondents were those who directly accessed Upazila Parishads for their services which allowed the study to be convenient. This has helped the research to get information from citizens having first-hand experiences in accessing services from UPZ.

Table 1: Respondents ‘details of the two Upazila Parishad

Units of Observation	Sample Size	Sampling Technique	Data Collection Method	Methodology
Service Providers				Qualitative Research Method
UNO	2	Purposive Sampling	in-depth interview	
Chairman	2	Purposive Sampling	Interview Schedule- semi-structured questionnaires	
Vice-chairman	2	Purposive Sampling	informal interview and observation	
Upazila officials	2X2=4	Purposive Sampling	Interview Schedule- semi-	

⁷ Single stage is used when a researcher has direct access to the population and can sample the population directly (Creswell 2014, p. 158).

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			structured questionnaires	
Service Recipients	10 from each Upazila Parishad 10X2=20	Purposive and convenient Sampling	Participant Observation	
TOTAL	30			

Source: Researcher's synthesis

During the study, the researcher observed the working environment of the Upazilas as well as other administrator's behaviors towards others and also observed the state of infrastructure in different Upazila. Furthermore, during the field study, document reviews helped to collect secondary data which is expected to be relevant to the study. A variety of documents has been used to collect data such as administrative documents, formal studies or evaluation of the same site under the study, newspaper, and other articles appearing in the mass media, all aimed at providing more empirical data about the study. Further, the research carried out the narrative data would be described in qualitative approach focusing objectives of the study.

Research Findings

This section gives a summary of the study findings. Theoretically, the study is grounded in the principal-agent model, which is often used to explain how political and bureaucratic actors (agents) respond to the interests of their citizens (the principal) on whose behalf they act. At the empirical level, a comparative analysis is used to synthesize in-depth interviews and documentary as well as observational evidence from the two selected local governments. However, analysis of the empirical evidence indicates that it is not possible to draw meaningful findings too early to say that there is a reflection of a broader accountability challenge in local governments.

A major problem in Bangladesh's public sector is not only a lack of accountability but also the nature of accountability. The chain of accountability stretching from the bureaucrats (higher position in the administrative hierarchy) to the peon (the lowest position in the administrative hierarchy) is weak and fuzzy. In general, Government of Bangladesh (GOB) agencies are subject to weak accounting controls, do not face serious scrutiny by the legislature or legal institutions, and are not subject to the financial discipline of the market place. Above all, agencies are unresponsive to people's needs; citizens have little access to information about government processes and decisions and lack any effective means of obtaining redress when officials abuse their power.

Analysis based upon Variables

A close linkage between the independent variables and the dependent variables has been found (Table -2).

Table 2: Scenario of public accountability in LGIs (based upon dependent variables)

Dependent Variables with indicators	Accountability ensured (Percentage of Total)	
	<i>Barishal Sadar Upazila</i>	<i>Rajoir Upazila Parishad</i>
Transparency (Notice Boards, Online Citizen Charter, E-Tendering, A2I)	average 80%	average 72%
Participation (citizens' involvement in local elections, social activism, engagement of CBOs/CSOs)	average 56%	average 45%
Complaints and Response Mechanisms (set complaint box, register complaints against public officers and services or political leaders) and (no such response mechanisms has been seen)	complaint average 10% response average 2%	complaint 0% response 0%

Source: Field survey from Upazila officials

Transparency

As far as openness of local governments is concerned, the government departments, in fact, the inclusiveness of LGs do not avail the required information to provide their citizens, in spite of switching the Right to Information Act in Bangladesh, in 2009. Local government revenue and expenditure information continue to be secretly kept, in the name of confidentiality. Citizens do not have adequate access to internal revenue and expenditure reports. Work plans like tendering processes are flawed but the system is a little updated after introducing E-Tender. *Barishal Sadar Upazila*, however, has better measures of communicating to the public through notice boards, citizen charter, etc. This assertion is supported by the testimonial evidence from *Rajoir Upazila Parishad* that, most of the communication mechanisms have not been prompt as *Barishal Sadar Upazila*.

Participation

Participation in the light of local government accountability entails citizens' involvement in local elections. The real participation in regular

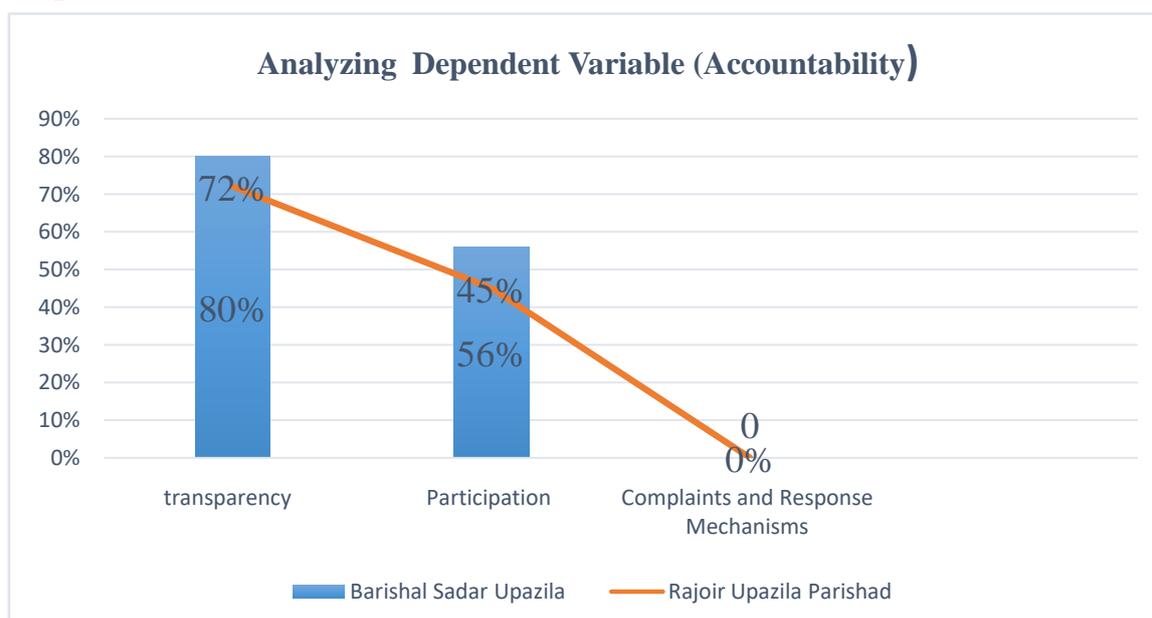
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local government elections is not evident in Bangladesh, it has been found during the study. There is little evidence of leadership change as a result of political and social activism. This scenario has been followed in both *BarishalSadarUpazila* and *RajoirUpazilaParishad*. The researcher found a little engagement of NGOs in UPZ though they sharpen the awareness of the citizens about their rights to access information and demand for accountability from their leaders. Evidence also indicated that there was no such initiative of meetings for budgeting purposes exists in both of the UpazilaParishad.

Complaints and Response Mechanisms

Mechanisms to register complaints against public officers and services are hardly seen in the LGIs in Bangladesh. Both *BarishalSadarUpazila* and *RajoirUpazilaParishad*'s has no complaint box and they have failed to answer questions before the public who want to report or complain against upazila's activities. **For example**, sometimes they got a complaint from the citizens if there is a delay in discharge of various allowance programs like... honorarium allowance of freedom fighters, widow allowance, etc. under Upazila Social Service Office. In this context, they got an informal complaint from the citizens and handle it informally. A common scenario exists in Bangladesh that nobody wants to go against the political leaders though they have some allegation against them and this is also seen in the case of this research. The respondent has some accusation against political leaders but they not revealed much information to the researcher but such allegations that the political leaders are not totally ignorant as some people argued.

Figure 1: analyzing public accountability based on field study (dependent variables)



Source: Researcher's Synthesis

Table 3: Scenario of public accountability in LGIs (based upon independent variables)

Independent Variables with indicators	Accountability ensured (Percentage of Total)	
	<i>BarishalSadarUpazila</i>	<i>RajoirUpazilaParishad</i>
Citizens' awareness (citizen charter, official websites,information cell, meeting with general people)	Less than 40%	Average 52%
Local Government Capacity (proportion of local revenue, human resource capacity in internal audit department and ability to supervise)	local collections - 18%, Central government - 82% (around 1 crore for 2018-19 fiscal year)	local collections - 11% Central government- 89%
Political Ambience (political events, ideas, movements, and leadership, promotion of information dissemination)	average 31%	average 47%

Source: Researcher Field survey

Citizens' awareness

Citizens' awareness entails people's knowledge about accountability at the local government. Evidence shows that both UpazilaParishad uses a number of communication mechanisms like.....citizen charter, official websites, notice boards,etc. for citizens' awareness. But there is no information cellfound in the two Upazila for the help of citizens. During data collection, the researcher able to observe accountability-related information such as annual financial statements and awarded tenders on the notice boards but there have a fewinformation in relation to ensuring accountability of LGIs.

Local Government Capacity

Three indicators are considered for local government capacity namely: the proportion of local government revenue generated locally, human resource capacity in the internal audit department, and the ability to supervise.Findings indicate that *BarishalSadarUpazila* 18% of the total budget comes from local collections like revenue from hat-Bazar,kheya-ghat, pond lease, etc. and 82% of the total income is remitted by the

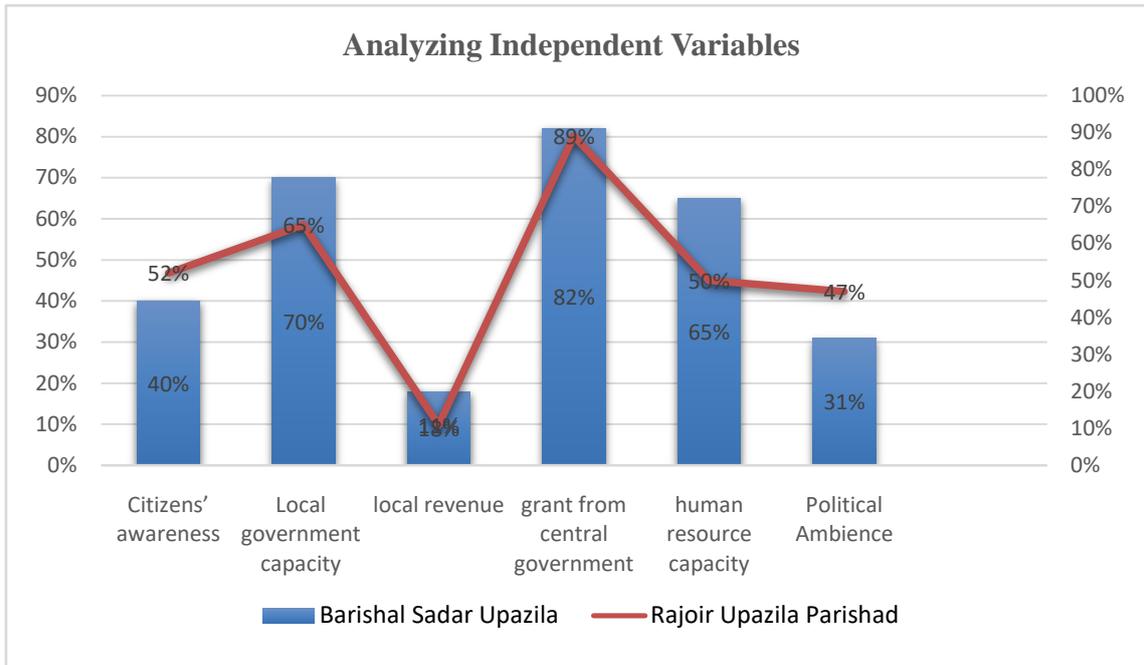
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central government, while *RajoirUpazilaParishad* 11% of total revenue is from local collections and 89% from central government. Low human resource capacity also hinders accountability especially in other departments and the lower local governments where most of the money is spent. This is because there is laxity as the officials see no third person checking their accountability. The ability to supervise is closely linked to ensure internal accountability- *BarishalSadarUpazila* has a detailed report on the performance of each department. They use performance agreements to measure the performance of the employees but *RajoirUpazilaParishad* has did not initiate such type of mechanisms. But the institutional audit conducted by the central government is held once a year through overall the country. Therefore, in the Upazila administration, there exists a dual line of authority and a dual accountability system of Upazila officers. The officers are accountable to Upazila Chairman and District officers at the same time and this reflects in the poor performance of institutions. Therefore, both Upazila arrange monthly meetings, sectoral committee meetings to supervise the performance of the officials as well as institutions and that raise accountability.

Political Ambience

Political History influence accountability relations between leaders and their followers. First, the researcher considers the narrative analysis of political events, ideas, movements, and leadership of the local government. Since government reform processes are expected to reduce rent-seeking opportunities, leaders are expected to be opposed by groups of actors that benefit from incomplete accountability. Empirical evidence shows mixed results. Although it is difficult to directly link leadership to local accountability and there was a close relation between leadership and openness, promotion of information dissemination. Respondents of both Upazila Parishad has a variation in accountability therefore is a matter of the extent to which leaders commit themselves to see the change in accountability.

Figure 2: analyzing public accountability based on field study (independent variables)



Source: Researcher's Synthesis

Conclusion and recommendations

This study is exposed to the existing challenges facing local governments and provides suggestions that would help improve accountability at LGIs in Bangladesh. Bangladesh like elsewhere, communications mechanisms vary. Urban centers tend to have better ways of communicating with people. The challenge that emerges is that in rural areas, most people do not have access to information. Therefore in order to improve accountability across local governments, the central government should make a deliberate effort to have citizens access information that benefits them.

CSOs play an important role in empowering the population, so it's necessary to involve CSOs in LGIs activities. In Bangladesh, the traditional accountability mechanisms are prevalent and their inadequacies have been analyzed. It has been argued that institutions-based (citizen charter, performance-based budgeting, value-for-money audit, corporatization, etc.) and society-based mechanisms (the media, CSOs) also need to be adopted that have insufficient in studied UPZ.

In addition, Committees of the legislature, debates in the parliament and public hearings, and constant vigilance by the media have the potentials to promote accountability in Bangladesh. It is therefore important that, if the desire to have accountable decentralized local governments is to be achieved, strong measures of opening up local governments to the citizens should be fostered. Bangladesh has a thriving network of media in a variety of forms. In recent years, the electronic media has proliferated, and the citizens have access to information and

this has the potential to promote accountability in the public service. Civil society supports and strengthens democracy by increasing accountability by widening participation. Though the accountable performance of state officials was found in some distributional projects when NGOs were involved in the process.

The issue of local government capacity poses a challenge like most local governments are poorly funded and even the little funds come in late as well as they have poor local revenue base. This makes it difficult for the citizens to hold their leaders accountable as they do not even have the necessary information about the revenue and expenditure. Therefore it would be more feasible. Another challenge is the low human resource capacity that most of the LGIs, serious lack of adequate capable employees to hold their leadership accountable. A lot of people have low literacy levels, therefore the 'educated' elite do not take their 'supervisors' seriously as they consider them unknowledgeable. With such attitudes, accountability is hard to enforce. For accountability to thrive, participation needs to be fostered. The political history of the local government also play important role in accountability. Here, found the role played by leaders with historical origins that failing accountability. Therefore reform policies aimed at empowering people would be the solution.

However, Vision 2021, the 7th Five Year Plan (7FYP), and several other initiatives have been taken by the government for overcoming the predominant challenges as well as for improving the conditions of LGIs in Bangladesh. The LGSP (Local Governance Support Project) actively cooperates with the government to mitigate the present challenges and to improve the service delivery of LGIs.

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