(REVIEW ARTICLE)

Participatory local governance and sustainable development in Bangladesh: mechanisms and outcomes

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Abstract

Bangladesh is at the crossroad, aiming on the one hand at implementing bold 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, and on the other hand at putting stronger system of local governance in place to ensure that the democratic roots of the country are well-established. Whether the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be effectively localized is more and more becoming determined by the institutional capability and responsiveness of the Local Government Institutions (LGIs). This paper questions this interconnection of these two national requirements locating the meaningful citizen participation as a possible game changing mechanism that would lead to successful realization of sustainable development at grassroots level. Although a new national policy has been favoring participatory governance, a tremendous gap still remains between the de jure and de facto participatory policies as it concerns a citizen engagement. The exact role of citizen participation in the concrete developmental outcomes is yet to be empirically investigated. Thus, the key research question of this study is the following: How significantly, and by which channels of causality, can citizen involvement in local government planning, budgeting, and monitoring processes lead the local settlements in Bangladesh towards the achievement of the targeted Sustainable Development Goals? At policy level, this study suggests leaving the phase of tokenistic participatory forms of participation behind, to institutionalize actual citizen empowerment. It proposes certain reforms directed towards enhancement of ability of state and societal layer to pursue constructive interaction. Theory Although the literature on participatory governance and decentralization already has a rich and well-developed history, that is, both conceptual and empirical, the proposed research will make meaningful contributions of theory to the field and its comprehension as it will present a subtle empirical evidence with regard to the background of a developing South Asian country, outlining the crucial mediating factors (such as political will, vitality of civil society and social capital) that shape the effectiveness of citizen engagement as a means of sustainable development.

Keywords: Citizen Engagement; Local Government; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Governance; Bangladesh; Participatory Development; Decentralization; Social Accountability

1. Introduction

The 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set an international agreement on the course that humanity will take in the future seizing a future that is prosperous, inclusive and sustainable. In the case of the People Republic of Bangladesh, a country that has been credited with amazing success in reducing poverty and human development indicators over the last decades, SDGs are therefore a much-needed guide in its next step towards development (Government of Bangladesh, 2020). The 8th Five Year Plan of the country is directly corresponding with the SDGs, which is the indication of the significant national intentions towards such global agenda. Yet, the intention of the 2030 Agenda is not so much about its global declarations but its implementation on the most insular level of governance. The vision of No One Left Behind requires a deep localization process, in which the global objectives are

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transformed into locally meaningful targets, and could be achieved by implementing context-relevant plans, triggering the most vulnerable groups (UNDP, 2024).

At the same time, Bangladesh has been in a path, which is usually long and tough, and that is the process of democratic consolidation. One of the main aspects of this process is the attempt to decentralize control and resources of central state to sub national levels of governance. This policy on decentralization is also two-fold because they regard it as a method to make the work of the governments more effective and responsive, and, secondly, a process that will provide greater democracy in the state by establishing the government to make decisions nearer the people (Ahmed, 2012). Such effort towards achieving a more devolved and participatory system of governance is a national imperative in itself. This paper argues that neither of these two strong imperatives localization of SDGs and execution of the local democracy are parallel lines but are rather closely connected. The increased development of one is the major cornerstone of successful achievement of the other.

The Bangladesh structure of local government is highly complex and has multiple layers. The main body in the rural areas is Union Parishad (the last level of administration and local government), Upazila Parishad (sub-district council), and Zila Parishad (district council). In the cities, the town and major cities administration is under Pourashavas (municipalities) and City Corporations. Such Local Government Institutions (LGIs) are law abiding entities whose mandate is to conduct a broad range of functions that play key roles in the everyday existence of the citizens. This among others, development and operation of local infrastructures (local roads, bridges, culverts), safe drinking water and sanitation facilities, waste management, primary healthcare support, and participatory role in local education and social safety net schemes (Local Government (Union Parishad) Act, 2009).

Though the mandates of LGIs in Bangladesh are not restricted, the LGIs have historically been operating in serious constraints. Long-standing ones concern the acute financial dependency on the central government that is frequently connected with harsh conditions and restricts the local authority; the sharp shortage in capacity in relation to the technical skills and administrative staff; and the ubiquitous existence of party politics at a national level that can tend towards the politicisation of local development processes and the delivery of services (World Bank, 2019).

These difficulties together with the influence of advocacy by the civil society and development partners, led to what one can describe as a major turn toward participation through the legal and policy frameworks that governed the local government in the early 21st century (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Historically significant laws, in particular, the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act of 2009, also established certain, obligatory citizen engagement tools. One of them is the mandate that Union Parishad preside open budget meetings - during which the citizenry is able to question planned revenues and spendings and the summoning of regular Ward Shavas (ward level assembly) so that the community members are able to provide their needs and preferences. Moreover, the formation of permanent committees and some of them are supposed to be chaired by women and the spread of social accountability tools that include citizen charters and social audit were supposed to ensure there is increased transparency and accountability of LGIs to its residents (Brillantes & Perante-Calina, 2018). This move in legislation marked an official acknowledgement that the credibility of local government as well as its efficacy depend on its capacity to communicate and to address itself to its citizens.

This paper further considers the following key argumenting point: Significant citizen participation in local governance, has become more than just a democratic ideal in local governance, but a higher aspiration and often, a less explored push factor that may ensure successful achievement of the SDGs at the local levels. The argument goes beyond the normative claim that participation is good to ones to establish a certain causal relationship. The more citizens are included in the key process of governance in their LGIs i.e. planning, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring in a mater-of-course and sincere way, the more the development outcomes are likely to be efficient, equitable, and sustainable.

Existing research on the topic lacks rigorous, systematic, empirical studies that can explicitly relate the empirical process of citizen engagement in LGIs with the considered outcomes in SDG localization in the context of Bangladesh. Although the connection between the two is usually presumed, it is hardly proved or even tested using mixed-methods evidence. Most of the available literature either discusses the legislation allowing the participation without looking at the impact it has, or the authors salute the nation-level advancements of SDGs without breaking out the role played by those dynamics within the locally-managed governance.

This article will attempt to address this gap. The main one is the very synthesis of these areas, which it makes and offers empirical evidence of how they are related. It is prone to remedying the shortcomings of anecdotal evidence and instead attempt to develop a more compelling, evidence-based argument as to why the development and appreciation of

participatory local governance is not only a question of democratic importance, but a critical intervention in reducing the time spent meeting the Sustainable Development Goals before the target date of 2030.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Spectrum of Citizen Engagement: From Tokenism to Empowerment

Modern development discourse is built around the concept of the engagement of citizens or participation, but the term is sometimes applied loosely. To make the concept operable in the rigorous analysis, one has to conduct the shift to stop using the single definition and understand its different manifestations and levels.

The all-time most tenacious model of participation conceptualization is the Ladder of Citizen Participation crafted by Sherry Arnstein (1969). The ladder created by Arnstein gives a very effective typology of participation which fall under the eight rungs of a scale of non-participation to citizen empowering (Ahmed, 2023). There are the lower stratum, Manipulation and Therapy, which depict scenarios where the involvement is fake and is formed by those with power to either teach or indoctrinate the participants, not to empower them to change results. The medium staging depicts level of Tokenism. The first step is informing, it is important but normally one-way flow of information with no feedback system. The voices of citizens can be heard through consultation (e.g. via attitude surveys or neighborhood meetings), but this gives no guarantee that the opinions are going to be taken into account. Placation means that a few able members of the community can be given token representation in formal boards or committees; usually they can be outvoted or even overridden. The upper ones are higher levels of Citizen Power. Partnership also empowers citizens to bargain and enter into tradeoff with powerholders. Delegated Power witnesses the citizens attain principal decision-making ability in particular plan or program. Lastly, Citizen Control is a situation whereby the program or institution is controlled by the citizens as a whole and they take complete control of the policy and administration. This framework taken in consciousness is very significant to this study because it will enable the evaluation not only of whether participation will take place or not, but on quality and content (Yin, 2018).

With some additions to the ideas of Arnstein, Sarah White (1996) further details the matter by discussing the various interests and motivations that appear behind the promotion of participatory initiatives. She names four main types of participation (1) Nominal, participation is used to achieve legitimacy; 2) Instrumental, participation is a way to achieve a pre-determined goal like greater efficiency through co-opting local labour; 3) Representative, participants are brought into the decision making process in terms of voice, and 4) Transformative, which treats participation as a way of gaining power, consciousness-raising and radical system change. Evidence that demonstrates the dangers of a romantic view of participation are premised within these frameworks; all show researchers to critically consider who is taking part in what ways and to the benefit of whom (Ahmed, 2023).

Participatory approach has been adopted by the government of Bangladesh formally; it has incorporated certain mechanisms in the local government legal framework of Bangladesh. Another common point in literature, however, is the discord between de jure will and de facto.

Ward Shava (Ward Assembly): Under the UP Act of 2009, Ward Shava is supposed to be the closest form of the grassroots democracy. It is held at the ward level (as member of a Union) and in theory it allows any voter to contribute, outlines local issues, it is allowed to choose development schemes and even to choose the beneficiaries of social programs. Nevertheless, empirical research is regularly characterized by serious difficulties. It tends to be poorly attended and usually consists only of men and local elites, with the outcome of the discussion being dominated by the Union Parishad Chairman personally or its members, who might steer the proceedings towards their own ends and interests (Ahmed, 2023). These proceedings are not always transparent, and the Ward Shava recommendation is not legally fining and is usually ignored during the Union Parishad (The Business Standard, 2022).

Open Budget Meetings: This is the other legal form that is put in place to increase fiscal accountability and transparency. LGIs must ensure that they conduct public meetings to give their proposed annual budget and get comments of the citizens before approving the budget. Practically those events are even formal. The documents of the complex budget are not written to be understood by many citizens, and their presentation often occurs too late to have constructive input, as well as the sessions may end up being an exercise to read the budget instead of a deliberative setting (Uddin & Haque, 2018).

Standing Committees: Union and Upazila Parishads must establish a number of standing committees to monitor particular aspects of their activities (e.g. finance and establishment; education, health and family planning; women and children development). As gender inclusion is desired, women on the council are required under the law to chair one-

third of these committees. These committees can be a potent mechanism of a close attention and planning. Nevertheless, they are usually debilitated by the presence of an overall strength of the chairman of the LGI, who can place the committees on the sidelines or make them dysfunctional in the first place, thus consolidating the power, not distributing it (Hossain, 2017).

Social Accountability Tools: Apart from such formal processes there has been a promotion of tools used in social accountability; this has been increased with the assistance of an NGO such as: Citizen Charters (which define service standards), Social Audits (community led performance reviews) and Grievance Redressal Systems (GRS). Although these tools are promising, they are uneven to a great extent and their effects are fragile. Citizen Charters are not always well broadcast or comprehended and it takes a lot of mobilizing by the community and technical assistance to make social audits genuine and effective against vested interests (World Bank, 2013).

2.2. The Role of Local Government in Service Delivery and SDG Implementation

According to the theory of decentralization, power and resources may be devolved to the sub-national governments and thus lead to better (effective) development. In such a way proponents hold that local governments are in better place to discern and address local needs, which has resulted in enhanced allocative efficiency (meeting the needs of local preferences with services) and productive efficiency (the provision of services at less cost) (Manor, 1999). It is this promise of theory that renders LGIs to become the unavoidable frontline players in the quest to localize the SDGs. The responsibility structure of the Government of Bangladesh itself, or its so-called Mapping of Ministries/ Divisions by Targets in the Implementation of SDGs, clearly delegates the tasks of many targets of the SDGs to the Local Government Division and, thus, by default, to the LGIs which it administers (Government of Bangladesh, 2018).

The direct corresponding relationship is exposed between LGI functions and the leading SDG targets through the analytical mapping:

- In SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), LGIs directly take part in the selection of beneficiaries of major Social Safety Net Programmes (SSNPs) such as old-age allowance, widow allowance, and food-for-work schemes. Their ability in this capacity is paramount in alleviating poverty and lack of food.
- SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being): LGIs facilitate in the running of health clinics in the community, holding health awareness and hygiene programs, and helping the nation with mass immunization and family planning programs.
- SDG 4 (Quality Education): LGIs had compulsory duties to oversee the operations of government primary schools, provide an account of teacher and student attendance and assist School Management Committees (SMCs).
- SDG 5 (Gender Equality): In addition to structural inclusion of female members, LGIs are expected to perform the female development projects as well as involve the women in their undertakings, which directly leads to female empowerment.
- SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation): That is a fundamental LGI role. They ensure the installation and maintenance of tube wells, promote the sanitary latrines and the accessibility of the community towards safe water.
- SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities): Urban planning, solid waste management, urban infrastructure (drains, roads) and management of the spaces in the city are provided through the main institutions that are Pourashavas and City Corporations.

LGIs (especially the ones in the vulnerable riverine and coastal regions), play an important role in local disaster management committees and in the local adaptation to the climate change plans.

Such straightforward mapping shows that unless there are competent, responsible and adequately equipped LGIs, the national dream of attaining the SDGs will be a dream never achieved.

2.3. Theoretical Underpinnings

2.3.1. Participatory Governance Theory

The theory of participatory governance postulates that the incorporation of citizens and groups of citizens in the central processes of decision-making of the state can contribute to the more legitimate, equitable, and efficient governance (Fung & Wright, 2003). It is not mere decentralization because it focuses mainly in the empowerment of the common people and their organizations. Fung (2006), asserts that, successful participatory governance designs usually include the following three foundational principles: (1) Devolution to Empowered Local Units where important problems are

tackled by small, local groups of citizens and officials; (2) Formal Linkages where small, local groups of citizens and the deliberations of the latter are connected in a formal manner to key allocation of resources and authority process; and finally (3) Practical Deliberation where the participants become involved in combating concrete problems and therefore involved in the process of reasoning. According to this theory, success of such mechanisms as Ward Shavas in Bangladesh can only be determined to be whether it is indeed empowered so as to have any say or influence the LGI budget (a formal linkage) and whether discussions between them are at all deliberative. The theory offers a compelling understanding on the failure of participation: when the involved participatory spaces are severed of actual power, they degenerate into tokenism.

2.3.2. Social Capital Theory

High levels of stock of social capital have a major bearing on the ability of a community to effectively take part in participatory form of governance. Social capital The social features of social organization e.g. networks, norms and social trust which enable people to coordinate their actions and work together to mutual benefit (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). It is more helpful to draw a distinction between a variety of types of social capital. Bonding social capital The reference to strong exclusive bonds in the homogenous groups (i.e. family, close friends, ethnic groups). Bridging social capital defines as those more inclusive relationships which bind individuals in various social divisions (e.g. class, religion). The third and most important form is known as Linking social capital and this refers to the vertical relationship between citizens and individuals at power positions such as LGI officials or politician (Woolcock, 2001).

To reach common development agendas such as the SDGs, bridging and linking social capital might be more significant than bonding capital. High bonding capital society is fragmented and cannot engage in any collaborative good. The key tenets to effective community participation include suitable participation of communities in catering to internal divisions as well as in establishing bridging social capital and to articulate their requirements and to induce accountability of the holders of power. Social capital will actually be one of the main variables to be used in this study so as to determine the reasons why there is different success among communities on how they use their participatory mechanisms to their advantage. In its turn, the inclusion of the bridging and linking social capital can be built through the very action of successful, inclusive participation, which establishes a virtuous circle.

2.4. Synthesis and Identification of Key Variables

A clear picture is observed in the narrative in the literature review in which Bangladesh has demonstrated the provision of a legal infrastructure of a citizen engagement (attaining Objective 1), as well as delved in tasks of endowing its LGIs with roles of utmost importance to SDG realization (Objective 2). Still, there is a severe implementation gap, and the connection between participation and practical SDG results is mediated by the presence of numerous factors (the focus of Objective 3). The theoretical models of participatory governance and social capital offer the instruments to get at the question of why this gap exists and how it may be filled.

According to this synthesis, the phenomenon-specific variables of this study are as follows:

- Independent Variable (IV): Citizen Engagement. It will not be handled as a monolithic concept, being operationalized as a qualitative continuum, where the quality and degrees of participation in certain LGI processes (i.e., planning, budgeting, and monitoring) will be evaluated as measured against the ladder of Arnstein (i.e., starting with tokenism and ending with partnership).
- Dependent Variable (DV): Localised SDG Achievement. This will be done by combining the quantitative data of the service delivery at LGI (e.g., percentage of households reachable with relative water, waste collection coverage, budget dedicated to women promotion) and national data (e.g., percentage of households with access to secure water, waste collection coverage, budget dedicated to women promotion) with perceptions based qualitative data on the equity, quality and sustainability of services by the citizens collected during focus group discussions.
- Mediating Variables: These are the most important contextual variables as found in the literatures that are hypothesized to play a change role between the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. These are: (1) Political Will and Leadership of elected LGI officials; (2) Bureaucratic Culture and the extent of support or rejection among LGI staff; (3) Strength and Role of Civil Society (and its NGO and community-based processes); (4) Citizen Awareness and Capacity to engage effectively; and (5) the nature and availability of Social Capital (bonding, bridging and linking capital) in the community.

3. Methodology

This study employs a rigorous mixed-methods research design to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the relationship between citizen engagement and SDG localization in Bangladesh. This section outlines the research strategy, including the rationale for the chosen design, the procedures for case selection and data collection, the methods for data analysis, and the ethical considerations that guided the research process.

Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources, ensuring triangulation to enhance the validity of the findings.

Multi-stage purposive sampling strategy was used to select the four case study sites at the maximum variation and analytical leverage. As selection criteria, it used:

- Performance Variation: We selected the sites based on the initial quantitative scoping given them a range of performance on important SDG indicators.
- Reputation of Engagement: Consultations were made with experts in national think tanks, civil society organizations and development agencies that were active in the field of participatory governance to find LGIs that had some reputation of either being pioneers in the field of participatory governance or to be particularly opposed to participatory governance.
- Geographical Spread: To avert the regional bias, the cases were identified through two different administrative districts of Bangladesh.
- Logistical Feasibility: The feasibility of logistical aspects of access and safety was also factored into consideration.

In both case study locations, interviewees and focus group members were also chosen purposely to meet the requirement of abundance of views.

To evaluate the operation of the mechanisms of engagement the next methods would be utilized:

- Document Analysis: there was a systematic review of official LGI documents. This consisted of the minutes of monthly meetings of the Union/Upazila Parishad, Ward Shava books, budget proposals and final budgets of the last three financial years, published Citizen Charters and any locally available local development plans or audit reports. This gave an understanding of the formal or the de jure aspects of participation.
- Direct Observation: The research team was involved in a total of non-participant direct observation of at least two Ward Shavas and one Open Budget Meeting on each of the case study sites. It was noted in a systematic fashion with the use of an observation protocol, including the number and demography of the group participants, who started the discussion, the kind of discussion (deliberated or confrontational), the way differences were addressed, and the perceived location of power in the hands of LGI officials on the one hand and ordinary citizens on the other.
- LGI Service Delivery Data Analysis: The data that were collected on the allocation and spending in particular sectors (e.g. water and sanitation, women development, infrastructure), based on the LGI offices was analyzed to monitor the flow of resources.
- Focus Group discussions (FGDs): there were a total of 16 FGDs which were carried out in the four sites. In order to assure that the voices of the marginalized would be heard, distinct FGDs were carried out with: (a) adult men, (b) adult women, (c) youth (male and female), and (d) the members of economically disadvantaged groups (e.g., landless laborers, the inhabitants of geographically remote hamlets). Community perceptions refer to issues discussed in the FGDs about the quality of LGI services, equity of allocation of resources, trend, and whether they felt that the LGI projects were really addressing their needs. Discussion was facilitated by the use of participatory methods, which included key ranking activities and community mapping of services.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) A total number of 48 semi-structured KIIs was carried out. They were identified using key informants who have particular knowledge and a certain niche within the local governance ecosystem.

4. Findings: Engagement, Outcomes, and their Interplay

The results given in the above section lends a clear picture of divergence. Although LGIs under analysis fall under the same body of national legislation, the standards of governance and the ability of the LGIs to generate the effects of sustainable development also vary dramatically. It is in this section where analysis is given to these results and it shows

that in explaining this difference, the critical variable is quality of citizen engagement. It also breaks down the most significant enabling and a constraint factor to influence the engagement process and deliberate on what the empirical realities translate to the theories of participatory governance and the social capital in the case of Bangladesh.

The study's findings provide strong empirical validation for the central thesis: meaningful citizen engagement is a powerful driver of localized SDG achievement. The contrast between the 'high-engagement' cases (Islampur Upazila, Savar Pourashava) and the 'low-engagement' cases (Belkuchi Upazila, Dhamrai Pourashava) is stark and systematic. The Most important point is that just having participatory forums is not important, but the quality and genuineness of participation is important.

The participatory mechanisms in the Belkuchi and Dhamrai were taken down to tokenism. Using Arnstein's (1969) ladder as a diagnostic tool, the Ward Shavas and open budget meetings barely rose above the rungs of 'Informing' and 'Placation'. People knew that their choices had already been made and were informed on decisions, and there were only a couple of elites seated at the table, which gave a sense of a choice. From the perspective of White's (1996) framework, this was a classic case of instrumental participation, where the forums were used by powerholders to fulfill legal requirements and legitimize projects that served their own clientelistic networks. The results which have been witnessed through the patronage system of allocating tube wells where the principle of equity in SDG 6 is defied, and the technically unsound, centralized drain project that is contrary to the goal of sustainable infrastructure in SDG 11 were ineffective, not fair, and unsustainable in the future.

Conversely, in Islampur and Savar, the engagement processes, while imperfect, climbed higher up Arnstein's ladder towards genuine 'Partnership'. Citizens would not remain passive information recipients as it was more or less, they would play a role in the negotiation and co-design. The transformative participation can be top-notched using the process of a culvert being demanded by women in Islampur as one of the successful examples, or accomplishment of the co-developed system of waste management in Savar. Such a superior quality of engagement enhanced the outcomes of SDGs in two ways. To begin with, it was able to improve the allocative efficiency by bringing local knowledge that was critical into the planning process. The residents of Savar knew the most convenient places to have the collection points of wastes; the women knew the flooded parts of the path. This local wisdom, which cannot easily penetrate to the centralized, top-down planning, guarantees that the public resources will go into the real community needs. Second, it fostered co-production and ownership. Due to the fact that the community in Savar was involved in designing the waste, and the women of Islampur had a hand in fighting to get their tube well, a vested interest in the successfulness of the systems has been created giving rise to more than adequate maintenance and long term sustainability.

The wide amplitude of difference between the cases cannot be suffced with legal frameworks. The results indicate a stellate association of mediating factors that explain the chances of participation spaces to turn into vehicles of true deliberation or elite capture. These are the main success/ failure transmitting factors as they concern directly the third task of the research.

A combination of positive enabling factors that interdependent with each other was identified in successful examples of Islampur and Savar:

- Proactive and Democratic Leadership: The single most powerful enabling factor turned out to be the attitude and commitment of the elected LGI leader (Chairman/Mayor). Mayor of Savar was very active in facilitating the questions and negotiating in the public, which gave a tone of democracy and encouraged citizens to raise their voice. Such active leadership provided a political environment in which participation could flourish and was a sign to citizens and other officials that participation was desired. This affirms the literature that highlights the pivotal role of "political champions" in driving governance reform (Grindle, 2007).
- Synergistic Civil Society Partnerships: LGIs perform better when they do not work alone. The collaboration of the Savar Pourashava with an NGO operating in the locality proved to be decisive. The NGO played a critical role of a mediator, because it resolved the capacity deficit by simplifying the hard budget into a version understandable to the civilians. This proves that an active and organized civil society should not be an enemy of the local government but a strategic partner, which can help achieve citizen awareness, conduct a dialogue process, as well as make the LGI responsible.
- Transparency and Access to Information: No one can meaningfully participate without access in intelligible information. The "citizen's budget" in Savar was a simple yet transformative tool. It closed the information gap between the people and officials and created a more equal footing in terms of deliberation and allowed citizens to go beyond broad complaints to something specific and evidence-based.
- Citizen Awareness and Collective Efficacy: The women in Islampur who successfully demanded the culvert demonstrated a high degree of 'collective efficacy'—the belief in their group's ability to organize and achieve a

goal (Bandura, 2000). This trust is never something that the person was born with, it is regularly developed in the response to prior mobilization, awareness raising events (frequently by CSOs), and minor, but positive, victories that generate a virtuous circle of participation and empowerment.

In the failing experiences of the Belkuchi and the Dhamrai, participatory processes have relentlessly been hampered with:

- Capturing and Perpetual Clientelism: This was the greatest obstacle. The findings from Belkuchi show how participatory spaces can be 'captured' by local elites who use them not for public deliberation but to reinforce their power and distribute patronage through clientelistic networks. The tube well distribution had been very evident of public property being utilized in the gain of the personal politics. This is in agreement with the cautions of the decentralization literature that decentralization of power to un-elected local elites can in some cases exacerbate inequity (Manor, 1999).
- The technical jargon used by officials in Dhamrai during the budget meeting should be viewed as a kind of bureaucratic resistance. Officials who were assigned to the position or post might regard citizen involvement as a complication that is not necessary because it questions their professionalism and also interferes with routines. This bureaucratic slow-down becomes a strong deterrence to the real transparency and accountability.
- Low Citizen Awareness and Political Fatalism: The disillusioned farmer in Belkuchi who stated, "Our voice has no value," embodies the sentiment of political fatalism. This is an acquired habit, which many times may be as a result of years of being in tokenistic participation that the citizens are consulted but their views never count in each and every occasion. What happens is thus a vicious cycle of indifference and un-involvement that makes elites find it easy to take control of the political arena.
- The Vested Gendered Power: The case of the female councilors in Belkuchi stands out as a good example of how procedural representation (*de jure*) does not necessarily lead to substantial power (de facto). Although they were required by law at those positions, entrenched patriarchal traditions and customs in LGI positions rendered them mere voices whose words and opinions barely mattered in their contribution. This highlights that achieving SDG 5 (Gender Equality) requires tackling not just legal but also the informal cultural barriers that prevent women's meaningful political participation.

The study's findings have important implications for the theoretical frameworks of participatory governance and social capital.

The results are highly consistent with the main propositions of the Participatory Governance Theory to provide resolution of the issue of whether genuine, intentional inclusion can lead to more equal and resultative development. However, they also introduce a critical nuance. The experience of Belkuchi villages and Dhamrai shows that the establishment of participatory institutions as suggested by Fung and Wright (2003) is however a necessary not sufficient condition. Without genuine political will from the state and the pre-existing capacity of citizens to engage, these institutions can be easily co-opted and may even lead to 'participatory exclusion,' where the forums serve to further marginalize the poor and powerless (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). The outcome of participatory governance thus depends on factors discussed above which lie within context.

The explanatory power of the Social Capital Theory also finds a clear elucidation in the research. Belkuchi is a classic example of a community where governance is undermined by a combination of high bonding capital (within the elite's patronage network) and extremely weak bridging capital (across different social groups). These dynamic fuels fragmentation and elite capture. By contrast, Islampur and Savar exhibit the fruitful strength of bridging social capital (the women who arranged themselves across households, the market association cajoling the mayor) and connecting social capital (the healthy networks developed between citizen groups and non-governmental organizations, between CSOs and LGI leaders). More importantly, the study proposes a recursive connection: on the one hand, a stock of social capital facilitates good governance, whereas, on the other, the process of successful, inclusive involvement is an effective mechanism of bridging and linking social capital, and it cultivates a basis of further joint action. This collaboration between the Pourashava and the NGO in Savar did not only deliver an improved budget process but it also built the social structure of the whole community.

5. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This article attempted to examine the nexus between citizen participation/engagement in local governance and localization of the Sustainable Development Goals in Bangladesh that is less explored but of critical importance. With

the non-acceptance of participatory rhetoric being a step taken by the research, it has mustered itself into an understanding of the synthesizing realities of the interactions between citizens and their local governments and for that matter the consequence of said interactions on physical development. This concluding section summarizes the study's main findings in relation to its objectives, outlines its contribution to knowledge, and proposes a set of policy recommendations aimed at forging a more robust link between participation and sustainable development.

5.1. Revisiting the Research Objectives

The research has been informed by three major objectives and the results have given a clear picture on them.

- First, regarding the objective to assess existing engagement mechanisms, the research concludes that a profound 'implementation gap' exists between the de jure design and the de facto practice of participation in Bangladesh. Although such mechanism as the Ward Shava and the open budget meetings are enshrined in law, their operation can differ enormously, in some LGIs it is full of deliberation whereas in others it is just an empty democratic farce dominated by elites.
- Second, when analyzing the role of the engagement in the achievement of the SDGs, the research discovered the existence of a causal relationship, which is positive and clear. Engagement quality had a firm impact towards the chances of succeeding in localizing the SDGs. Legitimate participation, which refers to genuine dialogue and participation by citizens, resulted in more equitable results in water and sanitation (SDG 6), and more sustainable and inclusive planning infrastructure of urban centres (SDG 11), and gender-responsive local planning (SDG 5). On the contrary, tokenistic engagement did not bring about these advantages and, instead, in most situations, they led to the strengthening of inequity.
- Third, when outlining the major influencing factors, the study found an essential group of enablers and barriers. Successful enablers were proactive leadership of the elected officials, synergistic partnership with civil society, information availability, and citizen awareness. These were methodically undermined by enduring obstacles especially, co-option by local elites of spaces of participation to clientelistic interests on the one hand, bureaucratic foot-dragging and a diffuse politics of fatalism among the marginalized citizens.

5.2. Overall Contribution to Knowledge

This paper is very important to the body of knowledge on development and governance in South Asia. It provides a missing gap in the existing knowledge by bridging the systematic and empirical linkages between the micro-processes of local governance and the macro-goals of the 2030 Agenda. It is mainly in providing evidence-based subtle evidence that quality of participatory governance and not the existence of participatory structures are essential variables in determining the success of SDG localization. The paper will put a challenge to policymakers and practitioners not to merely assemble boxes to check but rather invest in designing the environment in which genuine interaction can be achieved. It offers a realistic consideration of the functions of participation in terms of converting the development agendas into a reality in the light of its effects on optimizing the allocative efficiency and promotion of community ownership.

5.3. Policy Recommendations

The results of this study result in a set of specific policy recommendations that should be offered to the various stakeholders that can play a significant role in the development of a more participatory and effective local governance system in Bangladesh.

- Reform LGI Performance Assessment: The existing performance assessment system of LGI which is usually based on fiscal transfers need to be changed. It has to go beyond specialist financially based auditing to incorporate sound measures of governance quality. This must have such requirements as evaluating quality of Ward Shavas, inclusivity of budget meetings, citizen satisfaction surveys. Connecting a large part of the LGI grants to these ratings of performance in the governance would introduce a strong motivation among the elected officials in order to treat participation.
- Healthcare Assessment and Education: A uniform civic education curriculum must be designed, funded nationwide. This should be an ongoing program, not a once-a-year campaign that may involve schools, community centers, the media to construct the literacy of the citizens in how the LGI works, the budget process, their rights and responsibilities as active members.
- Proactive Transparency: Leaders should not be the ones waiting to be asked of information. They must become advocates of the culture of active disclosure and present information about the budgets, projects, and beneficiary lists in simple language and forms accessible to all (e.g., in form of a public notice board, infographics, or social media). The case of the 'citizen's budget' in Savar provides a replicable model.

- Ruler-Facilitator Replacement: The elected leaders have to be trained and nurtured to perceive their position in the public meetings as facilitators rather than as commanders. Their main role must be to facilitate discussions in a non-partisan way and ensure that the views of the seemingly under-represented sections of the population, especially females and the poor, are canvassed intensively.
- Act as 'Governance Intermediaries': CSOs should strategically position themselves as intermediaries that bridge the gap between citizens and the state. Some of the major roles involve capacity building of the community organization in terms of expressing demands as well as translating technical information into layman terms and technical assistance toward LGIs who exhibit real political will.
- Encourage Social Accountability Tools: NGOs need to get beyond popularizing social accountability tools, and to promote their use extensively, promote the use of tools such as community-based project monitoring and social audits. Such instruments give well-defined systems through which citizens can hold the LGIs accountable in their output.
- To overcome Elite Capture: The central government is asked to cut stringent regulations to the people, open disclosure of all contractor information, expenses of the projects and the names of beneficiaries of projects even before they start working on the project. Besides, more accountability means establishing ways around local elite gatekeepers out of which, reinforcing and popularizing digital Grievance Redressal Systems can be of great assistance.
- To Challenge Gendered Power Structures: To give female representatives more leverage, policy should mandate that a specified percentage of the LGI development budget is directly channeled through and managed by the standing committees chaired by women, particularly the committee for women and children's affairs. This would grant them with financial mandate required to convert their priorities to action.

5.4. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study, like all research, has its limitations. These results are based on few qualitative case studies and thus analytically generalizable but not statistically. Although they give profound knowledge of causal processes, the particular dynamics can differ in the rest of Bangladesh. Behavior of participants could have been somehow affected by the presence of researchers as well. The correlations identified here should be tested in a large-N quantitative study that covers a representative nationwide sample of LGIs. This would be a statistic measure of the influence of various indicators of engagement on SDG outcomes.

There is an urgent need to conduct research on the influence regarding digital technology and social media on citizen engagement in rural Bangladesh. Are Unfortunately, the new tools are creating new exclusions?

A longitudinal study would offer precious information by following a group of LGIs along a number of years. What changes to participatory practices occur over time and what causes participatory practices to shift between tokenistic and authentic practice?

To sum up, attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals in Bangladesh is trodden on the local roads. The route may be a thorny one, but this study has helped to show that there is no detour on the journey to the realization of an inclusive, empowered and accountable citizen engagement, which is the safest, surest and the most sustainable path to the creation of a more prosperous, more just, and more democratic future in which all of us can share.

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