



SDG 6 and Union Parishad in Bangladesh: An Exploration of Safe Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Viewpoint

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Abstract: Safe water and sanitation is a chronic problem in rural Bangladesh, which has had a direct effect on the health of the population and the livelihood sustainability of the population. This paper looks at the role played by Union Parishads (UPs) as the lowest level of local government institute in the realization of Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) on water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). The data were gathered using a mixed-method in the form of household surveys (n = 74), interviews with the UP officials (n = 26), and observations in the field by utilizing two unions in Rajshahi District- Hariari and Parila. Results indicate that more differences exist: Parila is more literate (51.2%), and latrines (83.2%) are more common, but open defecation is more common (13.6%) than Hariari (3.6%). Contamination, poor infrastructure and inadequate maintenance are the continued obstacles that the two unions encounter on the way to safe water. Standing committees of the UPs have been found to be either dormant or controlled by the chairpersons who limit participatory governance and transparency with regards to institutional analysis. Political influence, gender exclusion and insufficient community participation also hinder proper service delivery. The paper suggests that the active governance of rural areas with efficient committees including all, and reporting to ensure accountability is essential in speeding up the WASH results in rural areas and the achievement of SDG 6 in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Union Parishad, SDG 6, WASH, Rural Governance, Community Participation, and Bangladesh

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Introduction

The provision of household water access to safe water and decent sanitation is one of the most urgent issues in the global development. Although the world has committed to sustainable development over the decades, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there has been an unequal progress especially in the Global South. Communities are still exposed to preventable diseases and their socioeconomic progress is slowed down by people being exposed to poor sanitation and clean drinking water that are available to millions of people (UNICEF & WHO, 2021). Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) goal 6.1, which is to make water and sanitation accessible and manageable to everyone, requires more than just investment in infrastructure, but proper governance at the local level and accountability of the institutions.

Leadership has a final say on the delivery of public services. The decentralization theories state that authority is more responsive, fair and productive when it is devolved to a greater extent to the local authorities because it is closer to people (Rondinelli, 1981; Faguet, 2014). However, the results of empirical evidence are conflicting. In some Latin American nations, decentralization accentuated the inequalities on the local level as the elite was captured and politically favored (Grindle, 2007), and in some African nations, the local authorities were limited by the lack of technical capacity and financial independence (Crook, 2022). Researchers have started to point out that the effectiveness of the phenomenon of decentralization is not only determined by the institutionalization of devolution but also the quality of governance, its transparency and the involvement of citizens (Zhang and Zou, 2020).

These governance dilemmas are evident in the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services. The services are physical, social, and directly impact on health, gender equality, and human dignity. The examples of Bolivia demonstrate that empowered local institutions can deliver transformational outcomes (Faguet, 2014), whereas the experiences in Uganda and Tanzania indicate that weak governance destroys infrastructure sustainability (Tripp, 2019). Therefore, good governance is equally important in the context of SDG 6.

The example of Bangladesh also offers a very strong perspective in terms of analyzing these intersections of governance and service delivery. Since the 1990s, the country has achieved great success with covering sanitation which is commonly mentioned as a worldwide example of low-cost sanitation innovation (World Bank,

2021). Nevertheless, the problems still exist: millions of people continue to rely on polluted water sources of arsenic, the rural-urban inequity still persists, and the servicing of water sources and latrines is uneven (Haque and Ahmed, 2021). The focus of filling these gaps centers on local governance.

The most basic level of local government in Bangladesh is the Union Parishads (UP) which are also required by law to carry out water and sanitation under the 2009 Local Government (Union Parishad) Act. The Act sees participatory governance as building standing committees and community involvement (Rahman, 2020). However, in reality, there is a high likelihood of inactivity of the UP committees, the domination of a chairman in decision-making, and the use of partisan influence in the allocation of resources (Rahman & Hossain, 2019; Sarker and Zaman, 2020). The women and marginalized communities, who are disproportionately impacted by poor WASH services, are often not included in the planning and control (Chowdhury, 2021).

The research focuses on the achievements of Union Parishads in promoting SDG 6 as the two unions are compared, Harian and Parila in Rajshahi district of Bangladesh. It uses mixed method research, which incorporates household surveys, interviews and field observations, to determine the impact that institutional functionality, political processes and community participation have on local WASH outcomes. This research will help in filling the gap, as it connects the local empirical data with the wider governance and decentralization questions by adopting a mediating role of governance quality in bringing SDG 6 to life in rural Bangladesh and, accordingly, in other similar systems throughout the Global South.

Research Method

The research design used in this study is a mixed-method research design to understand how the Union Parishads (UPs) can help implement sustainable development goal 6 (SDG 6) by providing water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services in rural Bangladesh. The study was carried out at Harian and Parila Unions in Paba Upazila of Rajshahi district in Bangladesh which was purposely chosen to capture a representative of the normal governance realities in rural areas and compare the results of WASH. The data collection process was based on both quantitative and qualitative aspects connected to the need to have a full picture of infrastructural realities and the dynamics of governance. The numbers of participants were 100,

comprising 74 local residents, who represented various demographics including gender, age, occupation and location on the ward, and 26 elected representatives comprising of the chairmen, ward members and standing committee representatives. Structured questionnaires were used to administer household surveys that were used to determine access to safe water, sanitation practices, service satisfaction and perception of the performance of the UP. Semi-structured interviews of elected officials gave information on how governance is implemented and institutional limitations and how the SDG 6 mandates are achieved. Physical assessment of tube wells, latrines, and public facilities was done by field observations which was documented using field notes and photographs. To put findings into context and confirm them, the sources of secondary data were utilized, such as the records of the Union Parishads, the governmental reports, and publications by the UNICEF, WHO, and World Bank. Quantitative data were further examined using the method of descriptive statistics in order to determine patterns and disparities whereas qualitative data were examined through the method of thematic content analysis with recurrent themes being assigned to categories like institutional effectiveness, political influence and citizen participation. The use of multiple data sources in the triangulation process allowed the study to be more reliable and interpretive. Ethical aspects have been strictly adhered to the subjects were notified about the aim of the study, the study guaranteed them confidentiality and they were given verbal consent before being taken to participate in the study. Cultural sensitivity was also of special concern and was specifically considered when working with women and the marginalized groups. Though the study was also restricted in terms of coverage to two unions and it also lacked audio tapes in the course of carrying out the interviews, the combination of various data sources and views provides a strong basis in comprehending the intricate relationship between local governance and the delivery of WASH services in rural Bangladesh.

Findings

This paper gives a comparative research on the delivery of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services in two Unions (Harian and Parila Unions) of Rajshahi District, Bangladesh. The findings derive on the basis of household surveys (n=74), key informant interviews (n=26) and field observations and are grouped into four thematic themes which include infrastructure and service delivery, institutional performance, community participation, and political influence.

1. *Infrastructure and Service Delivery*

Parila Union has better coverage of the sanitary latrine (83.2%) and literacy rate (51.24%), than Harian (69.4% and 46.7%, respectively). But, contrary to this, the open defecation has been more predominant to Parila (13.56) compared to Harian (3.56), which may indicate that the infrastructural availability is not sufficient to guarantee behavioral compliance (Figure-1). This is consistent with Ahmed and Akter (2022), who contend that it is the physical access to sanitation in addition to the community awareness that determines the outcomes of sanitation.

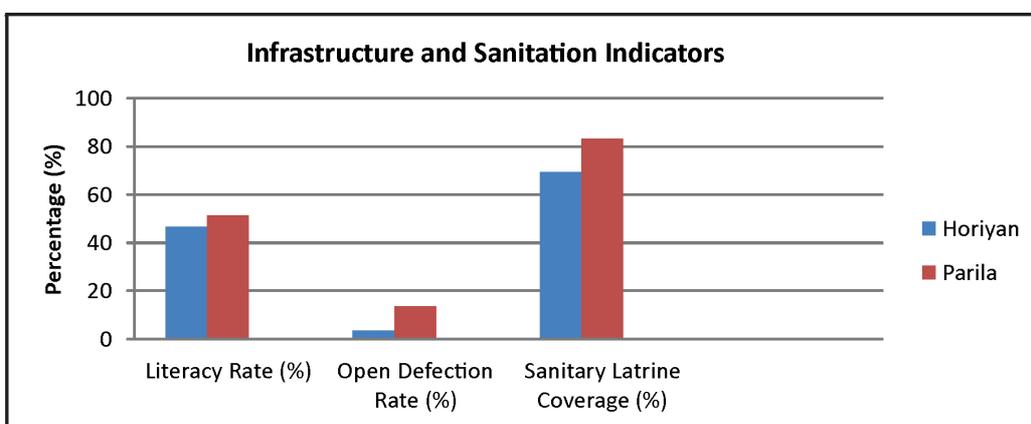


Figure 1: Infrastructure and Sanitation Indicators

Provision of safe drinking water has been one of the main challenges in the two unions. Harian suffers contamination of arsenic and improper conditions of tube wells, whereas Parila suffers persistent mechanical breakdowns. These data are similar to Haque and Ahmed (2021), who state that regular maintenance and community education to support the technical infrastructure is required to make sure it is sustainable.

Recent evaluations by the IRC (2023) point to the fact that the local-level WASH management systems are still loose in Bangladesh and lack institutionalization, which makes the service delivery even more problematic. Infrastructure investments may turn out to be useless without built in data systems and accountability processes.

2. *Standing Committee Institutional Performance*

The presence of standing committees in the two unions is not very functional. In Harian 80% of the committees are inactive or undocumented whereas Parila has a

little better performance with irregular meetings which are mainly chaired by the Union Chairman. Such a centralization of power compromises the participatory form of governance and is indicative of institutional vices identified by Chowdhury and Karim (2018).

The Local Government (Union Parishad) Act of 2009 provides that participatory decision making should be implemented but this is not being done in a consistent manner. In a study by Rahman and Hossain (2019), most of the UPs have no operationalize standing committees which makes the process of resource allocation clouded and poor supervision. This trend has been supported by our findings, which suggest that effective WASH governance relies on the institutional reforms and capacity-building.

3. Community Involvement and Community Awareness

WASH initiatives have low levels of community participation especially in Harian. There is a very small participation of women even though they play the biggest role in the management of household sanitation. Parila exhibits relatively increased participation, mostly through the intervention of NGOs. Nonetheless, 60 percent of households' state that it is intermittent and is externally motivated (Figure-2).

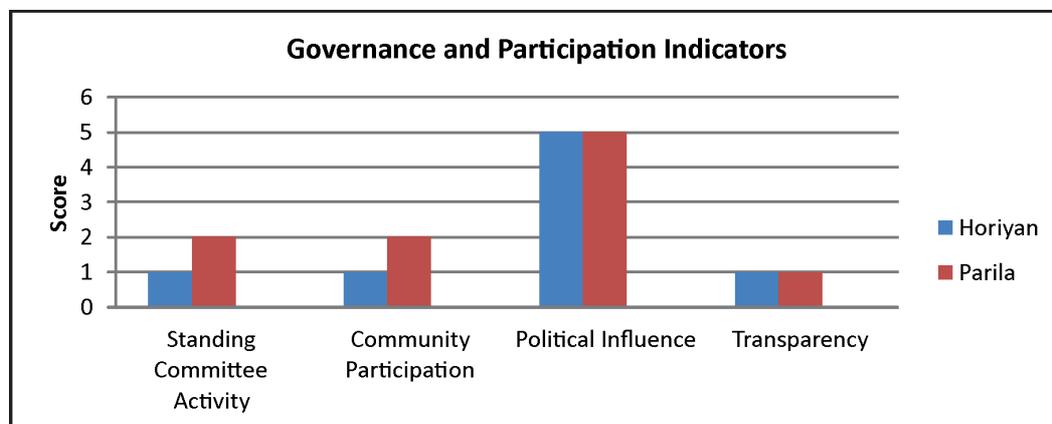


Figure 2: Governance and Participation Indicators

The solution to behavioral and cultural barriers is gender-sensitive planning and ownership locally. O'Reilly (2016) also stresses that the lack of inclusion of women in the decision-making process is not only a threat to equity but also diminishes the effectiveness of a program.

4. Political Favoritism destabilizes the delivery of services in a just manner

The issue of political favoritism continues to play a huge role towards access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services in Harian and Parila Unions. Families that have connections with the representatives of the ruling party are favored in the allocation of resources, locating infrastructure, and maintaining service. This has been an established patronage system that is perverting the way of decentralization that is meant to foster equity, responsiveness and community-based governance.

This research establishes that standing committees are usually idle or only chaired by Union Chairman who marginalize participative decision making. This concentration of power allows the political actors to distribute resources according to loyalty and not need, which further promotes social exclusion and service inequalities. According to Crook (2022) and Shrestha (2021), this has occurred in Ghana and Nepal where decentralization has enabled local elites to seize resources, which strengthens inequality instead of reducing it.

The recent study by WaterAid Bangladesh (2025) underlines the fact that the political economy analysis should be seen as the key to understanding the failures of WASH governance. Their results indicate that both the systemic obstacles, including elite capture, weak accountability, and lack of citizen oversight, should be dealt with to establish robust and inclusive WASH systems. Devoid of these reforms, decentralization will be prone to patronage at local levels as opposed to democratic empowerment.

In addition, a report IRC prepared about the pro-poor WASH strategy in Bangladesh (2022) has shown that the high-level political commitment has fallen out of favor since the Millennium Development Goals time period and SDG 6 has not become a lasting concern among policymakers. This diminishing political will is being transferred to local level in which WASH services are usually undermined unless they benefit the political interests.

The transparency mechanisms in Harian and Parila are practically nonexistent, as the community members state that they have little access to information regarding budgetary allocations or planning of the project. This absence of transparency not only promotes favouritism, but also destroys the confidence of the locals in local institutions. The key to this trend reversal is in strengthening mutual accountability, which is promoted by Sanitation and Water for All (2021).

Discussion

This paper provides a critical review of the politics of governance of the WASH service delivery in Harian and Parila Union, and notes how decentralization in Bangladesh is limited by structural and political factors. The results dispute the assumption that decentralization of authority is an automatic factor that improves service delivery particularly in situations where institutional capacity is low and where elites are captured.

1. Decentralization Theory: Structural Authority vs. Functional Capacity

According to the decentralization theory, the decentralization of the decision-making process through the devolution of local governments increases the responsiveness and equity (Rondinelli, 1981; Faguet, 2014). Nevertheless, as this paper has demonstrated, legal requirements are not sufficient in facilitating effective service delivery. The standing committees are the important tools of participatory governance, which are either non-functional or controlled by chairmen in both unions to restrict deliberation and control.

This is what Faguet (2014) calls the decentralization paradox: in the cases where local institutions are neither able nor responsible, decentralization can strengthen status quo inequalities. The fairly improved WASH performance of Parila is not only related to the decentralization but also backed up by increased literacy levels, involvement of NGOs, and partial functionality of committees.

2. Governance Theory: Consensus, Inclusion and Openness

The theory of governance underlines the importance of norms, institutions, and involvement of citizens in the determination of the outputs of the public services (Pierre and Peters, 2000; Joshi and Moore, 2020). This analysis shows that the two unions have low levels of transparency, poor record-keeping, and inadequate participation of citizens in them particularly the women. Yearly reports show the ineffectiveness of governance practice. The system failures also specify the legality of local institutions.

In Harian, the community members state that they are not involved in WASH planning and women are much sidelined even when they are the principal actors in the sanitation of the house. This omission indicates larger gender inequalities in local politics in South Asia (O'Reilly, 2016). The research confirms Ahmed and

Akter (2022), who believe that the inclusion of governance (particularly, the gender sensitivity of planning) is the key to sustainable WASH results.

In addition, the lack of external audits, participatory budgeting, and redress of grievances mechanisms enables the process of making decisions to be unnoticed. This is corroborated by WaterAid Bangladesh (2025), who assert that political economy analysis is necessary to know bottlenecks of governance in the WASH systems.

3. Local elite capture and Political favoritism

The issue of political favoritism is a wide cut off to equal service delivery. In the two unions, the members of the ruling parties enjoy preferential access to infrastructure and services by their households. This represents an elite capture tendency, as local political forces utilize public resources to accumulate power and buy obedience (Crook, 2022; Shrestha, 2021).

In the study, it is evident that decentralization in the absence of strong accountability measures can merely shift patronage to the local instead of the national level. This has been observed in Nepal, Ghana and India whereby decentralization has given powers to the local elites, and not the communities (Datta, 2019; Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006).

Centralization of power in the office of the chairman and the lack of transparency systems in Harian contributes to inequality. Similar tones can be found in the findings of Sanitation and Water for All (2021), as its authors promote mutual accountability frameworks, which would help to fight political interference in the WASH management.

4. Implications to SDG 6 and Local Governance Reform

The research highlights the point that to attain SDG 6 universal access to clean water and sanitation, it is not just about investing in infrastructure. It requires reform of governance, institutional responsibility and participation. The national level advancement usually hides the local imbalance as observed in the difference in the performance of Harian and Parila.

The policy interventions should be directed towards:

- Reorganizing current standing committees by legalizing and training.
- Enhancing gender-based governance through obligating women to be represented and be leaders.

- Improving the level of transparency through open budgeting, public audits and citizen scorecards.

So, the second one is strengthening the partnership between the NGOs to develop a community capacity and track the service equity.

These reforms are in line with best practices in the world and they are necessary in order to make sure that the decentralization achieves its promise of delivering services in an equitable and responsive manner.

Recommendations

1. **Strengthen Standing Committees:** Make Union Parishad standing committees stronger by implementing frequent meetings, proper documentation, and involvement of citizens in such meetings. This will assist in curbing partisan take over and boost participatory governance at the grassroots level.
2. **Support Local Government Capacity:** Train the representatives of the UP system on the issues of WASH governance, participatory planning, and decision-making based on evidence. Assign technical personnel to the union parishads to facilitate the functions of implementation, monitoring and reporting.
3. **Stimulate Participation Consensus:** Community forums should be institutionalized and a gender sensitive planning strategy should be embraced to capture the needs of the diverse households. Make sure that women, the youth and the marginalized groups are actively engaged in decision making processes related to WASH.
4. **Depoliticize Resource Allocation:** Introduce open beneficiary selection criteria, run frequent social audits and use community scorecards to lessen political advantages and enhance responsibility in service provision.
5. **Increase Financial Autonomy:** Strengthen the fiscal power of Union Parishad to mobilize and distribute funds to the WASH services. The central government transfers are linked to such performance-based indicators like the rise in the coverage of sanitation and water quality.
6. **Use Data-Driven Governance:** Introduce regular data gathering frameworks to check the standard of water and sanitation availability and customer contentment. Use GIS mapping, digital dashboards to lead fair distribution of resources and also define underserved areas.

7. **Make NGOs and Civil Society Collaboration:** Stronger NGOs and civil society actors will work with the community to implement WASH programs on a community level, promote awareness, and promote local monitoring and accountability.
8. **Institutionalize Performance Evaluation:** Prepare WASH-based performance assessment instruments of the UPs. Make use of evaluation results to make specific capacity-building, resource allocation, and best practice recognition.
9. **Enhance Legal Implementation of Governance Requirement:** Strengthen implementation by law of the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act through observing compliance with committee formation, frequency of meeting and procedures involved. Good governance norms must be institutionalized through legal accountability.
10. **Incorporate WASH into Local Development Planning:** WASH will be incorporated as a priority in the annual development plans and budgets of Union Parishads. Bring local planning to the national SDG 6 targets to make sure that local plans are coherent, sustainable, and long term.

Conclusion

The paper highlights the fact that achievement of the Sustainable Development Goal 6 of rural Bangladesh is not confined to infrastructural investment but on proper governance, institutional accountability, and collective social responsibility. Comparative analysis of Harian and Parila Unions show that challenges in Union Parishad (UP) governance e.g. nonfunctional standing committees, centralized powers, political favoritism, and lack of community involvement still obstruct the achievement of the goal of universal access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).

To effect any significant change, the Union Parishad needs to accept its legal and moral roles as the first line institution of the local government. Things UPs can do to improve are having standing committees that operate openly, budgets that are more open to check and decisions made on the basis of the needs of the community as opposed to political allegiance. They should also

Institutionalize gender sensitive planning, establish citizen feedback mechanisms and liaise with NGOs, government agencies and the development partners in order

to maintain the WASH infrastructure. By being proactive, empowering through capacity building, and engaging in inclusive decision-making, the UPs will be able to become true initiators of fair and sustainable WASH results.

The responsibility of citizens is also critical and their involvement brings about life to decentralization. The local members must watch the goings on within the community, be present at the community meetings, observe good sanitation habits and hold the elected officials to accountability. Women, young people, and those who are marginalized especially should be made to insist on their positions as active participants instead of active beneficiaries. Civic responsibility culture, which is based on the awareness, cooperation, and ownership, is necessary to guarantee the sustainability of the SDG 6 success.

In the end, this study concludes that the way forward towards the realization of SDG 6 in Bangladesh is in a balanced relationship between empowered institutions and the active citizens. Where there is clear, participatory, and gender-sensitive governance by the Union Parishads and a collective responsibility on the part of the citizen in regard to hygiene, stewardship and accountability, WASH service delivery can transform into a source of human dignity, health and social justice in rural Bangladesh.

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