

The Dynamics of Disempowerment: A Qualitative Study of Local Environmental Governance in Rural Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh is in the list of most environmentally vulnerable countries in the world. The country is under rigorous threats of climate change and environment degradation that has a direct adverse effect on its way to sustainable development. This qualitative analysis evaluates how the Union Parishad (UP) which is the basic form of a local government, changes the structure of environmental governance in rural environments. The primary objective is to explore the on-the-ground realities, perceptions, and systemic challenges that constrain the UP's effectiveness as a key factor in environmental management. This study finds, using a thematic analysis of qualitative data gathered in discussions with key informants and focus groups interviews, a critical gap between national policy and local action. The results reveal a profound disconnect: while communities express high concern over environmental issues, they are largely dissatisfied with and disengaged from the UP's efforts. The study concludes that the UP's capacity is undermined by a triad of crippling issues: severe financial resource shortages, a public trust deficit stemming from corruption, and significant political interference. To address this, the article recommends a paradigm shift towards a governance model that is genuinely decentralized, adequately resourced, highly accountable, and fundamentally participatory to secure Bangladesh's environmental and human future.

Keywords: Environmental Governance, Local Government, Sustainable Development, Climate Change Vulnerability, Climate Resilience

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh, a nation defined by its low-lying deltas and vast floodplains, stands as one of the world's most vulnerable countries to the adverse effects of climate change and environmental degradation (Islam, et al., 2024). Healthy environment is the linkage with the welfare of millions, and the possible sustainable development. The fact that it is geographically and socio-economically placed in such a way indicates the acute vulnerability of the country in terms of population level and dependence on agriculture (Sikder & Faisal, 2020). It is facing numerous environmental crises that includes the regular treatment of floods, cyclones, tidal surge, intrusion of salinity and erosion of rivers that are of great concern to the nation and economy as well. These challenges threaten to undermine national development goals and the country's capacity to adapt to the ongoing climate crisis (Islam, 2018).

To overcome this and other such challenging issues, the Government of Bangladesh has come up with a holistic policy and institutional framework of legislative interventions and specialized departments to meet the challenge of disaster management as well as environmental protection (GIU, 2023). Nevertheless, these national level strategies can only succeed when implemented at the grassroots level. Here the primary role of local government especially the Union Parishad (UP) will be made obligatory since it serves as the most important representative of the central government in rural places. Union Parishad has been theoretically placed as the most important player in environmental governance, with a broad responsibility of tackling disaster, pollution control, any of social consciousness as well as preserving its natural resources (IPCC, 2012).

However, even though this is a central requirement, the performance of Union Parishad concerning reinforcing

environmental governance has been considered as a critical and understudied topic (Haque, et al., 2023). The main literature focus mostly gives prominence to noticeable impediments to development like long-term underfunding, lack of institutional capacity, political interference, and the extensive absence of community involvement (Asaduzzaman, 2008). The most critical factor is the debilitating lack of financial resources, which are usually scarce and released with significant delays. This is compounded by weak community involvement, as frameworks like committee systems and open budget discussions are not effectively applied. In addition, there is a high level of lack of coordination among stakeholders, which has led to a problem of implementing governance measures. The Union Parishad suffers from weak structural and institutional capacity, political interference, patron-client relationships and poor public confidence.

Although there are a number of studies written on environmental problems in Bangladesh, covering the issues of environmental degradation, disaster management, or the role of NGOs, there is a particular vacuum. On the basis of the literature reviewed no study has been conducted so far specifically to understand the position of the local government in the environmental governance of Bangladesh. The main contribution that this research thus intends to make is to close this critical gap by delivering grassroots assessment of the role, performance and impact of local government organizations in this under-researched field. The qualitative study used in this article is a reflective examination of these concerns, which was carried out through the elicitation of the views and experiences of community members and expert informants. This knowledge could be useful in providing a clear picture of how the UP actually operates and how it is being used to diagnose institutional constraints to its delivery as mandated. With a focus on the human aspect of governance, the proposed study will shed light on the aspect of policy intent and reality on the ground thus providing critical comments on mechanisms surrounding the local governance process as it is set in the context of environmental vulnerability (FAO, 2021).

This paper was undertaken to see the perception of local communities and expert stakeholders on the role and effectiveness of Union Parishad to raise awareness on the environmental issues of the rural areas in Bangladesh. It also aimed to investigate what are the major institutional and systemic constraints that, such as financial limitations and governance deficits, prevent the Union Parishad from effectively fulfilling its mandate for environmental management. In addition, the study was also to be conducted to identify the community attitude towards the participatory mechanisms and how the low level of civic engagement contributes to the legitimacy and sustainability of local environmental initiatives. Finally, the intention was to elaborate a set of recommendations for action that would help the Union Parishad to enhance its capacity for effective participatory environmental governance.

Theoretical Framework of Environmental Governance

Environmental governance can be called as an offshoot of the Human Governance paradigm which emerged in the academia during the year 1994 (Faisal & Ahmed, 2019). This paradigm is an alternative to the state-centric concept of security where the individual is the centre point of governance (Ali, et al., 2019). This concept was defined in the context of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) where the human security is a combination of seven dimensions which entail economic, food, health, as well as environmental security. This system of thought creates a direct correlation between the environmental health and basic security and well-being of people (UN, 2017).

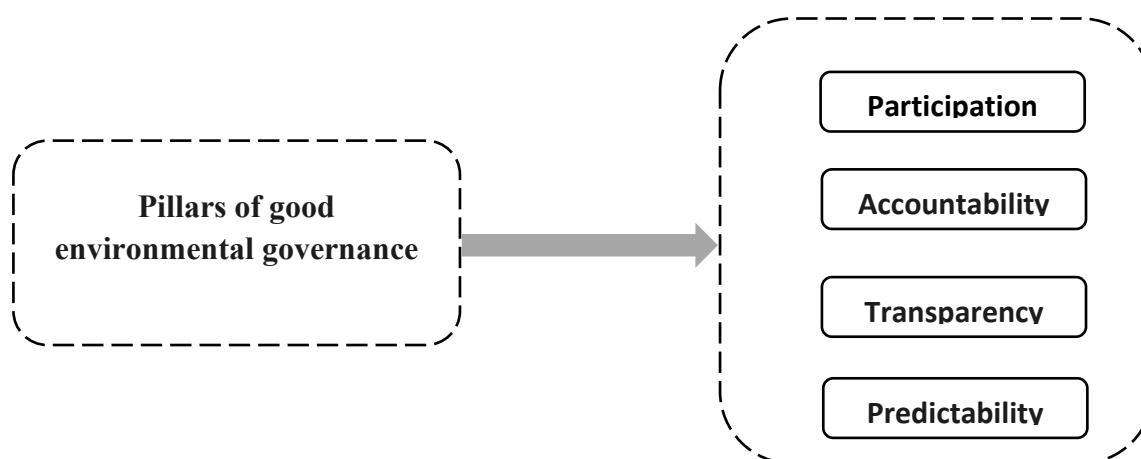
Grieving on this ground, the environmental governance is comprised of organizations, policies, financing mechanisms, rules, and norms, which govern the process of protection of the environment. The principles which characterize effective environmental governance include the following ones: this kind of governance incorporates environmental issues in every level of decision-making; it triggers the transition to sustainable circular systems and focuses on the fundamental interlink between people and their ecosystems (Abed, 2021). The development of effective international control of the environment has been slow, although apparently a need in the wake of the emergence of environmental problems. Other major obstacles are absence of political will, inefficient regulatory systems, funding gap, and the general disorganization between the stakeholders (IPCC, 2012).

There has to be an adequate theoretical framework to investigate institutional performance meaningfully. The chosen approach in this research is the Environmental Governance framework which is theoretically based on

the general argument of Human Security. In this paradigm, security lies with the individual rather than the state, which states that a people-centered approach is needed in order to achieve stability. As defined by the UNDP's 1994 Human Development Report, human security encompasses seven dimensions, one of which is environmental security (Islam, 2020). This association is essential, not only in putting environmental degradation in perspective as being an ecological problem but also a reality where there is an explicit and existential threat to the security and health of man (Rahman, 2021).

On this basis, it is possible and productive to divide the pillars of good environmental governance into four pillars that are all interconnected. It is through these pillars that this research is analyzing the qualitative information as well as the institutional health diagnosis of the Union Parishad (Islam, 2020).

Figure 1: Pillars of good environmental governance



Source: Adopted from Islam, 2020.

Participation: This pillar focuses on the meaningful participation of all stakeholders- the local communities, the civil organizations and other non-state actors in designing, executing and monitoring of all environmental programs. This is regarded as one of the preconditions to making sure that policies and projects can be locally relevant, sustainable, and generate in the community ownership (Panday, 2011).

Accountability: This doctrine underlines that the actions of the functions of the institutions as well as their decision-makers, the public officials, are required to be accountable. Within the environmental governance, it implies that the persons charged with safeguarding the environment must be effective and the parties that cause harm must be held accountable (Rana, 2011).

Transparency: Transparency is the foundation of accountability. It demands that the government processes and decisions should be transparent and open to various people. This involves open budgetary procedures, disclosure of project details, good communication channels between the people and the government officials (Siddique, 1992).

Predictability: This pillar implies applying the laws and policies in the same way, without discrimination. In case of environmental governance, it involves a consistent legal and institutional environment in which all interested parties would know that they could expect an equal and fair treatment of the rules (Sarker, et al., 2021).

They are able to explain that the framework is relevant to the situation in Bangladesh, specifically rural Bangladesh, in that it is applied directly to the situation. It gives the language and framework to view the deep-seated issues reported by the community- e.g., corruption, political influence, etc. as a symptomatic pattern of misplaced accountability and transparency (Ahsan, et al., 2014). It allows one to further explore the reasons why participatory mechanisms are failing even though they have been identified as key to localizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Shibli, 2017). The framework will assist the research to go beyond superficial observation to give a careful evaluative insight on whether the mandated role of the Union Parishad is being complied with at all as per these universal ideals of good governance.

The Context of Environmental Vulnerability in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is widely recognized as one of the world's most susceptible and ecologically vulnerable nations (World Bank, 2022). The combination of specific geographic and hydro-geological characteristics, including the dominance of floodplains and extremely low sea level are the factors that precondition this vulnerability (Adger, 2006). Additional to these geographical issues are socio-economic issues such as a very high density of population, a high rate of poverty and a strong dependence of its economy on natural resources (GED, 2012). Around 70 percent peoples (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022) are living in rural areas that are exposed to many environmental hazards that question their livelihood and leadership (Islam, 2021).

Global warming and climate change effects are believed to be a threat multiplier as they severely exacerbate such vulnerabilities threatening to derail the progress of the country in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Cologna, et al., 2025). The main climatic effects are severe and regular cyclones, intrusion of salinity, waterlogging, unreliable rainfall and more erosion of rivers. The government has realized the extent of these overwhelming challenges, and they have attempted to make the country healthier, more sustainable, as well as friendly to the environment (Haque, et al., 2025).

Recent studies in Bangladesh have deepened the understanding of how environmental vulnerability plays out across different settings, and what social, ecological, and institutional factors exacerbate (or mitigate) those vulnerabilities.

Riverine islands (“chars”) and social vulnerability: A mixed-method study in the riverine islands (chars) of Gaibandha district found that geographical isolation, fragile housing, low education, displacement, climate-sensitive occupations, and low income make these communities highly vulnerable. Adaptive capacity is constrained by lack of infrastructure, limited climate-change information, and financial resources (Hossain, et al., 2023).

Multidimensional flood vulnerability: An article published in 2025 assesses flood vulnerability among rural Bangladeshi communities across multiple dimensions: exposure to flood, sensitivity (e.g. loss of land or livelihood), and adaptive capacity (including access to warning systems, social networks, infrastructure). It emphasizes that vulnerability is not uniform — districts with weaker infrastructure and fewer institutional supports fare far worse (Rahman, et al., 2025).

Salinity intrusion impacts beyond coastal frontiers: Research has shown that salinity intrusion is no longer confined to the exposed coast: interior coastal zones are experiencing rising salinity in surface and irrigation water. One study in Shariatpur (lower Meghna region) found that irrigation water’s salinity had increased (≈ 1.3 dS/m), higher than earlier estimates, negatively affecting crop yield (Baten, et al., 2015).

Vulnerability in Assasuni (Satkhira)- a Climate Vulnerability Index (CVI) approach: In Assasuni Upazila, researchers used a CVI to assess fishermen communities’ vulnerability. They found that dependence on fisheries, declining fish catch, and inadequate coping strategies (such as diversification of livelihood or savings) combined with physical exposure (e.g. coastal flooding) to increase risk (Ahmed, et al., 2024).

Riverbank erosion & livelihood impacts: Bhuiyan et al. (2017) studied how riverbank erosion hazards impact local livelihoods via land loss and forced migration. They report that loss of agricultural land, displacement of households, and erosion of infrastructure (homes, roads) result in long-term vulnerability for many rural households (Bhuiyan, et al., 2017).

Probability of riverbank erosion in southern shoreline: In the southern shoreline regions (e.g. Chars of Barisal), studies have estimated erosion risk probabilities, showing high risk in certain unions. This quantification helps in mapping those vulnerable to land-loss, displacement, and livelihood disruption (Hasan, et al., 2018).

Changes in extreme rainfall and drought risk: More recently, work using advanced statistical-physical downscaling and satellite data indicates that extreme rainfall events are projected to increase in Bangladesh by

mid-century. Drought severity also shows spatial variability, and many districts are likely to see increasing risk under warming scenarios. These climatic shifts deepen vulnerability especially for agriculture-dependent rural populations (Saha & Ravela, 2024).

To counter these threats, the Government of Bangladesh has over the course of decades developed a policy, legal, and institutional framework that has been constructed in steps (Ahmed & Islam, 2012). The first steps

were the Water Pollution Control Ordinance of 1973 and Environment Pollution Control Ordinance of 1977. In 1985 the Department of Environment (DOE) was formed and in 2018, a national Environmental Policy was accepted where environmental protection was identified as a national priority (Haque, et al., 2023). The country also has synchronized its policy agenda on international climate talks by developing National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) in 2005, and landmark Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP) in 2009. This concern has been embedded in broader national development plans including the Seventh Five Year Plan that had specific targets set with regard to the SDGs.

Although national policies contribute a strategic guidance, local government institutions are obligated to implement its guidelines at the grass root level. In rural Bangladesh, the most people regard Union Parishad (UP) as the most serious institution of enacting environment actions (Islam, 2018). The UP is regarded to be the major avenue in which the resources allotted by the government are used in safeguarding the environment and is the most representative body at the local level (Islam & Faisal, 2024). The UP has been burdened with a lot of responsibilities such as the management of natural resources (plantations of trees, protecting embankments), management of pollution sources (management of arsenic, air and water pollution rules), and management of disasters (disseminating early warnings, maintaining community shelters) (Haque, et al., 2023). This required positioning places the UP on the front line of the local resilience and well-being building of the community.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The contemplated study aimed to enquire into the nuances of the relationship between the local government as well as environmental governance in rural parts of Bangladesh due to a qualitative method approach. This design was justified in order to get a complex and multi-determined picture that would not be achieved by a single approach, where the breadth of the observation approach could be combined with the depth of qualitative knowledge. Observational method was applied to determine general patterns and trends in answering questions of what. In order to answer the why and how questions, the quantitative component was followed by a qualitative component of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), which provided detailed, contextual stories and expert opinions on the motivations and nuances behind the quantitative results.

The study used a purposive design and five sites were selected as the study areas covering the gamut of environmental vulnerability in Bangladesh. Such an approach allowed the study to go beyond some sort of environmental threat and include a broader set of issues. These selected sites were chosen purposively, one each from Shamnagar (Union Parishad, Satkhira, coastal area, cyclone and salinity vulnerability), Sariakandi (Bogura, riverine flood vulnerability), Islampur, Jamalpur (compound flood and river erosion vulnerability), Mithamain, Kishoreganj (flash flood Haor unique ecosystem) and Sadar, Chattogram (urbanization). The choice allowed comparing these challenges to find a common and specific aspect of them in various environmental settings.

In view of data collection, reliance was made on both primary and secondary sources in order to have a balanced and wholesome search. To achieve such a strong background in terms of context and policy, the use of secondary data was frequent through comprehensive desk research of scholarly sources, government policy papers and non-governmental and international organization reports. The kinds on primary data yielded were Focus Group Discussion and Key Informant Interviews. FGDs were carried out through purposive sample of Local People who will belong to group of males and females, youth group, group of persons with disabilities, Community Leaders etc. During the Focus Group Discussions, the discussion of problems took place, and the possible solution is explored. KII was used to interview the policymakers, government officials, practitioners, and academics to obtain expert knowledge (see Annex 1). Strict ethical guidelines were followed in all instances of data collection, in which informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality were provided to all the participants.

In order to guarantee the rigor of thematic analysis, the processing of the data was conducted in the form of a multi-stage coding. Initially, all interview and FGD transcripts were transcribed as is in the Bengali language, followed by translation into English so that coding could be done. This was done through a form of initial open coding to get the emerging ideas, then through the axial coding to make relationships between categories associated and finally selective where complex themes were being refined. To increase reliability, two researchers coded a quarter of transcripts independently and in advance and compared the results and obtained great intercoder agreement. Differences were debated and settled via consensus and finally a final code book was developed. Peer debriefings were also done regularly to ensure that the interpretation levels were consistent and the researcher bias was avoided.

FINDINGS

A Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data

The qualitative research methodology of interviews and the focus group discussions showed a pattern of a compelling story regarding the status of local environmental governance. The results are categorized within several central themes that have appeared directly out of the voices through the community members and expert informants.

Public Trust: Accountability and Transparency Crisis

There was a general theme of an underlying distrust of the Union Parishad due to the perceived corruption and having no transparency in all talks. Both the community members and the experts repeatedly identified systemic lack of accountability that negatively affects legitimacy and efficacy of the local government.

Consistent with the arguments, in the focus groups, citizens specified how they feel that in decision making, the interest of people is not regarded but rather people make decisions based on personal interests or political affiliations. One community member told that when he was asked on the reasons environmental projects failed, he replied: They are corrupted, and they don't do any work without bribes.

This aligns with broader research showing that corruption and weak accountability have long undermined Union Parishad legitimacy. Taufiq (2021) highlights how citizens frequently face barriers to accessing information or seeking redress, which fosters mistrust and withdrawal from formal governance channels.

Another resident, speaking about the government's role, expressed a similar sentiment, highlighting the need for external oversight: "The government should strictly monitor the activities of the Union Parishad". Similar concerns are echoed in other studies, which find that inadequate monitoring mechanisms at local level weaken environmental governance and policy enforcement (Haque & Hossain, 2024). Their analysis shows that while laws exist on paper, implementation is routinely compromised by poor oversight

This demand for monitoring was echoed by multiple participants, suggesting that citizens have lost faith in the UP's ability to police itself. The comments demonstrate the failure in the social contract that the population no longer thought that there is any chance of the local government honesty or fairness. Such accountability and transparency deficiency naturally results in the tendency to drop out of the political process since it would have no use. Appropriately, the qualitative data lends a narrative clarification to the quantitative event of mass-discontent among the populace and establishes it as firmly founded and grounded in a sense of a crouched institutional failure and not mere indifference.

A System of Disempowerment: Financial and Political Constraints

Whereas community informants placed the blame of this behavior on corruption, expert informants critically offered a structural interpretation of the said behavior. This situation was reinforced by the similarity between the responses of the policymakers and the practitioners in the interviews, as both groups emphasized that, they are extremely disempowered institutions in a vicious cycle of lack of funding and political pressure.

The key barrier as the community and the experts determined is a critical shortage of financial means. The structural problem was explained by an expert of an international development organization:

The Union Parishad is systematically under-resourced for the monumental task they face. They are expected to manage everything from disaster response to climate adaptation with inadequate and unpredictable financial support.

This finding is supported by broader evidence. Uddin (2019) shows that although UPs are formally empowered to deliver local services, resource scarcity and delayed disbursements routinely limit their effectiveness, leaving communities dissatisfied with outcomes.

This expert perspective aligns with the community's own assessment, where a "lack of funding" was consistently ranked as the single greatest challenge facing the UP. According to the qualitative data, this financial precarity is not only limited by small budgets, but also by lack of reliability of sources. A government official noted the impact of delays:

Since the government is late in releasing the grant money, Union Parishad is not able to perform an effective role in providing the rural people with environmental governance.

Comparable patterns are noted in studies of fiscal decentralization, where unpredictable fund flows have been shown to trap local governments in reactive crisis management rather than proactive planning (Haque et al., 2023)

This financial weakness is compounded by what informants referred to as "unwarranted political pressure" and "patron-client relations". This implies that despite having presence of resources, the distribution may be based not on the reality of the community needs instead it may be influenced by the partisan interest. This qualitative data therefore provides a deeper insight into why corruption and political interference is so rampant according to this data; it is because corruption and political interference is an indication of a system where institutions are devoid of independence and of resources to act independently and without bias.

Bangladesh is not the only country with these issues of governance. Parallels in trapped struggles have been noted among the other countries of South Asia as revealed in comparative studies. As a case in point, in India Panchayati Raj Institutions are equally elite capture vulnerable alongside resource limitations, further undermining effectiveness as actors in local governance. Similarly, in Nepal, municipal authorities dedicated to environment-related management usually have no predictable fiscal transfers, which results in the NGOs having to provide the necessary services. These parallels help highlight that fiscal decentralization and institutional autonomy are key regional bottlenecks and the experience of Bangladesh is part of a broader pattern in South Asia of disempowered local institutions struggling to deal with environmental crises.

The Call for Participation: A Desire to Engage

Although the participation rates in the environmental initiative spearheaded by the UP were meager (secondary source), the qualitative evidence shows that there is a huge community want to increase the participation rates. This is not apathetic population but rather one that considers itself left out.

The respondents of the focus group discussions made several suggestions on the way the Union Parishad can be improved, and the theme was enthusiasm to be engaged earnestly. A community leader proposed:

They should arrange meetings with the local people and discuss the problems to find a better solution.

This resonates with evidence from Uddin (2019), who found that participatory forums at Union Parishad level exist in principle but are often poorly implemented, leaving citizens with limited voice in shaping local decisions.

Another resident's suggestion went further, calling for a structured approach to inclusion: Engage people from all walks of life. Form a committee with local people for better management. Rahman (2015) similarly

emphasizes that inclusive participation, particularly involving women and marginalized groups, is key to improving transparency and legitimacy in UP decision-making. However, his study shows that women leaders are often sidelined in practice, mirroring community frustrations documented here.

This theme directly challenges the notion of community indifference. It demonstrates that local knowledge on the part of the citizens has a value and that they are aware of the fact that their participation is vital in taking any project to fruition. The current lack of participation, therefore, is not a failure of the community's will but a failure of the institutional mechanisms that were supposed to make that will happen. The qualitative information presented here is providing a strong story to explain the irony of being highly environmentally concerned and having a low level of civil engagement. The community is ready to participate, but the UP's perception of ineffectiveness and the absence of transparent and accessible platforms for engagement has created a chasm that is yet to be bridged.

A Practical Agenda for Action: The Community's Vision

The qualitative findings are also clearly and defined by the citizens as an agenda with actions to be taken environment wise. Upon being asked what the Union Parishad ought to do the answers no longer became governed by the ethereal governance ideologies but gave practical and tangible solutions to the problems. The priorities of the community are pragmatic and directly related to their day to day lived experiences.

One of the themes that dominated there was the need of protective infrastructures in flood and devastating regions. A resident from Islampur stated: Build permanent and strong embankments to protect us from river erosion.

Bhuiyan et al. (2017) also state that riverbank erosion causes severe livelihood disruptions, land loss and displacement; supporting the urgency of protective infrastructure investments.

On other fronts, the attention was given to the public health and sanitation. A participant from a peri-urban area of Chattogram suggested: Proper drainage system should be developed.

Haque et al. (2025) address the same point by demonstrating that urbanizing rural areas have insufficient drainage which contributes to flooding, sanitation problems and health hazards which collectively represent the need of the community.

Another echoed this, and said it needs more profound waste managing: They should take initiatives for tree plantation and waste management.

Such demands are reflected in national studies on sustainable local governance which talk about community birthed programs in tree plantation and waste management as necessary to build resilience and local ownership of environmental initiatives (FAO, 2021)

The local governments are now targeted by activities based on these kinds of findings which can be considered qualitative. They illustrate that the people squarely criticize the efficiency of the ruling now not on the stand of abstract policies but on the provision of much-needed infrastructural and amenities. The qualitative information confirms the rates of local environmental issues being contextual-specific and the necessity of finding different solution which should be adjusted to the peculiarities of ecology and social conditions of a particular area, confirmed by not just qualitative research, but also by analysis of variations on a regional basis regarding the level of satisfaction.

Discussion and interpretation of the results

When synthesized, the qualitative results of this study generate a very attractive and provocative picture of the local environmental governance in rural Bangladesh. They highlight an implementation scarcity putting forward how good national policies and frameworks do not result in efficient local action. This failure is not through lack of citizen concern but is a combination of institution and systemic malfunctions, which is directly antipodal to

the good governance principles.

The most striking discovery is the disengaged arrested between the people and the Union Parishad which can be translated into the crisis of the institutional legitimacy. The qualitative report is that the problem of corruption and lack of transparency would cause to a drastic level of damage to the public trust. The repeated calls for 'monitoring' and 'strict measures' against dishonest practices is a direct call for accountability, where the same is seen to be lacking. This is an important observation: any environmentally-oriented program can be successful only when it is first legitimized to be believed and accepted by its community whom it is supposed to serve. Until this serious lack of accountability and transparency is dealt with, additional funds or technical expertise will most probably be swallowed up by the same structure breakdowns.

In addition, the qualitative description will remodel our perception about the low community participation. The realization that more than a great majority of the citizen never acquired any access to UP led initiatives is also not indicative of the general apathy among the citizens but the direct result of this crisis of legitimacy. The withdrawal of citizens in the process, therefore, is a logical act of the citizens, which believe that the local government is disempowered and unaccountable to the local population. They do not see the Union Parishad as an "effective arena through which the Local government can be involved in decision-making" rather the Union Parishad as "top down and not participative". Such lack of engagement, in turn, creates a vicious cycle, whereby the UP would lack the benefits of local knowledge and community ownership that would possess the keys to effective and sustainable management of the environment. The principle of participation is not only a policy objective but also the qualitative data can disseminate the policy that it is a highly desired result according to the view of community.

Finally, the qualitative findings bring into light the role of Union Parishad being a disempowered agent in a flawed system. Despite the fact that the community may be responsible in its failure, the interviews with the expert's tick with a more detailed diagnosis. They consistently identify a triad of systemic problems of inadequate and unpredictable funding, political interference, and weak institutional capacity, that hamstringing the UP's ability to do its mandated duties. The UP will have to deal with possibly intractable and resources demanding projects such as the disaster relief and the protection of the environment without a debilitating financial crunch. This economic precarity further places the UP in a reactive position of crisis management in lieu of long term and strategic environmental planning. This discussion indicates that there is no better analysis in enhancing, without fundamental reformation of inter-governmental fiscal and political system, might improve the local environmental governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to give a qualitative review of the roles of the Union Parishad towards environmental governance at a ground level within the rural setting of Bangladesh. These results clearly indicate that there exists a big disconnect between the intentions of the policy and what occurs in the field. The local government's capacity to strengthen environmental governance is severely constrained by a dysfunctional governance environment marked by a lack of financial resources, a profound deficit in public trust, and a top-down, non-participatory approach to development.

Based on the qualitative pieces of evidence and findings presented in this paper, the following recommendations can be beneficial to overcome these systemic problems:

Institutionalize Transparency and Accountability

- Legislate mandatory annual and independent audits of all Union Parishads' financial expenditures.
- Ensure audit outcomes are published in local media and displayed prominently at the Union Parishad office to ensure public access and transparency.
- Constitute an accessible and autonomous grievance redressal system at the Upazila level, allowing citizens to formally lodge complaints regarding corruption or mismanagement.

- Require Union Parishads to conduct open-budget meetings at the ward level, enabling the public to actively participate in prioritizing and reviewing environmental projects before funds are allocated.

Empower the Union Parishad through Fiscal Reform

- Redesign the central government's fund release system to ensure grants are provided to the UP in a regular, predictable, and adequate manner.
- Remove delays in funding to allow the UP to shift from a reactive, crisis-management footing to proactive, long-term environmental planning.
- Allocate a significant and protected portion of the UP's annual budget specifically for environmental and disaster management initiatives to prevent funds from being diverted to other uses.

Foster Genuine Community Participation

- Repurpose standing committees by mandating regular, publicly announced meetings that ensure the attendance of a diverse cross-section of the community, not just political elites.
- Actively encourage and facilitate collaboration with non-state actors, such as local and national NGOs, to leverage their technical expertise and community mobilization skills.
- Utilize the UP's platform to initiate local campaigns to raise public awareness of environmental issues and provide practical training in disaster preparedness skills, fostering a more engaged and empowered citizenry.

Although these recommendations are fundamental, their feasibility should be placed critically within the background environment of the established political economy of Bangladesh. Patron-client relationships and the veto power of the central decision-making on fiscal transfers might make it difficult to promptly enforce the reforms including independent auditing or predictable funding. Reforms can be achieved only in the presence of long-term political intent on the side of the central level and the work of the active civil society, which was confirmed by the experience of the past decentralization reforms. As a consequence, a gradual strategy with pilot interventions in a few environmentally endangered districts could provide a feasible avenue to expand reforms with creating a sequence of trust and proving its idea.

The study gets to the conclusion that the Union Parishad, as it currently exists, cannot be deemed an effective localizing agent towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The weaknesses do not enable its translation of national goals into relevant and sustainable local results. The promise of the 2030 Agenda to "leave no one behind" remains largely unfulfilled at the grassroots level. Thus, there is need to change the paradigm in order to deliver climate-resilient and environmentally secure rural Bangladesh. It should be a change beyond the model that views the UP as a bureaucracy with a limitation of resources toward one that actually steps forward to empower the UP as a vibrant, accountable and participatory institution.

With the implementation of the above recommendations, Bangladesh can initiate a radical change in its local governance of the environment. The qualitative results reveal that the citizens are prepared and will do so, they are only awaiting to be given an institutional system worth their trust support. This is the highest investment that the country can make in ensuring future of the country in environmental and human terms.

Annex 1: Profile of respondents whose quotations have been used in this article

Key Relevance	Location	Occupation	Interview Timeline
Spoke about corruption and lack of accountability in UP activities.	Islampur, Jamalpur	Farmer	April 2025

Demanded stronger government oversight of UP.	Islampur, Jamalpur	Community resident	April 2025
Highlighted resource scarcity of UPs.	Dhaka (field engagement)	NGO official	April 2025
Pointed to delays in central grant disbursements.	Satkhira	Government officer	March 2025
Commented on structural distortions.	Dhaka	Policy researcher	April 2025
Emphasized participatory dialogue between UP and people.	Mithamain, Kishoreganj	Youth leader	March 2025
Called for inclusive committee formation.	Sariakandi, Bogura	Homemaker	April 2025
Demanded infrastructure against erosion.	Islampur, Jamalpur	Community elder	April 2025
Pointed to lack of sanitation/drainage.	Chattogram (peri-urban)	Resident	March 2025
Suggested local environmental initiatives.	Chattogram Sadar	School teacher	March 2025

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