ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 11| Issue: 7| July 2025|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2025: 8.691 || ISI Value: 1.188

# ASSESSING CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION AT THE GRASSROOTS: A STUDY OF TWO *UNION PARISHADS* IN BANGLADESH

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**Article DOI:** https://doi.org/10.36713/epra23012
**DOI No: 10.36713/epra23012**

## ABSTRACT

*In the local governance structure of Bangladesh, the Union Parishad (UP) represents the most basic and lowest level, which, by its very nature, is run by a body of elected representatives. By way of representation, Union Parishads are meant to truly reflect local needs through the participation of the community people. In essence, it mandates local people's consent, often manifested by meaningful roles of standing committees in taking actions such as local-level planning, identifying local needs, and monitoring development projects. This organization possesses the ability to engage citizens in various committees and operations. In the context of regional governance in Bangladesh, the extent of citizen involvement can be effectively measured by their participation. This participation is crucial for upholding democratic processes, making effective decisions, and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For effective planning and sustainable development in rural areas, a strong UP with the active role of a standing committee is mandatory. This study seeks a qualitative design to gain a deep, contextual understanding of citizens' behaviors, attitudes, and experiences at the grassroots level in Bangladesh. This study is about a fresh look at citizens' participation in UP standing committees to ensure effective planning and sustainable development. The study's objective is to examine the community participation in the administrative functions of two Union Parishads. This study is expected to uncover findings of democratic processes at the grassroots level and identify potential areas for improvement to enhance citizen engagement. Understanding the citizens' involvement in local governance and assessing the effectiveness of the current mechanism for citizen participation are the two motivational aspects of undertaking the study.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Local Governance, Citizen Participation, Decentralization, Democratic process, sustainable development, Institutional Barriers.*

## INTRODUCTION

Local governance, especially in the context of the *Union Parishad* in Bangladesh, has evolved within a complex socio-political backdrop. The origin of this local government unit can be traced back to colonial times, and it is argued that it was established more as an administrative convenience rather than a local necessity. This colonial legacy has shaped the nature of local governance, often seen as an extension of the central government rather than an autonomous entity. Despite the evolution, these local units struggle with decentralization and citizen participation issues. The history and current practices suggest that these local government units serve more as a tool for the central government to extend its reach to the grassroots rather than empowering local communities and fostering bottom-up capacity building and participation. Members of Parliament (MPs) in Bangladesh significantly influence local governance, including *Union Parishads*. They often act as advisors, and their recommendations influence decision-making processes. This involvement can sometimes overshadow local leaders, which affects grassroots participation and sustainable development.

In Bangladesh, local governance is divided into two primary categories: rural and urban. The rural areas are structured into three tiers: *Zilla Parishad, Upazila Parishad*, and *Union Parishad*. In contrast, the urban areas are organized into two levels: City Corporation and *Paurashava* (Hasina & Hasan, 2015). The concept of participation originates from the Latin word 'participation' (pars-in-action). It refers to being involved or engaging in joint or governmental activities (Kurnia, Susmiyati, & Hamzah, 2016). Participation can be categorized based on type as either direct or indirect, active or passive, symbolic or real, and complete or partial (Callahan, 2007; Dusseldorp, 1981; Richardson, 1983; Rothman, 1996). A significant correlation exists between the participation of citizens and democracy (Michels & Graaf, 2017). Citizen participation facilitates the identification of local needs and the rational distribution of limited resources. It also contributes to local-level planning and decision-making processes. The participatory notion of local governance is highly significant in Bangladesh, as it empowers citizens, promotes accountability, and facilitates sustainable development at the grassroots level. The main committee of the *Union Parishad* is *the Union Development and Coordination Committee* (UDCC). Other gateways of citizens' participation in the *Union Parishad* are the Standing Committee, ward meetings, and open budget meetings. Effective participation by citizens takes place through their elected representatives and selected local citizens in standing committees. This study focuses only on the Standing Committee (SC). At its core, this study aims to evaluate the character of citizen participation in the standing

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committee of *Union Parishads* and to assess the current landscape and pinpoint collaborative opportunities that enhance progress and further the social justice agenda within the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). The concept of SDG extends beyond economic expansion, emphasizing inclusivity, improved living standards, and fairness**,** both in governance structures and broader society. The United Nations (UN) introduced the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, establishing 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A fundamental principle of the SDGs is "Leave no one behind" (abbreviated as LNOB), which reflects a commitment to eliminating poverty and addressing inequalities. This approach ensures that the most disadvantaged, marginalized individuals are recognized and that their needs are prioritized.

Article 11 of the Constitution of Bangladesh establishes the nation as a democracy that upholds fundamental human rights, freedoms, and the dignity of individuals. It also ensures that citizens actively participate in governance at all levels through their elected representatives. The Local Government (*Union Parishad*) Act, 2009, serves as the legal foundation for the *Union Parishad,* enhancing opportunities for public involvement in planning and executing development projects through Standing Committees (SCs). According to Section 45 of this act (in Chapter 4, details), there is a provision for forming 13 SCs (an extra SC may be formed with the permission of the Deputy Commissioner). These SCs consist of 5-7 members with provisions for the co-option of one expert member, including elected members serving as president (a third of whom are women) and local citizens capable of contributing to the meetings. The *UP* Standing Committee is designed to support the activities of the *UP*. Without thorough verification, certain issues cannot be resolved solely by UP itself or the Union Development Coordination Committee (UDCC). In these situations, the *UP* Standing Committees conduct on-site inspections, gather public opinions, analyze the collected information, and present their findings to the *UP*. When matters are brought before the *UP* along with the committee's analysis and recommendations, it simplifies the implementation process.

The *Union Parishad* Training Manual, published by the National Institute of Local Government (NILG, 1991), provides a thorough guide for *Union Parishads (UPs*). The sixth chapter, titled "Participatory Planning at the Local Level," highlights that genuine development is unachievable with a top-down approach, as it does not address the real needs of the people and excludes their involvement in decision-making. Consequently, the manual highlights the significance of participatory planning at both local and national levels (NILG, 2003:225). Different development strategies of Bangladesh have acknowledged the significance of robust *Union Parishad,* and engagement of the local people is necessary in delivering services, fostering better governance, and driving development in local government (National Rural Development Policy, 2001, and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, 2005).

A previous study (Pandey et al., 2011) claimed that the notion of 'citizen participation' is problematic in Bangladesh. It is a slippery concept; eye washing is not genuine, or it may shy away from the spontaneous and voluntary participation of people. Local governance in advanced countries has strong decision-making powers and financial resources. In contrast, Bangladesh is weaker and dependent on the higher-level government for funding and decision-making. This weakness is mainly due to historical, political, and institutional factors that have limited the devolution of power and resources to the local level. For agenda setting, the identification of local developmental needs provides more room for citizen participation. Citizens can be involved in the governance process through various methods, such as disseminating information, enabling participation in decision-making, implementation, and evaluation, and ensuring the equitable distribution of benefits and sustainable development.

Standing committees are often inactive in the Union Parishad for various reasons (Tawfique et. al 2009). These committees play a crucial role in local governance, yet often face awareness, institutional barriers, and leadership challenges. Understanding these issues is essential for enhancing citizen participation at the grassroots level. Standing committees (SCs) effectively represent citizens' interests by raising voices, setting agendas, and contributing to local sustainable development. This study proposal aims to identify the barriers to effective SC formation and examine the critical role of citizen participation in rural sustainable development.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To explore the major issues and causes for people's non-participation in the *Union Parishad's* standing committees. (SDG 10)
- Exploring policy and governance strategies that drive equitable development, focusing on peace, justice, and strong institutions**.** (SDG 16)
- Investigating the role of local governments in advancing social justice, inclusivity, and progress toward SDG objectives**.**
- Analyzing participatory governance models and grassroots mobilization as catalysts for social transformation. (SDG 11)
- Evaluating the challenges and opportunities of decentralization across diverse socio-political landscapes.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To find out the answer to the objectives, the following questions should be addressed-

Q.1. What are the structural and institutional barriers to involving citizens' participation in the *Union Parishads' standing committee?*

Q.2. Why does the standing committee not function properly for achieving sustainable development goals?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**Global Context:** From the latter part of the 1980s onwards, good governance matters have been progressively at the forefront of the worldwide agenda for advancement. Governance quality has become increasingly important in tackling challenges and fostering socio-economic progress in lower-middle-income countries like Bangladesh. The active participation of people is essential for effective planning and

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sustainable development. Without the engagement of the community, development efforts may not fully address the needs and aspirations of the population. Involving citizens in decision-making ensures that plans are more inclusive, practical, and sustainable, leading to successful implementation and positive outcomes (Mira, R., & Hammadache, A., 2017). Citizen participation entails actively involving citizens in every stage of political decision-making, ensuring their voices are heard during the formulation of policies. This involvement extends through the execution phase, where citizens help implement policies, and the assessment phase, where they evaluate the impact and effectiveness of these policies. By integrating citizens into these processes, governments can ensure that policies are more representative, equitable, and effective in addressing the community's needs (Dagnino, E., & Teixeira, A. C. C, 2014). In democratic societies, involving citizens in local governance is crucial for maintaining accountability and transparency. This engagement ensures that public services are delivered effectively and meet the community's needs. By participating in governance, citizens help uphold democratic principles and contribute to better decision-making and outcomes (De Brito, L., 2010). Andrew Cornwall's (2000) collaboration with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the International Development Exchange (IDX) in Sussex concentrates on boosting citizen participation in decision-making and development initiatives. His research highlights how crucial active citizen involvement is in achieving sustainable development. By engaging citizens in decision-making, development projects become more aligned with local needs and priorities, thus enhancing their effectiveness. Cornwall's insights also underscore that effective governance relies heavily on community participation. His work provides a framework for integrating citizen engagement into development processes to ensure long-term success and accountability. In "The Applied Theatre Reader," Majed Rehnuma (2009) discusses citizen participation as a critical element of applied theater practices. He emphasizes the importance of engaging community members in the creative process, allowing them to express their voices and experiences. Rehnuma argues that citizen participation fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among individuals and enhances the relevance and impact of theatrical work in addressing social issues. By involving participants in the storytelling process, applied theater (Applied Theatre is an umbrella term for the use of theatre-based techniques to address social issues and engage communities) can become a powerful tool for reflection, dialogue, and change within communities (Prentki, T., & Preston, S., 2009).

**Bangladesh Context:** Effective governance ensures that public resources are managed efficiently, minimizes corruption, and promotes transparency and accountability in policy implementation. Such governance practices build public trust and create a stable economic growth and development environment. According to Hasan et al. (2018), the quality of governance influences various aspects of sustainable development, including poverty reduction, education, healthcare, and infrastructure improvement. As Bangladesh strives for a higher economic status, enhancing governance quality is pivotal in overcoming barriers and achieving sustainable development goals. The study's results indicate that political complexities, institutional corruption, low levels of education, and general ignorance make it very difficult for the majority of rural residents to participate in the different avenues of the *Union Parishad* in Bangladesh (Ahmed, T., Rahman, A., & Akter, T., 2022). Local representatives' involvement in decision-making within various standing committees is notably limited due to the inactivity of these committees. This inactivity results in few substantial meetings or engagements, diminishing the committee's overall effectiveness. Consequently, representatives are often disinterested in attending meetings, perceiving them as unproductive. The lack of involvement in financial matters, which are seen as critical and impactful, further reduces their motivation to participate. To enhance engagement, committees must be more active and involved in significant decision-making, including financial discussions (Islam, M. S., Bhuiyan, M. S., & Salam, M. F., 2019). *Union Parishad* has various strategies to guarantee citizen involvement in local governance. These strategies encompass people's direct involvement via elections, ward meetings, open budget discussions, various standing committees, etc. However, these strategies are not effectively operational in reality (Uddin, N., 2019). To expand the understanding of local government, they highlight the four indicators of good governance: public participation, leadership, transparency, and equality. However, the authors did not offer extensive recommendations to tackle the challenges of people's involvement in the *Union Parishad* (Panday, P.K., & Rabbani, M.G., 2011). Engaging the community in the planning, execution, oversight, and evaluation processes ensures resource efficiency and fosters a sense of ownership among the people. Committees comprising *Union Parishad* representatives and community members effectively facilitate local development (Aminuzzaman, S.M.: 2010). Over the past thirty years, the government has faced significant challenges in achieving meaningful community participation in sustainable development initiatives. Despite these difficulties, fostering such participation remains a high priority. Ensuring effective community involvement is crucial for the success of development efforts (Asaduzzaman, M., 2008). Global empirical evidence highlights the significance of three critical factors - Functions, Finance, and Functionaries (the 3Fs) - for successful decentralization processes. Unfortunately, in the Bangladeshi context, an imbalance persists among these 3Fs, with Finance and Functionaries consistently posing challenges within the local government systems (Ahmed, Junaid: 2007). Achieving positive outcomes from citizen participation depends heavily on the actors involved and various contextual factors. While citizen participation is crucial, it remains underutilized in Bangladesh's local government. Political will, institutional support, and public awareness play significant roles in this scenario. Despite its potential to enhance governance and development, the engagement of the Bangladeshi people in local government processes is not yet sufficient. Consequently, there is a pressing need to address these issues to improve participation and realize its benefits (Mahmud, S., 2004). Active participation by the broader population significantly enhances local development. When community members are involved, development initiatives are more effective and aligned with local needs. Such engagement ensures that development efforts are sustainable and have a

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greater impact on improving local conditions (Rasyid, M. R.: 2003).

From the above literature, the following study problems and gaps were identified-

- There is a lack of a comprehensive study of citizens' participation in the *Union Parishads'* standing committee to enhance local-level planning in Bangladesh.
- The reasons behind the non-functionality of the standing committees and the reluctance of local representatives to participate in them need further exploration.
- To generalize or verify earlier findings, a repeated study is needed to understand how to overcome the challenges hindering public engagement in standing committees, such as political complexities, institutional corruption, low education levels, and general ignorance.
- The effectiveness of standing committees comprising *Union Parishad* representatives and community members in facilitating local sustainable development must be studied more deeply.

In a broad sense, the above pieces of literature mention only the non-functionality of the standing committee but do not elaborate on the various reasons behind this, and do not mention their role in local-level planning and decision-making properly. Furthermore, there were no marginal or peripheral area studies. Therefore, study/Research (Re+Search) = Repeated Search is needed, which could help to bridge the gap to some extent and enhance understanding of people's involvement in local governance and sustainable development initiatives. The study also endeavors to examine and verify the degree of accuracy of the conclusions drawn earlier.

## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

David Wilcox (1994) introduced a five-stage ladder of participation (Information, Consultation, Deciding Together, Acting Together, and Supporting) to describe citizen engagement in government processes. Information and consultation are general stages, and the Deciding Together, Acting Together, and Supporting stages involve significant participation. This theory is centered around the idea of effective community involvement and empowerment. That is why this is the best model of citizen participation.

This theory is particularly relevant in Bangladesh, considering its socio-economic and political landscape. Bangladesh has seen excellent growth in the mid-1990s. Still, Bangladesh is fighting to ensure participation in local-level planning. Wilcox's citizen participation theory is suitable for Bangladesh as it highlights the need to redistribute power to ensure effective citizen participation. This aligns with the challenges faced by local governments, where central control weakens local capacity and participation. Therefore, efforts should be made to empower local governments and citizens and reduce central control to enhance bottom-up capacity building and participation.

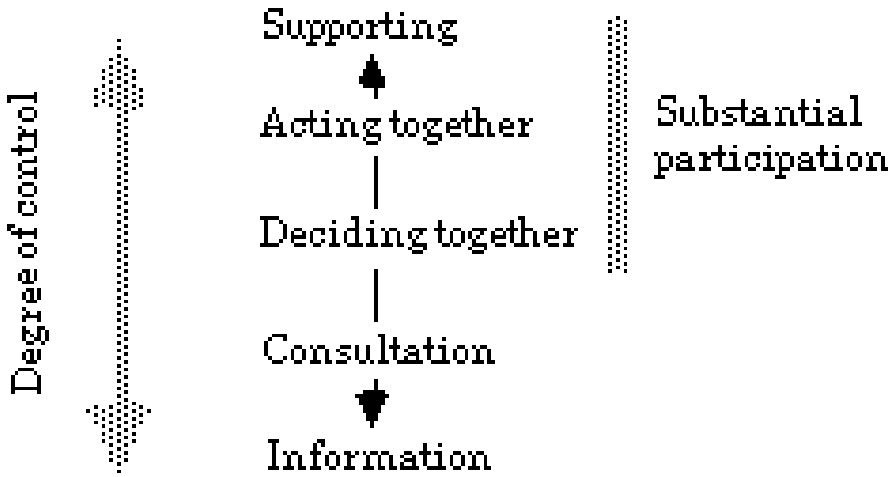



**Figure: Wilcox's (1994) levels of Citizen Participation**

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Based on David Wilcox's five-stage ladder of participation, **the conceptual or analytical framework** of the study could be structured as follows:

| Stage | Definition | Analytical Framework |
|---|---|---|
| Information | This is the first stage of the ladder, and in this stage, citizens receive information about pre-existing plans or decisions made by the government. | In the study context, this involves gathering data on how information is disseminated at the grassroots level in the two *Union Parishads*. Assess the method used, the effectiveness of the technique, and the level of citizen awareness about local governance issues. |
| Consultation | This stage involves seeking the opinions of the citizens by the *Union Parishad*. | Analyze how the *Union Parishads* consult with citizens, the platforms used for consultation, and the inclusiveness of these consultations. |
| Deciding Together | This stage involves joint decision-making processes. | Investigate the systems established for citizen involvement in decision-making at the level of the *Union Parishad*, and assess the efficacy of these systems. |
| Acting Together | This stage involves participants jointly deciding and working collaboratively to implement plans. | Study instances where the *Union Parishads* and citizens have worked together to implement decisions and evaluate the success of these collaborations. |
| Supporting Together | This is the final stage of the ladder, where citizens initiate and direct actions, with the government in a supporting role. Here, citizens are the controllers, and power dynamics shift significantly toward citizens. | Investigate if this happens in the *Union Parishads* and how the government supports such initiatives. |

**Table 1: Analytical Framework**

David Wilcox's five-stage ladder of participation theory is well-suited for this research on citizen participation in *Union Parishads* because it provides a comprehensive framework to assess different levels of engagement. This theory helps identify where on the ladder citizens' participation currently stands, from being merely informed to taking charge in decision-making and implementation. It allows for analyzing the depth and quality of engagement, highlighting areas for improvement. By applying this framework, the study can effectively evaluate the potential and challenges in enhancing grassroots governance.

## METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The methodology for this study is qualitative. This study seeks a qualitative design to gain a deep, contextual understanding of citizens' behaviors, attitudes, and experiences at the grassroots level in Bangladesh. The method also allows for flexibility and exploration of complex, multifaceted issues from the participant's perspective. This explorative research aims to discover patterns, themes, and insights within the data. The case study will be based on participant observations and utilize semi-structured, open-ended questions. A semi-structured interview guide serves as a valuable tool for qualitative social research. According to Punch (2013), semi-structured interviews facilitate qualitative interviews and focus group discussions by allowing flexibility in participants' responses. This study's semi-structured interview guideline was essential for exploring the barriers to citizen participation in *Union Parishad* Standing Committees.

This study has been conducted in Birulia *Union Parishad* (located near the center of Bangladesh) of Savar Upazila in the Dhaka district and Chilmari *Union Parishad* (located in marginal areas in Bangladesh) of Chilmari *Upazila* in Kurigram District. Considering Dhaka's status as the capital of Bangladesh, its inhabitants have access to certain advantages compared to those residing in the Rangpur division, situated in the country's northeastern region. Though the two areas have diverse geographical and socio-economic comparisons, the study has provided a holistic understanding of citizen participation. This study ensures that the findings are relevant and applicable to various contexts within the country. The time for data collection was from October to December 2024 of the recent interim government of Bangladesh.

The sample size has been 15*2 *Union Parishad* =30, where 20 are male and 10 are female, and the age group of the respondents is 25 to 60. Purposive sampling or judgmental sampling method has been used for selected respondents (Table 2). Moreover, the study has been enriched by the opinions of experts, academicians, and civil society.

| Mode of Data Collection | Respondents | N 15*2= 30 |
|---|---|---|
| Semi-structured questionnaire (Open-ended style) | Committee Members (10 M, 2 F) | 12 |
| | Political Leaders (2 M, 2 F) | 4 |
| | Govt. Officers (2 M, 2 F) | 4 |
| Focus Group Discussion (FGD) | Representatives and Employees of *UP* (2 M, 2 F) | 4 |
| | Community leaders (2 M) | 2 |
| | People (2 M, 2 F) | 4 |

**Table 2: Categories of Respondents**

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## OVERVIEW OF THE ACT RELATED TO THE *UNION PARISHAD*

***Union Parishad at present***

The Local Government (*Union Parishad*) Act of 2009 substantially changed the structure, powers, and functions of *Union Parishads* in Bangladesh. Over time, the framework of *Union Parishads* has evolved to meet public demand and political leadership, firmly grounding its legal foundation within the Constitution. The Constitution details local government institutions' formation, responsibilities, and functions in Sections 9, 10, 11, 59, and 60. A *Union Parishad* comprises:

- One Chairman, elected directly by the *Union's* voters.
- Twelve members, including three reserved seats for women.
- Nine wards within each *Union*, with one member directly elected
- Three reserved women members, elected by the voters of every three wards.
- Any female voter in the *Union* may vote for both the reserved seats and the general ward members.

The term of a *Union Parishad* is five years from its first meeting. However, if a new election is delayed, the existing *UP* continues to function until the next *Parishad* convenes. The government provides remuneration for the chairman and members, but *UP*s primarily rely on government grants due to limited revenue sources.

Following the July-August 2024 revolution, Bangladesh experienced major political shifts. Nobel laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus now leads an interim government focusing on national stabilization. This has brought greater scrutiny to *Union Parishads*, emphasizing democratic governance, transparency, and citizen participation. Key developments include:

- Increased accountability for the *UP* chairman to ensure transparency and public trust.
- Temporary appointments from the *upazila* administration in *unions* where elected chairman are absent.
- Enhanced community engagement to rebuild trust in grassroots governance.
- Formation of the "Local Government Reform Commission" to propose improvements in local governance.

While the interim government operates within existing constitutional constraints, there is growing hope for meaningful reforms strengthening democratic participation and local governance. The situation remains fluid, with ongoing efforts to improve the effectiveness of *Union Parishads* in addressing local needs.

***Overview of formation of Union Parishad standing committee and functioning***

(1) As per Section 45 of the Act, the *Union Parishad* must establish Standing Committees to carry out its functions in the following areas efficiently:

(a) Finance and Administration
(b) Auditing and maintenance of accounts
(c) Assessment and collection of taxes
(d) Education, health, and family planning
(e) Agriculture, fisheries, livestock, and other economic development
(f) Development, preservation, and maintenance of rural infrastructure
(g) Law and order maintenance
(h) Birth and death registration
(i) Sanitation, water supply, and hygiene
(j) Social welfare and disaster management
(k) Environmental conservation, protection, and tree plantation
(l) Family dispute resolution, women and child welfare (m) Culture and sports

(2) In addition to these Standing Committees, the *Union Parishad* has the authority to form additional committees with the approval of the Deputy Commissioner, as per the provisions of this Act.

(3) The chairman of each Standing Committee shall be selected from among the *Union Parishad* members, except for co-opted members. Additionally, at least one-third of the Standing Committees must be chaired by female members. However, the chairman of the *Union Parishad* will solely lead the law and order affairs committee.

(4) Each Standing Committee shall comprise five to seven members. An expert in the relevant field may be included as a co-opted member, though they will not have voting rights.

(5) Other committee members will be nominated from among residents who possess the expertise necessary to contribute to the respective committee's activities.

(6) Recommendations made by the Standing Committees will be reviewed in the subsequent *Union Parishad* meeting. If a recommendation is not accepted, the *Union Parishad* must formally communicate the reasons in writing to the committee.

(7) The decisions made by a Standing Committee will be finalized only after approval in the general meeting of the *Union Parishad.*

(8) A Standing Committee may be dissolved under the following circumstances:

(a) If it fails to convene regular meetings as required
(b) If it consistently fails to provide necessary guidance to the *Parishad*
(c) If it engages in activities that violate this Act or any other relevant laws.

(9) Each Standing Committee must convene at least once every two months, with the option to hold additional meetings as needed.

(10) Regulations shall define the operational framework for the Standing Committees. Until such regulations are established, the *Union Parishad's* general meeting will determine its functions.

This section clearly shows that the Standing Committees are designed to assist the *Union Parishad* in fulfilling its responsibilities. Certain matters cannot be efficiently managed within the *UP* office without thorough verification. In such cases, Standing Committees conduct field visits, collect public opinions, analyze gathered data, and present their findings to the *Union Parishad* for consideration. This process facilitates more effective decision-making, implementation, and consequently sustainable development in rural areas. Unfortunately, these Standing Committees are often not formed

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or do not function as intended, primarily due to a lack of awareness among local communities.

## DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

***Data collection from two selected Union Parishads***

| Mode of Data Collection | Questionnaire | Respondent remarks in verbatim |
|---|---|---|
| Semi-Structured Questionnaire | 1. Is there a regular standing committee meeting? Are you present there regularly? | Mostly said *"Standing Committee meetings are not held every two months. We sometimes present at the meeting".* |
| | 2. Is the standing committee active? If not, how to activate this committee? | Largely said, *"In most cases, not active. Every member should be interested, and regular meetings will make the standing committee active".* |
| | 3. What can be done to improve citizen participation in the committees? | Everyone said, "*Citizen participation can be increased through awareness and by providing refreshments, honorarium.*" |

**Table 3: Data Collection**

| Mode of Data Collection | Questionnaire | Respondent remarks in verbatim |
|---|---|---|
| Focus Group Discussion (FGD) | 1. Do you know about the *Union Parishad* Standing Committee? | Uniformly said *"We do not know that we have the opportunity to participate in the standing committee meeting".* |
| | 2. What are the main factors that hinder effective citizen participation for sustainable development in the *Union Parishads'* Standing Committees? | Everyone said, *"The main obstacles to participation are our ignorance and disinterest in these committees. Lack of hospitality, honorarium, and in most cases, meeting decisions are not implemented."* |
| | 3. How *could the Union Parishad's standing committee* be activated? | One pointed out, *"If prominent people of the area were in the committee, they could activate the meeting."*<br><br>Another commented that *"If the President/member of the committee who does good work can be rewarded, then that committee and other committees will start competition. In this way, committees will be active and the quality of work will be increased."*<br><br>Others emphasized that "The committee will be active if everyone understands *their role and responsibility for the meeting."* |

**Table 4: Data Collection**

***The opinions of Experts, Academicians, and Civil Society***

Experts, academicians, and civil society organizations (CSOs) in Bangladesh generally agree that citizen participation at the grassroots level is crucial for effective local governance and sustainable development. They emphasize the need for regular and inclusive meetings to ensure active involvement.

- Civil society organizations (CSOs) can be key players in mobilizing public engagement and community awareness, although their impact has been limited due to cultural and political barriers.
- Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) have a great role in making the *Union* Members more active, assertive, and they should be more enlightened about rural functions. Here, NGOs have a role in making a demand site.
- Education and awareness among citizens are highlighted as essential for increasing participation.
- Rewards and recognition for active participants can also drive engagement.
- Hospitality and honorarium during meetings can make them more attractive and encourage attendance.
- Women members do not know their role, and she is not trained. Their enthusiasm is very high, but their shyness and preparedness are very low. They need some basic education, knowledge, a basic role, and function.
- In most cases *Union Parishad* Chairman does not welcome the standing committee's decision. Naturally, there exists a power distance here. Prominent local figures can play a significant role in influencing, activating, and sustaining participation.
- Those who are opted, many of them come from the ruling party and are patronized by local power elites and, in some cases, it is alleged to be with the local MPs. They come here with some political views that are both positive and negative. By the way, the *Union Parishad* failed to include real community members. Here, the standing committee loses its inclusive character.

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Standing Committee has significant potential, but over the years, it has been observed that they have not been made aware of and capacitated to engage the accountability issues of the *Union Parishad* and represent the voice and demand of the people. Transparency and accountability in decision-making are crucial for building trust and encouraging citizen involvement.

***The Summarization of Documents***

By reviewing the documents of two *Union Parishads*, the following information is obtained:

- There is no written notice of the meeting; it is communicated orally.
- Registers for some of the 13 committees have been found.
- Meetings are held every few months. Even after a few years, the meeting has not happened. Two *Union Parishads* have not arranged meetings since 5th August 2024, and in Birulia *Union* Parishad, *Upazila* women's affairs officer, instead of the chairman, is performing additional duties of his own.
- Most committees are not formed according to the Act
- The meeting is not signed by all members.
- The minutes of many meetings do not have the chairman's signature.
- Meeting decisions are general. For example, in "Agriculture, fisheries, livestock, and other economic development works; standing committee," the meeting proceedings started with a welcome to everyone. The meeting ended with a request to all to work together for the betterment of the union".
- Some specific decisions and opinions come into the minutes of a few committees, and a few of them are implemented after going to the main committee.

***Thematic Analysis***

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns within data. Critical, researchable insights that relate to the study's objectives and research questions were identified through a close reading and critical review of the qualitative data generated in the interviews, focus group discussions, and semi-structured questions.

**Theme- Structural and institutional barriers to citizen participation:** Irregularity of meetings of committees, with frequent meetings not called by directives of the *Union Parishad*, is a recurring issue. This inconsistency negates the usefulness and success of the committees. In addition, meetings held without the benefit of formal written notices are without accountability, as people tend to orally 'arrange' to attend, which can be ineffective. The gap in institutional support is very much visible. Moreover, the absence of a systematic process for the application of meeting decisions is an inhibitor of trust establishment among participants, thereby inhibiting participation for a sustained period.

**Theme- How to enhance citizen participation:** Respondents pointed out the need for incentives, such as honorariums and hospitality at meetings, to encourage attendance and active involvement. It was found that there are practical measures that would recognize committee members who have contributed exceptionally and would make them experience competition and drive within the committees. Also, several prominent local figures were included on the committees to give them credibility and make other committee members more likely to sign on.

**Theme- 'Citizen awareness and perception,' which was critical to the success of participation:** A considerable informational deficit regarding the standing committees, including their existence, purpose**,** and functions, is manifested in the fact that many citizens are well aware of the various councils and committees, but not the standing ones. Beyond the ignorance about how participation matters, there exists a lack of awareness of the benefits that could come out of such participation, which further serves to lower their interest in attending to the governance processes at the local level. Specifically, the research calls for tailored awareness campaigns targeting citizens to enhance their understanding of their rights and roles in the committees. It assures the citizens of the rewards of contributing to participatory governance.

**The final theme** shows the effects of non-participation on governance outcomes. The issue of limited citizens' involvement in the standing committees of the *Union Parishad* has significant outcomes with respect to the *Union Parishad* governance. This lack of participation does not facilitate the *Union Parishads* in framing inclusive and responsive policies, hence diminishing the effectiveness of grassroots governance. When citizens are not active, transparency and accountability, which are necessary to create trust and legitimacy, cannot be maintained.

Key to increasing citizen participation in *Union Parishad* standing committees is the thematic analysis, which focuses on removing the structural and institutional barriers, undertaking practical activation strategies, raising awareness, and ensuring transparent decision-making every time. The thematic analysis of this research showed some interconnected themes regarding challenges and opportunities for promoting citizen participation in *Union Parishad* Standing committees. The interplay of these findings underscores the need for far-reaching reforms that are inclusive and bound to community participation to propel grassroots governance and sustainable development in Bangladesh.

***Content Analysis***

Content analysis is a research method that systematically interprets and codes textual material to generate replicable and valid inferences (Krippendorff, 2004). Following Krippendorff's methodological framework, content analysis allowed for an objective review of textual materials, ensuring that primary data collected from respondents could be cross-verified against established research and official records.

This study employed content analysis to systematically interpret and analyze various textual materials concerning *Union Parishad* Standing Committees and citizen participation. The secondary data sources included government documents, policies, gazettes, and regulations related to the functioning mechanisms of local government institutions in Bangladesh.

ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 11| Issue: 7| July 2025|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2025: 8.691 || ISI Value: 1.188

Learning about the broader institutional context within which *Union Parishads* operate and formal mechanisms for citizen participation in the Standing Committees was important.
Apart from these official documents, the study considered theoretical research papers, academic articles, and books, which offered theoretical insights regarding citizen participation in local governance. Fieldwork findings were contextualized using this literature as it added to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities of improving *Union Parishad* Standing Committee citizen involvement.

It has been able to measure certain patterns and trends in the underlying functioning of these committees using analysis of meeting records, minutes, and other official documents. For example, another regularly encountered issue mentioned in the document analysis was the consistency of committee meeting dates, as many of these committees did not follow the stipulated, bi-monthly schedule. It was identified as a major barrier to successful citizen participation, as meetings held not frequently unnecessarily lose momentum and enthusiasm. It also analyzed the content of recorded meeting minutes, showing that decisions were frequently generalized and not necessarily followed through, creating a sense of disillusionment among both citizens and committee members.

At the same time, the content analysis identified several systemic barriers to citizen participation, including a lack of awareness regarding the committees, citizen disinterest, and the lack of incentives, such as honorarium or other forms of recognition of committee members. The results of this analysis depict how structural, institutional, and cultural factors converge to limit the community's engagement with Standing Committees.

This research analyzed these documents by triangulating the results from the primary data (blending all interviews) with the secondary sources and existing literature and from the opinions of experts, academicians, and civil society organizations. It was able to get a comprehensive understanding of what is currently happening at the stage of citizen participation in *Union Parishads.* Results highlighted the importance of structural reforms for the way meetings were organized, for increasing awareness, and more incentives are needed to encourage participation. Content analysis ultimately reveals constrained opportunities for meaningful citizen participation, driven partly by institutional and societal barriers, which must be addressed to create a more inclusive, functional *Union Parishad* for sustainable development.

## DISCUSSION

***Assessing data/information in line with the theory***

Theoretically, the data interpretation has been considered against the framework of participatory governance, especially its theories (David Wilcox's (1994) "five-stage ladder of participation" theory) of decentralization, citizen participation, and the levels of local institutions. In several key areas, the findings were aligned with the theory. First, the data shows that a lack of communication and awareness, and irregular meetings for some, render citizen participation so undermined in these areas. Second, the suggestion to offer incentives such as honorarium and hospitality was compatible with how the theory emphasizes rewarding citizen participation. Finally, both *Union Parishads* showed the role of local leadership in promoting citizen participation, an issue repeatedly emphasized in governance theories arguing that good local leadership is essential for engaging grassroots democracy. The findings, overall, confirm the applicability of the Wilcox Participation theory to explain how citizen participation in *Union Parishads* is justified. It also suggests that structural reforms are needed to make participation more meaningful and inclusive for sustainable development.

| Alignment with the stage and the Analytical Framework | What I have found | Remarks |
|---|---|---|
| **Information stage:** In the study context, this involves gathering data on how information is disseminated at the grassroots level in the two *Union Parishads*. Assess the method used, the effectiveness of the method, and the level of citizen awareness about local governance issues. | Distribution of the findings based on the combination of Interviews and focus group discussions reveals a huge gap in the information about the 13 standing committees and their chairman. This lack of transparency eliminates a citizen's ability to participate effectively in the governance process due to the inability to know roles, responsibilities, and how these committees operate. | This is crucial to the alignment with Wilcox's first stage, Information, which is to have clear and easily accessible information available to the citizens all the time. The points of communicating the committees' objectives, activities, and contact details through notice boards, local media, and community meetings will be improved through publicity and the process of informed participation. |
| **Consultation Stage:** Analyze how the *Union Parishads* consult with citizens, the platforms used for consultation, and the inclusiveness of these consultations. | The second stage, Consultation, involves receiving feedback to inform citizens' decision-making. Although meetings are irregular when they occur, the authorities sometimes consult with the citizens. | Getting the secretary's role in organizing mandatory meetings and its importance in ensuring that committee members' feedback is actively sought and considered makes perfection within the consultative process impossible. Additionally, more formal occasions should be given to the citizens to voice their opinions to be heard and constitute a part of decision-making. The consultation process itself can be significantly bolstered by encouraging |

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | awareness about the significance of participation. |
| **Deciding Together Stage:** Investigate the systems established for citizen involvement in decision-making at the level of the *Union Parishad*, and assess the efficacy of these systems. | The findings of this research imply that when important local figures and dignitaries are involved and offer incentives like honorariums and refreshments during meetings, a more inclusive and collaborative decision-making environment can be brought in. | A positive step, such as having women represented in committees (one-third of members female), promotes inclusive decision-making; however, more efforts can and should be made to include diverse voices, especially the voices of the marginalized, in the decision-making for sustainable development. It is a collective approach to deciding things, as citizens and committee members work together on key issues. This makes people more open to the issue and supports better governance. |
| **Acting Together Stage:** Study instances where the *Union Parishads* and citizens have worked together to implement decisions and evaluate the success of these collaborations. | Although people are committed to attending meetings and making decisions, the meetings are infrequent, and attendance is inconsistent, leading to ineffective or poor collaboration. | Committee members must attend meetings regularly and more consistently, and meetings held regularly must be successful for implementation. Whatever decisions are made, they should be actionable, and actions should be executed collaboratively. While there appears to be collectivity in recorded minutes and apparent implementation of decisions, leverage is in how and more frequently committees can meet and act as a collective body by making decisions to actualize for the community. |
| **Supporting Together Stage:** Investigate if this happens in the *Union Parishads* and how the government supports such initiatives. | Studies reveal that some decisions and opinions come into the minutes of a few committees, and few of them are implemented after going to the main committee. Results indicate the successes of rewards for committee members, hospitality, and greater overall awareness of the benefits of participation to enable continued engagement. | Recognition and incentives for good efforts will make the citizens feel better supported and motivated to continue participating in the association. Additionally, there are hurdles of dodging disinterest and lack of awareness that have to be overcome. With the sustained support provided, that would enable citizens both institutionally and through community-based self-help schemes, citizens will be empowered. They will be encouraged to participate in future governance activities. |

**Table 4: Assessing data in line with the theory**

Overall, the findings suggest the partial application of Wilcox's Ladder, with certain stages not fully meeting the ideal engagement levels outlined by the theory. The gaps and inconsistencies point to areas where effort is needed to advance toward more genuine and effective citizen participation.

Enhancing citizen participation in *Union Parishads* demands a whole approach that aligns with Wilcox's five-stage ladder of participation. In the Information stage, it is vital that transparency is maintained and that the committees provide clear and available details to the public. At the Consultation stage, actively soliciting citizen input and feedback will create a more responsive governance system. Inclusive decision-making, the promotion of which is strengthened by involving local influencers, can enhance Deciding Together. Based on regular and consistent meetings with joint work, we can effectively implement decisions in the Acting Together stage. The Supporting stage focuses on giving various rewards, incentives, overcoming obstacles, and encouragement through the implementation of citizens' decisions. By concentrating on these stages and addressing the barriers identified by the research, it is possible to improve citizen participation for sustainable development.

## Significant Findings and Concluding Remarks

### *Key Findings*

After examining the field data to the research questions, objectives, and analytical framework, the overall findings must be clearly outlined to highlight the significance of the study. Based on the thematic analysis provided, the findings can be summarized into several key points that relate to the challenges and opportunities for promoting citizen participation in *Union Parishad* Standing Committees:

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**Structural and Institutional Barriers**

- Inconsistent meeting schedules and a lack of formal notices diminish the effectiveness and accountability of the committees.
- Insufficient institutional support and the absence of systematic processes for applying meeting decisions hinder sustained participation.

**Enhancing Citizen Participation**

- Incentives such as honorariums and hospitality can encourage attendance and active involvement.
- Recognizing exceptional contributions and including prominent local figures can boost credibility and participation.

**Citizen Awareness and Perception**

- A significant informational deficit regarding the standing committees' existence, purpose, and functions exists.
- Lack of awareness about the benefits of participation reduces interest and engagement in governance processes.
- Tailored awareness campaigns are needed to educate citizens about their rights and roles in the committees.

**Effects of Non-Participation**

- Limited citizen involvement leads to disengagement and a lack of trust and legitimacy in governance and reduces the SDGs target.
- Non-participation hampers the *Union Parishads'* ability to frame inclusive and responsive policies, diminishing the effectiveness of grassroots governance.

***Policy Implications***

The researcher sought recommendations from respondents, key informants, and relevant officials regarding enhancing citizen participation in *Union Parishad* standing committees. These recommendations, shaped by their insights and the researcher's experience as an administrator for over six years. Implementing these policy-oriented solutions could help policymakers address the gaps in citizen engagement.

A. Micro Level: Addressing Immediate gaps in citizen participation

To improve grassroots participation, policies should focus on:

- Establishing a standardized budget to ensure committee members receive honorarium and hospitality.
- Providing adequate logistical support, such as a designated meeting space and awareness campaigns to inform citizens.
- Actively involving the community in the committee process as early as possible to foster engagement.

B. Medium Level: Strengthening institutional mechanisms

To ensure sustainable improvements, legislative measures should emphasize:

- Organizing training sessions and workshops on the roles and responsibilities of standing committee members.
- Setting up a dedicated monitoring cell to oversee committee activities and ensure proper functioning.
- Implementing a reporting mechanism that mandates regular updates to higher authorities on committee meetings and activities.

C. Macro Level: Establishing long-term structural reforms

Sustainable approach to strengthening participation, policies should affirm:

- Creating a Local Government Commission with authoritative jurisdiction, as an advisory role alone is often ineffective.
- Allocating sufficient funds in the *Union Parishad* budget under a specific sub-head dedicated to supporting standing committee activities.

These recommendations aim to bridge existing participation gaps, ensure better local governance, and create a more effective and inclusive decision-making process in *Union Parishads* and contribute to sustainable development in rural areas.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The various standing committees within *Union Parishads* play a crucial role in enabling citizen participation and contributing to effective governance. The effectiveness of these standing committees in fostering sustainable development relies on active citizen participation, institutional support, and collaborative efforts. When these components are present and functioning well, a bottom-up approach to implementation can be realized, leading to enhanced governance and better outcomes in rural sustainable development. The ultimate goal of this research is to answer the central research questions. Uncovering the factors that enable or hinder effective citizen engagement in the standing committee of the *Union Parishad* is a key objective of this study.

Through a thorough review of official documents, including files, relevant records, and summaries, along with the analysis and comparison of information gathered from key respondents, the study has cross-checked and validated findings, addressing any gaps. The answers to two research questions were to learn about the structural and institutional barriers to involving citizens' participation in the *Union Parishads'* standing committee, and why the standing committee does not function properly for achieving sustainable development goals. Based on the findings, it is evident that the issue of committees has not been perceived by many actors involved in the committees' operations. Ignorance and reluctance have been identified as impediments to committee effectiveness, and low member engagement in committee meetings indicates that constructive talks are not occurring. This is due to a lack of internalization of committee importance by the various actors involved in the committee process. As a result, the good operation of the committee may provide several benefits to the proper functioning of the *Union Parishad*. First, committees allow for informal debate among members, which is necessary to form ties among individuals with differing political viewpoints. Effective distribution and utilization of resources are crucial for successfully executing participatory processes at the local level. This study aims to enhance understanding of how citizens engage with the various standing committees of the *Union*

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*Parishad* in decision-making. By investigating these dynamics, the research offers valuable insights into how *Union Parishad* standing committees can optimize citizen participation to improve governance, contribute to sustainable development, and ensure more responsive service delivery at the grassroots level.

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