

Evaluating the Efficacy of Standing Committees in Resource Allocation and Service Delivery in Local Government: Evidence from Zila Parishad

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***Abstract:** The Zila Parishad (ZP) is the highest and oldest unit of rural local government in Bangladesh. Standing committees of ZP plays crucial role to ensure service delivery and resources allocation in local communities. Understanding their efficacy is essential for effective local governance. However, previous studies have rarely examined these issues systematically. This paper follows descriptive analysis. The main object of this qualitative study is to explore the role of standing committee in terms of resources allocation and service delivery in zila parishad. Data are generated from In-depth interview (IDI), Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and secondary resources such as books, journal article, ZP office documents, newspaper etc. The analysis shows standing committees of ZP are not effective in terms of service delivery and resource allocation. Excessive control by ZP chairman, lack of funding and dependency on government officials of ZP are the main obstacles in ensuring efficacy. The findings suggest that decentralizing decision-making process, ensuring accountability and transparency can improve the current situation.*

Keywords: Standing Committee, Service Delivery, Decentralization, Zila Parishad, Local Government.

Introduction

The Zila Parishad (District Council) in Bangladesh has had significant transformations over times, originating from the colonial District Board period during British administration. Established in 1882, these boards primarily managed rural administration and infrastructure, although with restricted jurisdiction (Chowdhury, 1997). The decentralization of administration resulted in the formal foundation of Zila

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Parishads following Bangladesh's independence in 1971, with the Zila Parishad Ordinance enacted shortly thereafter in 1982. The standing committee system was implemented in the country to enhance local decision-making and service delivery, assigning committees to several sectors like health, education, infrastructure, and agriculture (Siddiqui, 2005). These committees were established under the Local Government (Zila Parishad) Act of 2000, granting elected representatives a direct role in resource distribution, policy formation, and service monitoring (Local Government Act 2000). It delineated the role of committees by specifying their general tasks and particular responsibilities, such as financial oversight and enhancement of public welfare (Ali, 2011). Despite these evident advancements, political interference, resource limitations, and coordination issues continue to prevail (Haque, 2014). These committees have made significant progress in enhancing service delivery at the district level; however, their efficacy has primarily relied on the willingness of local government to collaborate with national organizations (UNDP Bangladesh, 2020). Zila Parishads currently serve as the principal entities of local governance, with standing committees designated for the judicious distribution of resources and enhanced service delivery (Islam and Fujita, 2012). Despite facing criticism and operational challenges, the committee remains a crucial element of the continuing decentralization and local governance reforms in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2018).

This study is an attempt to assess the effectiveness of the standing committees of the Gazipur Zila Parishad of Bangladesh in service delivery and resource deployment. The routine functions of local government are monitored by appointed standing committees involved in the allocation of resources, overseeing of development projects and the provision of services relevant to the needs of local communities. However, due to inadequacy of resources, bureaucracy, laxity and lack of accountability, creation and sustenance of these committees' efficiency is hampered. The role of these committees this research examines how these affect the operational performance of Gazipur Zila Parishad in relation to resources, accountability and effectiveness in addressing demands of the people. The research questions directing this study are: To know what exactly the standing committee is doing apart from duplicating your organizational' resource and financial inefficiencies? How do these committees address the problems encountered in delivering such services? What function do standing committees serve in enhancing transparency and accountability within the local government? Additionally, in what manner do the committees influence the Zila Parishad's reaction to the socio-economic requirements of Gazipur residents?

This research is significant for providing critical insights into the functioning of standing committees and their influence on local governance in Gazipur. The paper comprehensively analyzes the problems and triumphs encountered by these committees, providing insights that can guide future policy reforms aimed at optimizing resource allocation, improving service delivery, and augmenting transparency in decision-making processes. This may also serve as a valuable example for not only Gazipur but other local governments in Bangladesh to improve the efficiency and accountability of their standing committees in local governance. Moreover, the research is also benefitting the understanding of potential roles of standing committees in context of urban development and effective distribution of local government in the rapidly growing urban areas of Bangladesh. The purpose of this research is to contribute to the development of more effective, accountable and open local institutions to help address the challenges of urbanization as well as improve the living standards of city dwellers.

Literature Review

In an attempt to explain the standing committees in Zila Parishads, therefore, theories on decentralization and local government offer the necessary understanding on this topic. As it has been postulated by (Oates, 2011) decentralization theory, grant of more decision-making power to the local governments enhances their suitability to meet local demands meaning that the local governments becomes effective in delivering goods and services within the region. Local governance theory underlines the importance of local stakeholders in decentralized public management systems and the proper organizational mechanism of delivery of public service (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006). Therefore, according to principal agent theory, local representatives must be held accountable to the citizens, who are the principals, in order to maintain the effectiveness and efficiency of local governance (Rogers and Weller, 2001). In this case, the local government standing committees are thought to be crucial for streamlining governance structures and coordinating resources and services, particularly in areas like education, health, and transportation where specialized knowledge is required for multiple sectors (Moe, 1984). By focusing on the decision-making process, the bureaucratic theory also provides evidence of the effectiveness of committees in managing intricate local governance (Weber, 1978). Committees are seen to be more effective in making decisions and carrying out policies because they divide work into several operational areas. However, political circumstances,

administrative capacity, and financial resources may influence the extent to which committees function, making them one of the components used to measure the performance indicators of local governance.

Decentralization, resource governance or delivery, has received a lot of focus in the literature especially under local governance where standing committees have been a focal point. A relationship between decentralization and enhancement of local governments was revealed by (Faguet, 2014) in a study that reviewed research in Bolivia. This study however concludes that decentralization can only work if lower tiers of government are institutionally sound and well-endowed. Moreover, as to decentralization in India, (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006) evidenced that decentralization enhances the implementation of public services in rural areas, but problems such as political interference or capture by local elites weakened them partially. Because of these problems local capability is central to the optimization of decentralized governance structures in decentralized systems. (Ahmed, 2016) focused on Zila Parishads and the stand-alone standing committees for the rural development within Bangladesh. As the intermediary organization, the Zila Parishads were washed with the responsibility of both fixing and investing to ensure they gave them the resources they needed. However, (Amin, 2016) realized that centralized political interferences limit their powers and financial unavailability in addition to the bureaucratic problems that subdue the standing committee efficiency. More so, the study revealed that most local committees lacked the mechanical way of achieving a demand defined by the community since they were financially dependent. The author also unpacked the roles of these standing committees in provision of public services in Bangladesh's subnational governments' system as (Panday, 2019). He said that beside standing committees were central for the mobilization of resource and political strength, political interference, less exposure and lack of co-ordination among local government dealers deteriorated their performance. (Ullah, 2021) also discovered that committee members were generally dysfunctional for administrative posts, which did not allow them to adequately oversee projects and assess resource management.

The authors of the work (Islam and Karim, 2018) identified the projects which the local standing committees of the government were supposed to manage and noted the absence of cooperation between the local standing committees and other ministries caused the delay in the use of resources and project implementation. From this research, committees employed by non-ministerial government departments were used as a

decision-making tool, with most of the committees failing to position the department's work in synch with the cardinal direction of the central government, hence the departmental service delivery efficiency. Continuing in this line of research, (Hossain and Khair, 2020) examined the functions of standing committees in education and health. The researchers also made a conclusion concerning the functions of committees: while, in, theory, those could allocate the fund, due to their inability to control local politics, they could not put suitable solutions into practice, which resulted in unequal distribution of services that were offered and accessed. According to the report, funds were transferred through political patronage, which made it more difficult for the committees to provide services in an equitable manner. Zila Parishads' participatory governance became more inclusive as a result of decentralization, however standing committees struggled with poor decision-making transparency, according to (Hossain and Rahman, 2017). Due to political conflict that affected resource distribution, this study found that local councils were dishonest in their service delivery about issues that impact rural poor people and women, among other minority groups.

Despite the fact that decentralization has been widely studied in the literature and is known to have an impact on local governance, there doesn't seem to be much empirical, qualitative research on how effective standing committees are at using resources and providing services in the local context. Without considering workflow or the challenges faced by standing committees, the current study has concentrated on the structural organs or qualitative analyses of decentralization or local government outcomes. As a result, political meddling, resource scarcity, and governance effectiveness are all covered in the literature that is now available; nevertheless, there are still few empirical analyses of how these committees function in the Zila Parishad environment, particularly in Bangladesh. Since there aren't many case studies on the internal workings of standing committees and how they make decisions, we can't fully comprehend how these committees handle the resources that are available to them, let alone effectively meet the complicated demands of local communities. Furthermore, there is a dearth of research on committee accountability systems and how they provide equal service, particularly when it comes to performing an empirical examination in regard to Bangladesh's political and economic framework. Filling in these gaps could provide crucial information about how to maximize the standing committee system in local governance and increase its efficacy in improving service delivery to the general public.

Methodology of the Research

Following the qualitative method, this study aims to evaluate the efficacy of standing committees in the Gazipur Zila Parishad regarding resource allocation and service delivery. To obtain a full understanding of the research, diverse qualitative approaches were employed, including In-depth interview (IDI), Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and document analysis. Key stakeholders, such as standing committee members, local government officials, and community leaders, were subjected to comprehensive interviews to examine their opinions on governance, resource management, and service delivery. Focus group talks with local citizens provided detailed insights into their experiences with public services and the operation of standing committees. An analysis was conducted on government papers, budget documents, and meeting minutes from the Gazipur Zila Parishad to ascertain the funding and utilization of resources. 25 participants, including specific committee members, local politicians, and community representatives, were purposively sampled for the plan. A thematic analysis of the collected data was performed to uncover key themes and trends regarding the efficacy of committees in managing local resources and service provision.

Conceptual Clarification

Decentralization has received heightened global interest recently. Decentralization refers to the process through which authority is transferred from higher to lower levels of Government (Ahmed, 2012). Decentralization as a concept was put into reality when the conventional top-down methods of Government failed to promote rural development. According to Louis A. Allen- "Decentralization refers to tire systematic effort to delegate to the lowest levels all authority except that which can only be exercised at central points." Decentralization, entailing the delegation of authority from the central government to local governments, comprises three components. These encompass fiscal, administrative, and political decentralization (Erk, 2018). The administrative aspect examines the organizational framework of local governments, while the political factor evaluates the politically appointed executives who lead these entities. The fiscal dimension pertains to the financial and expenditure agreements between local governments and the central government (Rondinelli, 1981).

The efficacy of standing committees in Zila parishads is contingent upon the decentralization of local governance. Decentralization reallocates decision-making authority from the central government and Zila Parishad Chairman to the standing committees, enabling them to fulfill their designated responsibilities in resource

allocation and service delivery (Rahman, 2018). It promotes Social Justice and active participation in framing policy-making that is as empowering as it will not allow the committee to be locked out by the central authority. This decentralization depends on elections which means that it is essential not only to have clear and detailed legal descriptions of the functions of standing committees but also to limit reliance on the Chairman and government officials (Hossain and Khair, 2020). The last one is the authority to control funds necessary for the activity of decentralized committees to be granted to these committees. In addition, decentralization made the corrupt officials responsible and reduced the secretiveness since the locals and the members of the community are part of the government.

Enhanced services correspond to community requirements via frequent committee meetings, characterized by transparent decision-making and the monitoring, assessment, and alignment of services (Chowdhury, 2018). Decentralization also mitigates political meddling by implementing checks and balances through communal decision-making. This safeguards the community's genuine resource need from political agendas (Islam, 2022). However, if these programs fail to incorporate capacity training for committee members, the advantages of decentralization will remain unoptimized. Decentralization in local government, overall, granted standing committees a measure of autonomy, accountability, and operational efficiency that facilitated the provision of equitable, needs-based services to the local population.

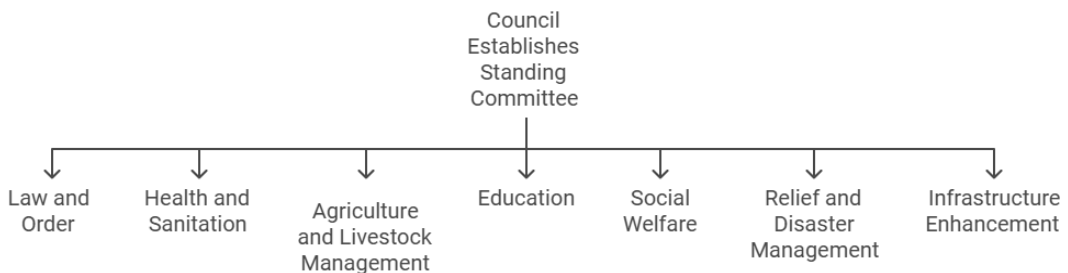
Legal Framework of Committee System of Zila Parishad

According to the constitution of Bangladesh, the government should empower local government institutions instead of exerting control, as undue interference from the central government hinders local entities, particularly the Zila parishad, from functioning with the essence of self-governance. Utilizing standing committees to their maximum capacity is essential for strengthening democratic institutions without compromising the administration.

The Zila parishad Act of 2000 designates standing committees as essential instruments for maintaining the transparency and accountability of the zila parishad. The Zila Parishad Act 2000 has a provision in Section 34(1), for the establishment of committees to address the accountability of the parishad's acts. According to this section, The Council may establish a requisite number of committees comprising the chairman, members, or other individuals to aid its functions, and it shall decide the membership,

responsibilities, and processes of these committees. A Council member shall serve as the Chairman of the Standing Committee. No council member shall serve as chairman of more than one standing committee. It is stipulated that one-third of the Standing Committees shall be presided over by female members of the Parishad.

The Council shall establish one Standing Committee to address the following matters: law and order; Health, family planning, environmental concerns, potable water, and sanitation. agriculture, irrigation, cooperatives, aquaculture, and livestock management; education; Social welfare, women's and children's development, youth development, sports, and culture; Relief and disaster management, non-governmental organization activities, and self-employment. Enhancement of communication and physical infrastructure



Source: The Zila Parishad Act 2000

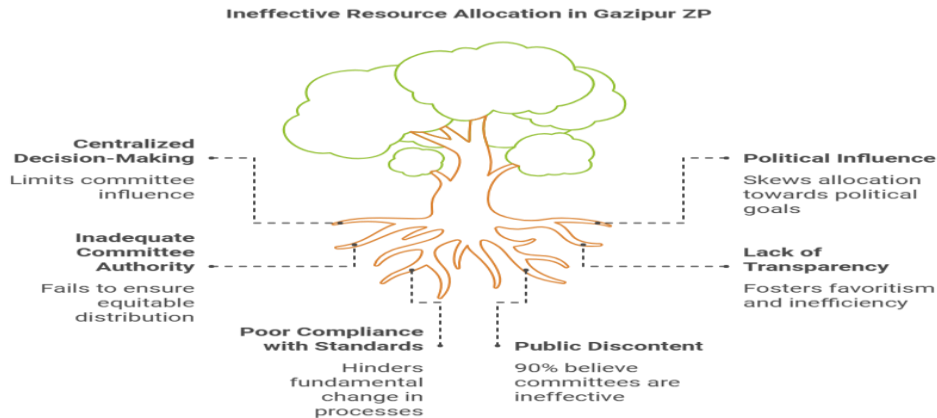
The activation of committees can enhance service provision to the impoverished by utilizing the collaborative efforts of multiple departments. The committee's effective functioning may yield numerous benefits for the effectiveness of upazila parishads. The establishment of relationships among individuals with varying political perspectives relies on the capacity of committee members to engage in informal dialogues.

Findings

This study critically examines the efficacy of the standing committees of the Zila Parishad (ZP) in resource allocation and service delivery, focusing on the Gazipur Zila Parishad. This report analyzes to what extent these committees have been able to discharge their mandated functions in local governance issues. It illustrates Gazipur Zila Parishad by portraying a spot of reality of Gazipur Zila Parishad, communicating the committee's operated powerhouse which has vast obstructions, listed below boundaries, and deficiencies in administration conveyance of resource appropriation.

The Function of Standing Committees in Resource Allocation

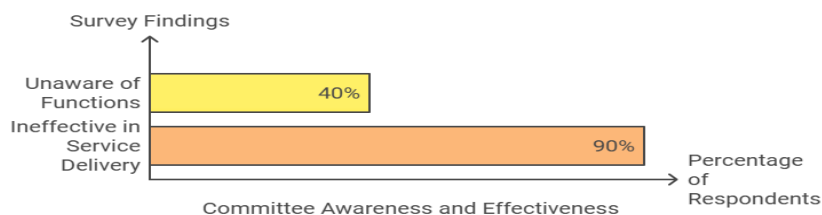
The Zila Parishad sets the Zila Parishad Standing Committee to request the central government and additional financial bodies and development partners for resources allocation. As principal local and district level organizations advocating for increased resources to address local needs and district level projects to improve the Zila Parishad's budget and identify external funding and technical assistance from foreign aid and NGO, the Standing Committee will seek resources themselves to fulfil this task. (Islam and Karim, 2018). The Zila Parishad sets the Zila Parishad Standing Committee to request the central government and additional financial bodies and development partners for resources allocation. As principal local and district level organizations advocating for increased resources to address local needs and district level projects to improve the Zila Parishad's budget and identify external funding and technical assistance from foreign aid and NGO, the Standing Committee will seek resources themselves to fulfil this task. Consequently, the Chairman possesses the right to allocate resources as deemed most beneficial for the organization, with committee members mostly excluded from this decision-making process. Additionally, the local influence of the Member of Parliament exacerbates the situation, as political factors affect the distribution process; resources are allocated according to political objectives rather than the district's requirements. A recent study indicates that 90 percent of participants believe the Standing Committee has inadequately fulfilled its role in resource allocation. This centralized and politically motivated strategy undermines the Zila Parishad committees, so obstructing the honest and responsible governance of local development resources. The lack of transparent resource distribution methods fosters political favoritism and inefficiency, hindering the district's long-term development and its capacity to address the diverse requirements of the local populace.



Source: Field Data from Gazipur Zila Parishad-2022

Role of Standing Committees in Service Delivery

The Gazipur Zila Parishad Standing Committee is ineffective in delivering services in that district. Most services are executed by government personnel rather than engaging actively in their delivery and management; these services encompass health care, education, and infrastructure development. The committee's limited participation in planning, resource allocation, and monitoring is expected to significantly influence these procedures. The research field data reveals that 40 percent of respondents are unaware of the committee's functions, indicating inadequate visibility and communication on its responsibilities. Furthermore, 90 percent of respondents assert that their Standing Committee is ineffective in-service delivery, indicating widespread dissatisfaction and apathy towards the committee's agency.



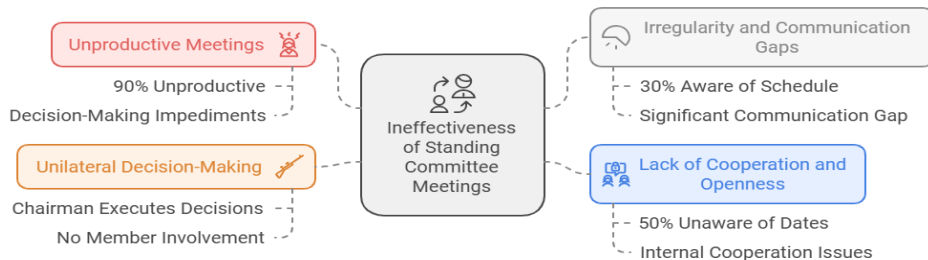
Source: Field data from Gazipur Zila Parishad-2022

Nonetheless, a significant concern may be the centralized decision-making about service delivery, wherein most choices originate from the Chairman and government officials, rather than through collaborative deliberation within the committee. The Zila Parishad has demonstrated inefficiency due to a lack of collaboration with other governmental entities involved in service delivery. Moreover, the MP and other significant political appointees has substantial authority in resource allocation, often favoring political objectives over the more desirable approach of prioritizing community needs. This is further aggravated by the Standing Committee's restricted capacity to engage with the community and hold officials accountable. Transparency and attention to the requirements of the local community are generally not guaranteed. The disparity between the committee's intended functions and public expectations renders the committees inefficient and results in subpar service delivery. The Gazipur Zila Parishad Standing Committee has not adequately fulfilled its intended function in service delivery, necessitating significant reforms to enhance the Committee's efficacy, coordination, and responsiveness to the community.

Meeting of Standing Committee

According to the Zila Parishad Act, The Standing Committee generally meets regularly to assess the current situation, evaluate progress on various issues, and make decisions as necessary. The meetings conducted between the sessions of the full Zila Parishad are typically convened to facilitate prompt decision-making. Decisions in the Standing Committee are determined by majority vote and thereafter presented to the whole Zila Parishad for approval or additional deliberation. In terms of regular committee meeting, The Standing Committee is largely ineffective in my study region, Gazipur Zila Parishad, with around 90% of respondents deeming the meetings unproductive. The irregularity of committee meetings is a significant problem, impeding effective decision-making and oversight; just 30% of respondents are aware of the meeting schedule, indicating a substantial communication gap. But the lack of cooperation and openness has been more problematic, as 50% of the committee's members said they were unaware of meeting dates. They do however have to come together on occasion and any conclusion reached during those meetings it will be undertaken unilaterally by the Chairman without any input from the other members on the committee. The Standing Committee has become too centralized in authority; there is hardly any communication amongst its members and there are no regular meetings to oversee allocation of resources and delivery of services. The Zila Parishad's inability to fulfill

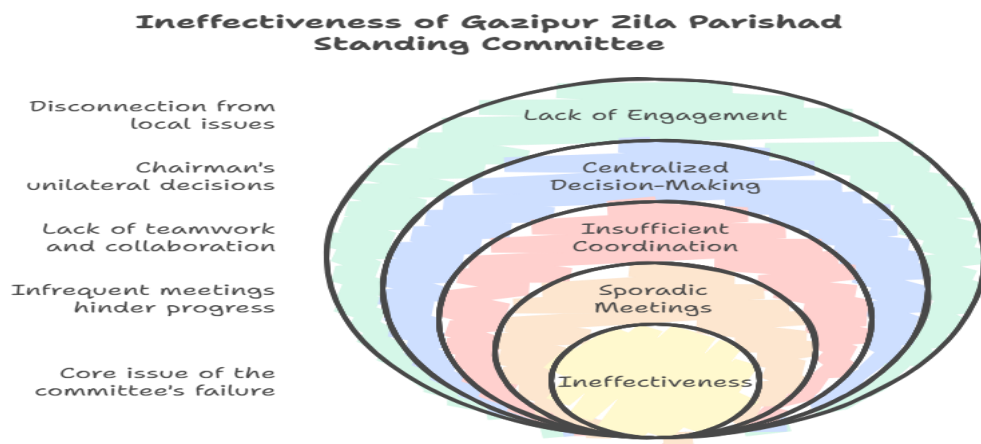
local needs and facilitate community participation in decision making processes is rooted in an expansive scope, lack of transparency, lack of accountability as well as nonregular committee structure. It leads to huge discontent against the working of the Zila Parishad.



Source: Field Data from Gazipur Zila Parishad-2022

Effectiveness of Standing Committee

It is found that 95 percentage of respondents perceive the Standing Committee of the Gazipur Zila Parishad as not effective. The committee charged with oversight of key local governance matters ranging from resource allocation to service delivery has overall been ineffective. To explain the cause of organization ineffectiveness, there is confluence of factors like sporadic meetings, lack of coordination, centralized decision making by the Chairman and others. The Chairman is, however, unilaterally deciding things without the involvement of the committee or community such that multiple committee members are unaware that we even meet, oblivious. The Standing Committee has become nearly irrelevant in decision making and its oversight in the face of the deterioration of governance and public discontent. Accountability, effective communication, and engagement with local issues have all failed to eliminate the underwhelming potential and failure of the committee to meet the public's expectations is due to a lack of these factors.



Source: Field Data from Gazipur Zila Parishad-2022

Challenges

The local government entities of Gazipur Zila Parishad have numerous challenges that exacerbate the bias of distribution of resources, and service delivery resulting in the limited role being played by the Standing Committees of Local Government entities in contributing to local development and upholding community life. The Chairman in control of the centralized decision making together with the government official are removed from the committee in important allocation of key resources. Inefficient and politically motivated decisions thrive under the absence of transparency and accountability in resource distribution and in regularly and poorly organized meetings which disrupt coordination and member engagement. The communication ineffective inside the committee as well as the government officials and public impedes the oversight and collaboration further which leads to duplication of efforts and inefficient utilization of resources. These problems are also exacerbated by political influence, as resource allocation too often tracks political, rather than community objectives. Due to limited authority and lack of training, the committee is unable to play any supervisory role over resource management or to be an informed contributor to local development. As a result, public engagement is still low and decisions do not offer feedback that addresses community priorities. Furthermore, the transmission of the funds and delivery of services is not sufficiently monitored, too, and services do not reach a scale sufficient to sustain the committee without the financial support of donors. Together these challenges collectively weaken the ability of these committees to function in a

timely and credible manner and with the result that the institutional reforms are urgently required to allow for fair, transparent, and participatory governance.

Conclusion

This research has thoroughly analyzed the function and efficacy of the Standing Committees within the Gazipur Zila Parishad concerning resource allocation and service delivery. The results demonstrate that these committees have failed to fulfill their designated functions despite their legal establishment through the enactment of the Local Government (Zila Parishad) Act of 2000. However, these committees persistently experience issues of political influence, budget constraints, and coordination challenges that compromise their efficiency. The Chairman's centralization significantly limits the standing committees' ability to contribute effectively. The political influence exerted by local MPs exacerbates the issue, as their power frequently skews resource distribution towards their personal political goals rather than the actual needs of the community. The study indicated that 90 percent of respondents believe that the standing committees of Gazipur Zila Parishad are ineffective and fail to operate as intended. Committee operations proceed unilaterally in a large part of their workings, with only the Chairman making decisions on most of what the Committee confronts, not committee members. Additionally, 70 percent of respondents didn't even know how many meetings committees hold in regular assembly or who is on the committees, 50 percent of members of committees didn't know when and what their agendas are. And it has resulted in incomplete coordination and transparency in the decision making process which make it difficult for the standing committee to execute resource allocation or service delivery. The failure of public service delivery has resulted from inefficiencies in public service delivery that have been brought about by the absence of standing committees whose role is to oversee and allocate resource. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, funding constraints and administrative incapacities have tended to hamstring the committees with far from ideal means of monitoring and reviewing the projects. Despite the legal mandate that allows these committee the authority to oversee and look after Gazipur Zila Parishad's local resources, the Gazipur Zila Parishad's performance does not seem to meet this responsibility. In fact, the governance framework is fragile, and there is absent accountability. It shows the need of a new reform in the standing committee so that it could function, be accountable and transparent in its work. Intending to play a big role in the governance of the Gazipur district and development of the district through the Gazipur Zila Parishad and its standing committees, but the implementation of these

councils is hindered by several critical problems. To the committee's dedication both to resource management and delivery efforts, the centralized decision making, political meddling, and lack of effective coordination among committees and other local government entities are hindrances. In order to improve governance in Gazipur, and other such areas, it is important to build up the capacity of standing committees, to conduct standing committee's proceedings transparently and to rid processes of politics. In addition to this, these committees should be better financially and administratively equipped to deal with these interests of the community locally. Thirdly, it is necessary to strengthen public participation and accountability mechanisms to help local administration and supply of basic services to the residents of Gazipur.

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