

Politics of Local Development Projects in Bangladesh: A Qualitative Analysis of Upazila Parishads

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Abstract: The concept of Upazila Parishad came to light during the Ershad Regime, and since then, through confronting several ups and downs, over the last few decades, upazila has become the nerve of the local level development affairs once again by the "Local Government (UZP) Act - 2009" and "Local Government (UZP) (Amendment) Act – 2011". It is the center of local development affairs in all possible aspects. Politicians and administrators play a crucial role in spreading the development proceedings at the grassroots level. This study explores the politics of local development project operations, focusing on the Annual Development Programme at two Upazilas through a qualitative study using purposive sampling, in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. Findings reveal that conflicts of interest, exclusionary practice, and informal political settlements significantly undermine transparent and participatory project selection. The local elites frequently capture subcontracts and contracts with limited accountability, while administrative support has the tendency to extend partisan influences unintentionally, contributing to compromised quality and efficacy of the projects. The study recommends reassessment of MPs' advisory roles, the strengthening of the monitoring role of administrative players such as the UNO, broader participation of stakeholders, and improvement in monitoring mechanisms even further. By bringing to the fore such issues of governance, the research offers practical suggestions for making local development in Bangladesh more transparent, inclusive, and effective.

1. Introduction

Local government has been the driving force behind the development process and advancing local-level development activities in developing countries, thereby reducing the burden on the central government. It is taking on more responsibilities, resulting in an improved quality of life at the community level (Kaczmarek, 2000). The local government, more specifically the Upazila Parishad, plays a central role in ensuring decentralized governance and effective service delivery to the local population in Bangladesh. It bridges the gap between Zila and Union Parishad at the local government level.

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To accomplish its critical role, the Upazila Parishad often faces governance challenges in shaping the local development process, particularly in development projects. The competing interests among political and administrative actors, politically mobilized pressure, and limited inclusiveness in decision-making, as well as informal settlements make the development more susceptible. Decision-making at the Upazila level is difficult to comprehend due to the ambiguous positions and intimate ties between administrators, MPs, and political leaders. Ara (2024) notes that local development programs often rely on top-level government decisions to allocate resources, with communities playing a largely passive role. According to Waheduzzaman (2018), the legal duties and responsibilities of local elites, particularly elected leaders and government personnel, regarding the sharing of authority and knowledge with residents are unclear. Moreover, at the Upazila, the relationship between elected representatives and officials remains tense due to the unclear distribution of authority, ultimately leading to poor public service delivery and suffering for citizens (The Daily Star, April 24, 2014). Ahmed (2009) observes that officials (bureaucrats) in the Upazila Parishad encourage partisan politics by supporting one another's duties and sharing resources and assistance to accomplish individual and group goals. Sometimes, MPs maintain relationships with other local elites, including influential businessmen, community leaders, government administrators, and project-building contractors (Waheduzzaman, 2018). Regarding interest and values, politicians are the dominant forces in local governments, whereas administrators are responsible for initiating and implementing development affairs at the local level. Instead, there arises tension when conflicts occur between actors during policy formulation and implementation (Rahman M. S., *Upazila Parishad in Bangladesh: Roles and Functions*, 2012). Rahman (2018) observes that conflict among some actors (MPs, UZPC, and UNO) is a significant barrier to effective local development. As a result, the effectiveness of project operations is undermined and becomes vulnerable. Furthermore, the debate arises from the administrator's direct or indirect involvement in partisan politics and the unclear role of some key actors, particularly MPs, in relation to development projects at Upazilas. Section 25(1) of the "Upazila Parishad Act-1998" mandates the maintenance of advice or direction from the local Member of Parliament (Rahman, 2012). Again, section 25(2) of that act indicates that all required governmental communication should be done by informing the local MPs (GoB, 1998). This clause creates a blurry picture of the influence of local political elites, as both MPs and local-level politicians maintain close relationships in their constituencies. Thus, complexities are evidently prevalent in local development affairs, which may not be readily apparent.

Several studies have examined the governance challenges of the Upazila Parishad, but few have examined how political dynamics influence ADP projects' decisions at this level. However, a critical gap remains in the literature concerning how informal arrangements, exclusionary practices, and political settlements directly shape the Annual Development Programme (ADP). The study examines how development decisions are

influenced by elected representatives, local political elites, and administrators at the Upazila level. Additionally, it examines how open and participatory development processes are undermined, rather than maintained. Accordingly, the study provides directions for more inclusive and responsive development at this tier of local government.

2. Theoretical framework

This study builds upon the concept of Political Settlement, which asserts that informal power relations among political elites, bureaucrats, and other influential individuals significantly influence official rules and institutions. The idea was first initiated by the Khan and later refined subsequently. According to Khan (2010), a political settlement is a combination of power and institutions that is both economically and politically sustainable, encompassing not only formal institutions but also informal power relationships that support and stabilize them. He further argues that informal agreements between dominant groups, such as negotiations, rent allocation, and patron-client arrangements, determine how power is wielded and how institutions function. John & Putzel (2009) supported Khan's view, highlighting that informal elite bargains sustain the state's stability, even if they undermine formal rules and regulations.

This framework helps explain how legal decentralization reforms, such as the Upazila Parishad Act (2009) and its 2011 amendment, are influenced, constrained, or bypassed by elite bargains that allocate authority, rents, and influence in ways beneficial to powerful actors. Hassan (2013) demonstrates that, despite repeated decentralization initiatives, elite coalitions in Bangladesh have maintained control over policy, economic rents, and governmental activities, threatening transparency, accountability, and service delivery outcomes.

Based on this theoretical viewpoint, we can identify several key analytical propositions for this study: MPs, UZP chairmen, and local elites are projected to dominate ADP project selection, surpassing formal planning criteria and community participation. Administrative actors, such as UNOs, engineers, and departmental executives, frequently collaborate with political elites due to pressure or incentives, demonstrating the informal restrictions predicted by the Political Settlement framework. Union Parishad representatives, Ward Shabha members, and residents are likely to be neglected or have a symbolic role in the ADP planning and implementation process.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Technique

The researchers used an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) to examine the political dynamics in governance related to local government development projects. This study aims to reveal the dynamics that influence decision-making processes within these crucial areas where complex internal politics exist, associated with the preparation of ADP projects, selection, and the allocation of resources. The researchers selected the IPA approach as it helps better understand how participants perceive and interpret their experiences (Mortari et. al., 2023).

Erkkilä (2016) argues that qualitative insights on abstract constructs, such as political negotiation, informal practices, personal relationships, and power struggles, are not simply impartial or apolitical representations of reality. Using this approach, the study helped researchers explore and better understand actors' behaviors, perceptions, experiences, motivations, and interactions towards the governance of development projects at the Union and Upazila levels.

3.2 Sampling Details

In this study, researchers employed purposive sampling, a non-probability approach to select a small group of people with relevant knowledge and expertise about the topic. About the sample size of the qualitative research, Sandelowski (1995) proposed that a sample size of 10 would be suitable for investigations focusing on a homogeneous population. Research shows that conducting nine to seventeen interviews is often sufficient to reach 'redundancy or saturation' in qualitative studies (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Considering that, researchers conducted 20 in-depth interviews with relevant local government actors affiliated with the development project process. We focused on selecting respondents aged and with more than 10 years of experience in this process.

3.3 Data Collection

The data were collected using a semi-structured questionnaire, allowing for both standardized responses and the flexibility to capture nuanced insights. The data were collected from January 2024 to March 2024. Researchers collected information and conducted formal and informal discussions (face-to-face) with the respondents. It was difficult to obtain information from respondents, even after multiple meetings, to gain real insights. The purpose of the study was clearly explained, and respondents were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their information. Sensitive information was handled responsibly, and no respondent was forced during the data collection. However, the in-depth interviews lasted between 30 minutes to one hour. The mobile devices were used for recording and taking written notes when necessary. Moreover, researchers conducted two focused group discussions (FGD) and key informant interviews (KII). Six Union Parishads from Pirgacha and Debidwar Upazila were purposively selected based on the convenience of the researchers, as they were easily accessible and convenient to explore. The respondents were the Upazila chairman, Upazila vice-chairman, UNO, Upazila Engineer, UP chairman, UP member, UP secretary, licensed contractor, officials of the nation-building departments, local elites, and local government experts.

3.4 Analysis

The researches followed thematic analysis method to systematically organize and interpret qualitative data. Thematic analysis makes it easier to identify patterns and themes, allowing researchers to communicate findings coherently, which is vital for effective communication of results to stakeholders (Roldugin, 2023). The responses were transcribed from the in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews, and carefully scrutinize to gain a clear understanding. Additionally, a detailed review of required documents, such as different acts, guidelines, and other documents, was made to understand the gap between theory and practice. Furthermore, researchers

reviewed various books, research articles, journals, relevant official documents, and the Union and Upazila Parishad's records. Then, the researchers carried out theme identification, where important words, phrases, and ideas were marked. These themes were interpreted to explain the politics and governance of the Annual Development Programme (ADP) process.

4. Limitations

This study, like most others, has certain limitations. Firstly, due to the constraints of time and resources, it was not possible to survey a representative number of Upazilas in Bangladesh. The findings are therefore drawn from a restricted number of cases only, and this may constrain the scope for broad generalization, although the nature and working processes of most Upazilas are quite similar. The primary technique of this study was content analysis, supplemented by interviews with the respondents directly involved in the design and implementation of ADP projects. But the utilization of few interviews left less scope to obtain the overall vision of ADP governance. The perceptions of the respondents may also vary depending on their socio-political status, which might influence their perceptions and the findings might be biased. Furthermore, availability for some data sources was challenging since some of the providers were hesitant to reveal confidential and sensitive data. Finally, a deficiency of more advanced quantitative analysis restricted the scope of empirical verification. Even though these constraints restrict generalizability, the research still captures key trends, patterns, and governance challenges of ADP implementation, with useful implications for future studies.

5. Annual Development Programme (ADP)

To understand how politics affects projects, it is crucial to understand the ADP process. The planning commission is responsible for preparing Annual Development Programme (ADP) based on Five Year Plan. After the formulation, the draft is submitted for the ECNEC review and approval. During preparation, funds are allotted for development projects utilizing domestic and foreign sources. Table-2 shows how ADP is prepared through several stages and what is accomplished.

Table-2: How is ADP Prepared?

Who Accomplish?	What is Accomplished?
Inter-ministerial 'resource committee' at finance division	Estimates resource availability
Programming division of planning commission in consultation with sector division, General Economic Division of planning commission, sponsoring ministries and agencies	Prepare sector/project wise ADP allocation
Programming division at the meeting of planning commission	Draft ADP is placed for finalization
Planning division submits to National Economic Council-NEC	NEC gives formal approval

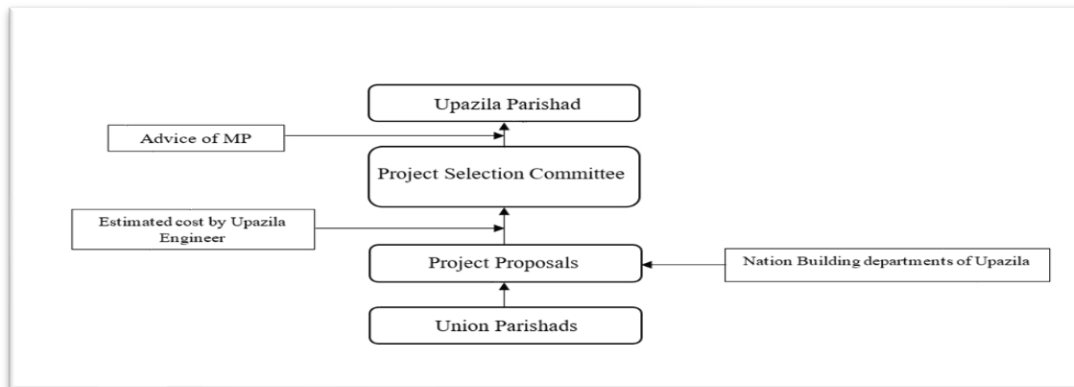
Adapted from Hossain, 2011

With regard to ADP at Upazila parishad, every Upazila Parishad is required to provide an Annual Development Plan on or before 31 March of each fiscal year, consisting of a list of development projects (ADP-projects). The process of project selection begins at the Union Parishad and concludes at the Upazila Parishad. Representatives of the Upazila Parishad, local MPs, government officials at the Upazila level such as the Upazila Nirbahi Officer, Upazila Executive Officer are involved in the project selection process. Moreover, local government institutions such as the Union Parishad and Upazila Parishad are also involved in the whole process.

At first, all union parishads submit the project proposals to the Upazila parishad. Later on, the Union Parishad must take a collective decision on the proposal approvals of projects and move a resolution. On the other hand, Upazila-level national building departments such as, LGED, DPHE, DLS, DoF may also send project proposals. Before these project proposals are submitted to the Upazila Parishad, they are to be examined and evaluated by a 12-member Project Selection Committee, headed by the Chairman of the Upazila Parishad, and consisting of a member from the Upazila Engineer as member secretary.

To begin with, the project list sent to the local Member of Parliament (MP) for advice or recommendation and then the Upazila parishad gives the final approval. After the MP's approval the list is formally endorsed in an Upazila Parishad meeting. The finalized list is then forwarded to the Local Government Division and disseminated among the local community. Subsequently, the approved projects must be prepared in the prescribed project format designed by the central government with the respective government departments providing necessary assistance in this process.

Figure: ADP Process at Local Government



Source: Adapted from Karim, 2016

6. Major Findings

6.1 Non-Inclusiveness in Decision Making

A development project at the local level should be structured to ensure the active participation of relevant actors. An UP is used to identify and prioritize projects through

the Ward Shabha during the shabha (meeting). Ideally, the decisions made at the Ward Shabha should reflect the local community's needs. This practice is noticeably absent in the UPs as findings portrays. Wahiduzzaman (2018) observed “elected representatives are generally opposed to direct citizen participation in local government affairs.” The UP chairman largely controls decision-making, and it is rare for Ward Shabha meetings to be held consistently, let alone for participatory decision-making. Few community members are aware of the development projects at the union level, while most remain uninformed about local development initiatives (Kala & Bagri, 2018). As a result, local needs are not adequately addressed or depicted in the proposals submitted to the Upazila Parishad. One of the UP members highlighted their exclusion from decision-making during interviews:

"I have been serving as a UP member for around ten years, but nobody asked me to get involved in this process. Moreover, we are hardly asked to conduct Ward Shava, where local demands and necessities might be truly identified, which could be further reflected in the ADP process. Only the chairman deals with this matter. Sometimes we know that a lump sum allocation is provided under ADP, not more than that." (IDI- 3)

Another respondent added:

"While preparing projects, almost all UP members do not know anything. It solely depends on the chairman. He does not ask for any opinion in this regard. Thus, some crucial community needs remain unmet year by year." (IDI-2)

6.2 Dependence or Weak Role of Ups

A comprehensive decision regarding the project proposal will be made at the UP. The UP chairman lacks a clear understanding of the preparation of the ADP proposal. Sometimes he/she depends highly on the UP secretary or the Upazila Parishad. This situation indicates either the UP's reluctance or a strong dependence on the higher authority, especially the Upazila Engineering office, to prepare the project proposal. Ara et al. (2024) noted many locally elected representatives lack higher education and are influenced by the upper-level political elite. Furthermore, Asaduzzaman (2008) highlights that political culture and bureaucratic dominance hinder community participation in development initiatives in Bangladesh. Consequently, project allocations to the respective UPs are made according to the preferences of the Upazila Engineering office, not according to the demands of the UPs. The UP chairman discloses:

"The Upazila Parishad conducts the process. The PIC (Project Implementation Committee) allocates the projects on its own, but not always according to our demands. Sometimes we are to forward proposals, but ultimately, we need not do anything." (IDI- 6)

6.3. Non-Sector or Priority-based Allocation

The study does not find a sector-based approach to project allocation, as indicated in government circulars. At times, allocated funds are diverted for different uses. These

inefficiencies lead to unmet local needs and compromised project quality. In a study, Karim (2016) found that project allocation across various sectors does not adhere to government directives. Moreover, the fund allocation provided to the UP is often inadequate and requires adjustment through subsidies and lump-sum allocations. There is a notable absence of needs-based allocation and implementation at the UP level. Additionally, expenditures occasionally do not produce the anticipated outcomes.

Respondent mentioned,

"When projects are allocated, sector-based allocation is not accomplished. Though a separate allocation is received for each sector, expenses are sometimes cross-subsidized. Even if that fund is not spent, the money is usually adjusted to another purpose. For example, if livestock allocation is deemed unnecessary, then it may be used in the education sector." (IDI- 9)

6.4. Negotiation or Informal Settlement

Political settlement refers to the informal agreements between powerful actors to share resources and benefits. Such settlements may reduce open disputes, but they ensure that projects reflect elite compromises rather than community needs. Sobhan (2007) observed that nominees chosen by MPs are allegedly making corrupt profits by misusing project funds with the help of dishonest public officials and local council members. The study also reveals informal settlements (among political and administrative actors) as a mechanism that undermines transparency in the ADP process. At the Upazila Parishad, this occurs when the UZP chairman, UNO, Upazila Engineer, local elite (nominated by MPs), and other bureaucrats negotiate behind closed doors to distribute projects and funds. The Upazila Engineering office plays a decisive role in project settlement. Moreover, the UP chairman must foster a positive relationship with the Upazila parishad to gain support. The happier the Engineer is, the more likely it is to get the project approval, even with a hassle-free allocation.

One respondent stated how allocation practices work in reality:

"The largest share of money goes to the UNO and Upazila Engineer. They estimate costs much higher than the actual ones. The extra money is then shared among all of them who are involved." (IDI-13).

Another respondent opined:

"The allocation of proposals depends on the strength of the relationship with the Engineer. The quality of work depends on money rather than the implied standard of work. Even if the work is of good quality and money is not given, it is labeled as poor quality, and the bill payment is postponed. On the other hand, if an incentive is given, the bill gets released even if the work is of poor quality." (IDI-8)

6.5. Clientelism Network

The study depicts a patron-client dynamics that indicates MPs' invisible power via advisory role, fostering alliances with bureaucrats, contractors, and local political elites.

According to Karim (2016), local MPs and politicians, especially those affiliated with the ruling party, were involved in selecting projects, either directly or indirectly. Thus, the MP, either directly or indirectly, influences project allocation or receives a share of the benefits from the allocation, and the UZP administration attempts to retain the MP's content. Additionally, the UZP administration and the Upazila Parishad receive a share from almost every project, as they are responsible for estimating project costs and making selections. Karim (2016) further argues that when MP gets involved, it can create pro or anti-alliances among elected and non-elected members in the Upazila Parishad's decision-making process, leading to conflicts of interest. Thus, using the patron-client network actors of the development project committees maximizes personal benefits from each project. Moreover, influential local elites also need to be satisfied through informal benefits or by involving them in the projects so they do not create obstacles or withdraw their support.

Respondent is of the opinion:

"The UNO and the Engineer do all work related to project selection. MP has no formal role, except giving advice or recommendations. However, the MP gets a share of the total money from the Upazila Parishad, which he can further allocate to others."(IDI-4)

Another respondent opined that,

"Everybody (Local elites, administrators, and people's representatives) remains inclined to securing funding for projects, where projects and funds are prioritized based on their relationships with MPs and the Chairman."

7. Discussion

This study explored the political influences and informal practices that shape the governance of Annual Development Program (ADP) projects at the Upazila level. While the Upazila Parishad Act 2009 has made the parishad decentralized and participatory for decision-making, the results show that project selection still controlled by local elites, Members of Parliament (MPs), and administrative officials. Informal networks of political elites frequently run local governance, influencing the distribution of resources at the local level (Khan, 2018).

The finding suggests that participatory decision making still remains a challenge. The demands of community are supposed to be reflected from the Ward Shabha meeting. However, the meeting is rarely held, highlights either the reluctance of elected representative or capacity to organize. Therefore, project proposal reflects personal interest of some selective stakeholders rather than real community needs. Hasan, (2022) observed UP member invites their political colleagues and family to join the Ward Shabha and make decisions without the participation of general voters. This undermines the core principle of participatory local governance in Bangladesh. As a result, ADP projects frequently fail to reflect local priorities, undermining the principle of participatory governance. ADP process becomes more vulnerable, when local authority doesn't have sufficient ability to make decisions.

Most of the committee members from different committees at UPs lack knowledge of their roles, responsibilities, and procedures (Hasan, 2022). The findings indicate that many UP chairmen lack the necessary knowledge and expertise to prepare project proposals. Therefore, they depend significantly on the Upazila Parishad or the Upazila Engineering Office. Very often, they transfer responsibilities to either UP secretary or UZ parishad. This explicitly proves the negligence of UP, weakening local autonomy.

Another important finding is the lack of sector wise or priority-based allocation in ADP projects. Although, the Upazila manual recommends sector-specific distribution for sound developments, allocations are frequently diverted or cross-subsidized across sectors, depending on political recommendation or administrative interference. Resources are often allocated for physical infrastructure such as roads and this practice hinders balanced developments. As a result, national development goals are not being implemented.

Actually, the ADP process is captured by collective elite negotiation. The study indicates that informal negotiations between MPs, Upazila chairman, UNOs, and engineers have substantial influence on ADP process at their respective level. Bureaucratic dominance within Upazila Parishads allows UNOs and engineers to act as gatekeepers of project approval, often reinforcing partisan interests (Ahmed S. , 2010). The UNO becomes the central figure in facilitating the patronage distribution of the local MP (Mirza M. Hassan, 2016). The nexus among MP, elites and the UZP fully control the process, gaining self-interest from the transaction. Contracting processes are frequently managed to favor ruling party loyalists, supporting the dominance of political interests in ADP projects (JICA, 2015). As the MP holds invisible power to influence the project, UZP and UP have to keep a patron-client relationship with the MPs. Karim, (2016) mentioned political elites often distribute ADP projects to maintain patron-client networks, rather than to meet community needs. The authors find Upazila engineering office as key actor in the process. Thus, the process of ADP proceeds through informal settlement and negotiation that intensifies inefficient project implementations. The study also reveals a strong presence of conflict of interest in project allocation. The advisory role of MPs in Upazila Parishads creates conflict of interest and undermines the principle of decentralization (Rahman M. S., Politics-Administration Relations and the Effect on Local Governance and Development: The Case of Bangladesh, 2020).

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study mainly reveals existing anomalies in ADP process. These findings confirm that the ADP has not fully achieved its intended goals of balanced and participatory development. Instead, it reflects strong practices of elite dominance and weak institutional oversight. Local power dynamics and informal agreements often overshadow community priorities, changing project outcomes and limiting transparency. The significant influence of political and administrative figures and reliance on exclusive networks create barriers to genuine grassroots involvement. Moving forward, meaningful reforms are essential to foster inclusive decision-making, ensure accountability, and ensure development efforts align with the true needs of local communities.

Based on the research findings and discussions some proposals may be suggested for better utilization of development funds at the local level. First, the controversial advisory role of MPs needs to be revisited to make it cooperative with UZP. Second, the influences of local political elites over the ADP process need to be minimized as long as possible. Third, every actor should be engaged from every sphere so that civic needs and proper utilization can be ensured. Fourth, proper monitoring by the concerned authority can reduce the chances of venality, and the project must be prepared and implemented accordingly.

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