



## LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN PRACTICE: A CASE STUDY OF UNION PARISHAD SERVICE DELIVERY AND STATE–SOCIETY RELATIONS IN RURAL BANGLADESH

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### ABSTRACT

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Rural governance in Bangladesh is a complex web of relations between the elected Union Parishads, central line agencies, development projects, local elites, and the population at large. Union Parishads are formally the lowest rural level of local government, but in practice they do little more than administer. They issue certificates, help with birth and death registration, help access social safety nets, manage minor infrastructure projects, run digital service centers, help resolve village-level disputes, and mediate people's involvement with wider government agencies. This study studies Union Parishad service delivery as a concrete site of state-society interaction in rural Bangladesh. It looks at the operation of Union Parishads as the primary institutions while dependent on higher bureaucratic, budgetary and political structures. The main purpose is to investigate how service delivery, accountability, involvement, digitalisation, and informal mediation influence the connection between rural residents and local government. The research is designed as a qualitative study with document analysis and interpretive synthesis. It depends on constitutional laws, Local Government (Union Parishad) Act, village court legislation, the principles of the Right to Information Act, government service documents, digital governance initiatives and academic literature on decentralisation, accountability and rural politics. The theoretical framework is based on decentralisation theory, social responsibility and the everyday state approach. These perspectives explain the way Union Parishads function as both democratic institutions and negotiated spaces of local power. The results reveal that Union Parishads are most efficient when they act as accessible service portals that narrow the distance between the government and the citizenry. Digital Centres, village courts, citizen charters, participatory planning and project based local development have boosted several aspects of service accessibility. Yet economic dependence, weak administrative autonomy, poor oversight, political meddling, information deficits, elite capture and informal patronage still hinder equitable and accountable service delivery. The paper argues that Union Parishads should not be seen only as formal institutions, but as pragmatic interfaces where law, bureaucracy, local politics and citizen expectations meet. To strengthen the governance of Union Parishad, there is a need for effective fiscal authority, more transparency, stronger participation, better coordination with line departments and defending the voice of citizens.

## 1 Introduction

Local governance is a basic foundation for democratic participation, linking residents to the state through institutions that are physically, socially and administratively close to everyday life. In Bangladesh the Union Parishad is the basic rural tier of elected local governance and is the principal public authority for many rural people. The office offers services such as issuing nationality certificates, character certificates, registration of births and deaths, safety-net recommendations, local verifications, village-level dispute resolutions, requests for small infrastructure, and other administrative services. The Constitution of Bangladesh recognises elected local government as an essential component of democratic governance and the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act provides the legal framework for the structure, functions and duties of Union Parishads (Government of Bangladesh, 1972; Government of Bangladesh, 2009a).

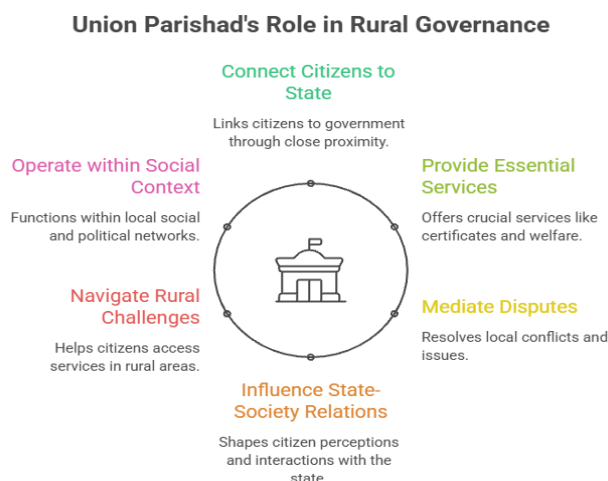
The importance of Union Parishads is not just in their legal position but in their functional position in rural areas. In many villages, the chairperson of Union Parishad and the ward members are the most visible state representatives. Central ministries and district offices are not often in contact with citizens, but they know their local officials and expect answers to problems in the neighbourhood. The Union Parishad is a major site of state-society relations. The Union Parishad is seen as a service provider, a document issuer, a welfare conduit, a dispute arbitrator and

sometimes a place for political bargaining. However, the governance of Union Parishad is not a perfect instance of decentralisation. The organization, although elected, derives its authority from central legislation, administrative supervision, minimal financial independence, project-specific funding, departmental monitoring and local political affiliations. The Local Government Division, upazila administration, sectoral agencies, non-governmental organisations, donor-funded initiatives and digital service providers cooperatively provide several services related to the Union Parishad. Hence, the Union Parishad serves more as an initial link between rural people and the larger state machinery rather than a fully independent local government (Panday & Asaduzzaman, 2011; Siddiqui, 2005).

In Bangladesh’s rural context, Union Parishads are of great importance. A large proportion of the population continues to live in rural areas where public services, infrastructure, markets, health facilities, schools and administrative offices are unevenly distributed (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022). In these situations, the Union Parishad functions as an effective middleman between households and state agencies. It helps residents to navigate administrative processes, locate qualified beneficiaries, report local issues and seek help from higher authorities. The Union Parishad is embedded in the local social dynamics. It functions in a culture that is structured around class, land ownership, gender, kinship, religious association, political parties and informal patron-client networks (Lewis & Hossain, 2008).

This study examines services delivery and mediation by Union Parishads in rural Bangladesh and the implications of these interactions for state-society relations. The discussion is about the pragmatic functioning of local governance, not about its formal legal basis. It asks how rural dwellers access services, which accountability mechanisms are maintained or eroded, the role of digitalisation of citizen–state relations, and the influence of informal power on service delivery. The paper presents an in-depth study of Union Parishads as legal entities and actual platforms of government, thus explaining the reality of rural local governance.

Figure 1. Union Parishad’s Role in Rural Governance



## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Union Parishad as the Frontline Institution of Rural Governance

Union Parishad has a special place in the local government system of Bangladesh. It is a legally recognised and constitutionally formed rural institution, but its real significance is based on its regular contact with the citizens. The Union Parishad comprises an elected chairperson, regular ward members and reserved women members, thus offering a formal representative structure at the village level (Government of Bangladesh, 2009a). This representative design makes it an important platform for local participation; nevertheless, representation does not always mean equal influence. Studies on local governance in Bangladesh often comment that local bodies function in a mostly centralised administrative framework. Local representatives who are elected by voters are responsible for addressing their concerns, yet they frequently lack adequate financial and administrative authority to handle problems on their own. This creates a gap between citizen aspirations and institutional capacities. Citizens expect from the Union Parishad highways, relief, certificates, justice, access to welfare, and administrative support. However, many of the responsibilities require coordination with higher authorities or sectoral divisions (Panday, 2011; Panday & Asaduzzaman, 2011). Union Parishads are front line state', he said. They represent formal governance in rural life. Governance is not about abstract policies for citizens, but about the chair's office, ward assemblies, certificates, local committees, digital service counters, and dispute adjudications. The ongoing presence of the Union Parishad, however, also exposes it to pressure, political rivalry, and public scrutiny when services are delayed or supplied inequitably. Research on democratic decentralisation has shown that accountable local bodies can only become more responsive if they have authority, resources and accountability mechanisms linking representatives to constituents (Blair, 2000; Crook & Manor, 1998; Manor, 1999). Bangladesh has been partially decentralised. The nominal responsibilities have been enhanced but administrative, budgetary and personnel authorities of Union Parishads are still limited. This results in a sort of decentralisation with little local autonomy (Panday, 2011). The result is an institution close to citizens yet dependent on central systems. Thus, the study of Union

Parishads must take into consideration both formal mandates and practical constraints.

### 2.2 State–Society Relations, Participation, and Accountability

State-society relations are the contacts between citizens and the public authority, including the making of claims, the seeking of services, and the holding to account of officials or representatives. These interactions are shaped by both official system and informal social system in rural Bangladesh. Formal procedures consist of elections, ward assemblies, public budget sessions, citizen charters, grievance protocols, village tribunals and access-to-information rules. Informal structures are kinship, political association, patron-client connections, local elites, religious leaders, social reputation, and personal networks. The social accountability research demonstrates that responsibility is more than a matter of simple formal representation. Citizens need information, organisational capacity, legal protection and safe spaces to confront authority (Fox, 2015; Goetz and Jenkins, 2005). In Bangladesh, accountability is sometimes compromised by lack of information, limited citizen participation, weak institutional safeguards and local powerbrokers (Taufiq, 2021). Citizens may be aware of their rights but do not know how to enforce their rights or challenge unjust verdicts. Access to public posts may be more difficult for the poor, less educated, females, elderly and socially marginalised.

Legislative and project-related reforms have improved participation in Union Parishad governance, while participation may still be uneven. There can be public assemblies, but not all citizens have equal say. Women can be represented through reserved seats, but their impact can be constrained by gender customs and the existing local political culture. Disadvantaged households may attend meetings but be unwilling to question prominent members. The distinction between formal participation and substantive influence is key to understanding local administration (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001; Gaventa, 2002). Accountability in Union Parishads should be regarded as a pragmatic process, not as a mere formality or checklist. Elections are a way to ensure accountability, but they take place at specific intervals and may be swayed by party politics, familial relationships, and social dependencies. Daily accountability relies on transparency, service

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standards, grievance management, responsiveness and commitment from representatives to treat citizens fairly. The Right to Information Act enhances the legislative foundation for citizens' access to public information; nonetheless, its effective implementation depends on awareness and the existing local institutional culture (Government of Bangladesh, 2009b).

### **2.3 Service Delivery Functions: From Certificates to Local Justice**

Union Parishads provide and provide a wide variety of services. They include issuing nationality certificates, character certificates, endorsement for trade, help in birth and death registration, identifying beneficiaries in social safety nets, coordination of local infrastructure, sanitation support, disaster preparedness and mediation in local disputes. Union Parishads have several legal responsibilities, but the realisation of these responsibilities depends on resources, integration with the administrative machinery, capacity of staff and political will (Government of Bangladesh, 2009a). Documentation is a key area of service. For admission in school, getting a job, migrating, getting benefits of various government schemes, land-related transactions and numerous administrative works, the rural people have to produce Union Parishad identity cards. This paperwork responsibility bestows substantial power onto the Union Parishad, as papers often decide whether inhabitants may avail themselves of further state services. Timely and transparent documentation increases citizen trust. Delays, politicisation or the effect of informal payments weaken legitimacy. Local justice is a major domain. Establishment of village courts for easy settlement of petty civil and criminal cases. They matter because for those living in the country, ordinary courts can be far, expensive and time-consuming. Village courts, when functioning fairly and openly, can reduce barriers to justice. Their effectiveness depends on sufficient training, neutrality, careful record-keeping, gender sensitivity and resistance to elite influence (Government of Bangladesh, 2006; United Nations Development Programme Bangladesh, 2022).

The Union Parishad also has a role to play in social protection. Many social safety net initiatives require local identification, endorsement, or validation. This puts Union Parishad personnel in an important position

to link poor households with state subsidies. Scarce resources and high demand make selection of beneficiaries a controversial process. Research on local governance and poverty reduction demonstrates that political loyalty, elite capture and information asymmetry might affect targeting (World Bank, 2017; Lewis & Hossain, 2008).

### **2.4 Digital Governance and the Transformation of Access**

The implementation of digital service delivery has markedly transformed the operational function of Union Parishads. Union Digital Centres were established to facilitate access to public and private services for rural populations. These centers offer facilitated access to online services, encompassing registration, applications, payments, informational services, educational support, land-related information, and various administrative procedures. The digital center model is significant since it diminishes travel expenses, conserves time, and facilitates residents' access to services that would otherwise necessitate visits to remote offices (Aspire to Innovate, 2024).

Nonetheless, digital governance does not eliminate all disparities. Numerous rural inhabitants continue to rely on intermediaries due to deficiencies in digital literacy, internet accessibility, confidence, or understanding of governmental protocols. Digital Centres thereby establish a novel form of mediated access. Mediation is more institutionalised than conventional broking; yet, it remains contingent upon the conduct of local entrepreneurs, the availability of equipment, service fees, electricity, connectivity, and public awareness. The advent of digital services alters the dynamics between the state and society. It enhances the visibility and traceability of certain procedures, hence mitigating arbitrary decision-making. Simultaneously, it may generate novel forms of exclusion if citizens are unable to comprehend or afford the service process. Digitalisation enhances local governance just when integrated with explicit service standards, transparent fees, grievance processes, and assistance for vulnerable populations. Global literature on digital governance indicates that technology enhances accountability solely when institutional regulations, citizen capabilities, and administrative responsiveness concurrently develop (World Bank, 2016; United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

### 2.5 Informal Power, Patronage, and Human Factors

The provision of services by the Union Parishad is significantly affected by local power dynamics. The social fabric of rural Bangladesh is heterogeneous. Villages exhibit disparities related to class, landownership, occupation, gender, education, religion, political affiliation, and familial status. These disparities determine who may engage with representatives, who is permitted to address meetings, who obtain information promptly, and who is seen as a legitimate claimant.

Patronage is a persistent concern in local administration. Elected officials frequently function within political contexts that necessitate sustaining backing from constituents, party affiliations, prominent families, and bureaucratic entities. This may influence beneficiary selection, dispute resolution, project priority, and certificate allocation. The issue extends beyond mere individual corruption; it is fundamentally structural as well. In situations of resource scarcity and elevated demand, representatives may exercise discretion to benefit loyal followers or influential groups (Lewis & Hossain, 2008; Siddiqui, 2005). Human considerations are also significant. The efficacy of Union Parishad governance is contingent upon the capability, motivation, integrity, and leadership approach of chairpersons, members, secretaries, village police, digital center entrepreneurs, and committee members. A dedicated chairman can enhance transparency and coordination, whereas ineffective or biased leadership might undermine service equity. Likewise, skilled female members can enhance inclusion; but, they require institutional respect and practical authority to impact decision-making. Studies on municipal governance indicate that institutional outcomes are influenced by laws, incentives, norms, leadership, and citizen pressure (Bardhan, 2002; Brinkerhoff & Wetterberg, 2016).

### 2.6 Capability Building and Institutional Learning

Good local governance requires continuous capacity building. The Union Parishads need to be capable of budgeting, planning, record keeping, communicating with the public, providing services digitally, settling disputes, monitoring projects, responding to climate change and ensuring social inclusion. Many reforms to develop these capacities through training, donor-funded

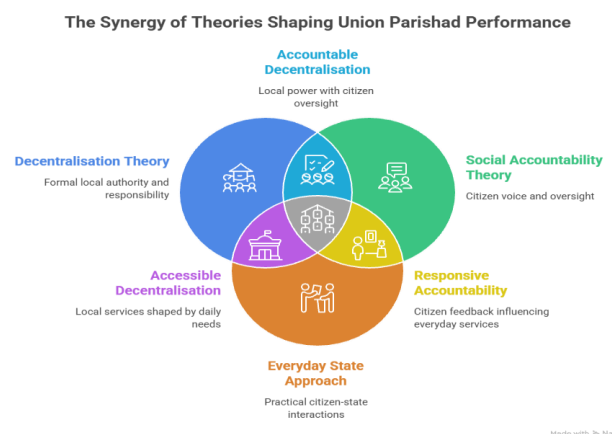
projects, performance-based grants and technical assistance have been introduced in Bangladesh.

Village courts, climate resilience, local planning, and performance-based grants are among the examples which suggest that Union Parishads can do better when supplied with resources, guidelines, training and monitoring support. The Local Governance Support Project enhanced local planning, fiscal transfers and performance incentives for Union Parishads, and climate-oriented initiatives helped vulnerable local governments with adaptation planning and community resilience (World Bank, 2017; United Nations Capital Development Fund, 2023). However, project-based improvements can be ephemeral if they are not institutionalised. The goal is to incorporate project learning into conventional governance practices. These needs sustained funding, long-term training frameworks, better local data governance and cooperation between Union Parishads and other concerned agencies.

### 2.7 Theoretical Framework

The research is informed by three complementary theoretical frameworks: decentralisation theory, social accountability and the everyday state approach. The theory of decentralisation explains the formal delegation of authority, responsibility and resources from the central government to the local entities. Local representatives are closer to citizens and have a better understanding of local needs, which is expected to lead to greater responsiveness from decentralisation. The decentralisation process is limited by the absence of economic autonomy, administrative power,

Figure 2. The Synergy of Theories Shaping Union Parishad Performance



experienced staff, or control over decisions on service delivery at the local level (Rondinelli, 1981; Smoke, 2015).

The Union Parishad is an example of this sort of partial decentralisation. It has elected representatives and legal requirements, but it depends on higher administrative structures for financing, authorisation, technical help, and policy direction. Local response depends on both local leadership and centralised control. The principle of decentralisation explains why Union Parishads may be visible to the population yet constrained in their ability to freely tackle local concerns.

The theory of social accountability highlights the importance of citizen engagement, openness, participation and public scrutiny. It explains why elections alone are not sufficient to guarantee accountable governance. Citizens need to know, have safe places to voice issues, attend open meetings, access records, and be able to question decisions without fear. Social accountability in the context of Union Parishad includes citizen charters, ward meetings, open budget sessions, public disclosures, grievance redress systems, participatory planning, and access to information (Fox, 2015; Taufiq, 2021).

The day-to-day state approach focuses on how citizens engage with the state in daily settings. It shifts attention from formal institutions to pragmatic encounters like getting a certificate, going to a village court, asking for repairs to the road, applying for an allowance, or visiting a digital service center. The concept is useful because rural people often evaluate the government on these everyday interactions, not on national policy statements. Daily governance demonstrates how formal legislation are interpreted through local authority, social status, personal relationships and administrative judgement (Gupta, 1995; Sharma & Gupta, 2006).

Together, these perspectives depict Union Parishads as hybrid bodies. They are legally included into decentralised local governance, politically rooted in the rural community and practically involved in daily service mediation. The effectiveness of such institutions depends not only on the legal framework, but also on factors such as resources, accountability, social impact, administrative coordination and the power of citizens to make requests.

## **2.8 Objectives of the Study**

The primary objective of this study is to examine how Union Parishads in rural Bangladesh mediate service delivery and state–society relations in practice. The study is guided by two specific objectives:

- i. To identify the legal, organisational, administrative, and socio-political conditions that shape Union Parishad service delivery in areas such as documentation, digital access, local justice, development coordination, social protection, and citizen support.
- ii. To analyse how accountability mechanisms, citizen participation, informal mediation, and local power relations influence responsiveness, fairness, legitimacy, and trust between rural citizens and the local state.

## **3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design**

This research uses a qualitative design, based on document analysis and interpretive synthesis. Qualitative approach is appropriate as the article examines institutional practices, citizen-state relations, accountability, and local power dynamics, rather than just a numerical assessment. The study explores the governance of Union Parishad as a pragmatic and social process driven by law, administration, digital platforms, development programmes and rural political culture. Document analysis is suitable for studying public organisations, as it enables a simultaneous evaluation of legal, policy, administrative and scholarly sources (Bowen, 2009; Patton, 2015).

### **3.2 Data Collection**

This study uses secondary sources such as the Constitution of Bangladesh, the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act, the Village Courts Act, the Right to Information Act, digital service materials, project documents, and academic literature on local government and accountability. Sources were chosen based on their relevance to the Union Parishad system, service delivery, decentralisation, citizen participation, digital governance, social responsibility and state-civil society relations in rural Bangladesh. The choice of material was wide-ranging, covering decentralisation, social responsibility and everyday state-making to aid conceptual interpretation (Blair, 2000; Fox, 2015; Rondinelli, 1981).

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The documents were studied thematically. The main topics covered were legal authority, service functions, digital accessibility, public involvement, fiscal and administrative reliance, accountability frameworks, local justice, informal mediation, gender inclusion and institutional capacity. Themes were further explored via the lenses of decentralisation theory, social responsibility, and the everyday state approach. blunders were not considered blunders, but important findings of discrepancies between stated regulations and operational realities. This opened the door for exploring the gap between legal design and everyday governance.

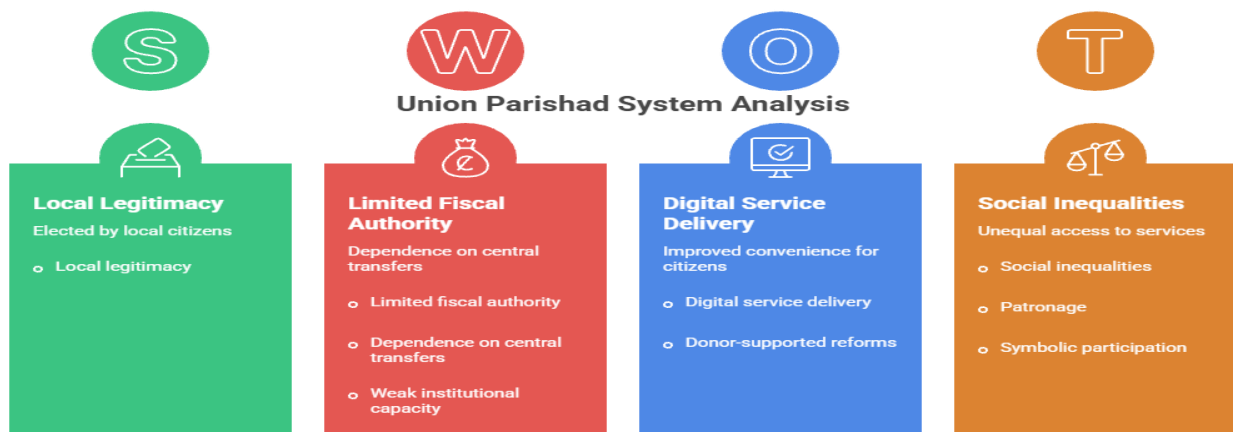
### 3.4 Contextual Analysis

The Union Parishad system needs to be understood in the larger administrative and political context of Bangladesh. Bangladesh has a long history of local government reform; nonetheless, often the rural local institutions continue to depend on the central authority. The Constitution recognises elected local governance, and the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act provides a statutory structure for Union Parishads. Yet, many important services are still administered by ministries, line departments and senior administrative offices (Government of Bangladesh, 1972; Government of Bangladesh, 2009a).

The Union Parishad is found at the meeting point of democracy and bureaucracy. It is chosen by local people but operates under a centrally controlled framework.

This creates opportunities and limitations. Union Parishads gained local credibility through elections. On the other hand, their limited fiscal autonomy and dependence on transfers from the central government restrict their potential to respond autonomously to the demands of the population. This reflects a wider trend where decentralisation initiatives create local bodies but often fail to provide them with sufficient authority and resources (Panday, 2011; Smoke, 2015). Service delivery in rural Bangladesh is typified by various providers. Health services might include neighbourhood clinics, union health facilities, upazila health complexes, and national health initiatives. Education services include schools, school boards, education agencies and national policy. Social protection initiatives include central ministries, local groups, computerised databases and elected authorities. Infrastructure development involves local priorities, engineering divisions, project financing and administrative authorisations. In this environment, the Union Parishad often plays the role of a coordinator, validator, recommender, and mediator, rather than the exclusive service provider. Digitalisation adds a new layer to this dilemma. Many Union Parishad offices have been transformed into service access points by Union Digital Centres. Citizens may receive assistance for online applications, registrations, payments, and informational services. This has increased convenience for many rural households, especially those who would otherwise have to go to upazila or district towns (Aspire to Innovate, 2024). Digital service delivery is effective where there is local capacity, openness, affordability and public confidence.

Figure 3. Union Parishad system Analysis



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Another significant contextual element is the influence of donor-funded and project-oriented governance change. Initiatives concerning village courts, climate resilience, local planning, and performance-based grants have fortified certain Union Parishads through the provision of training, resources, and institutional frameworks. The Local Governance Support Project facilitated fiscal transfers and performance incentives, whilst climate governance measures aided local adaptation planning in at-risk rural regions (World Bank, 2017; United Nations Capital Development Fund, 2023). These examples demonstrate that Union Parishads can execute significant developmental roles when provided with organised assistance.

Nonetheless, project-based enhancement also uncovers a more profound issue. If Union Parishads excel primarily when external projects supply resources and oversight, then their institutional capability remains consistently deficient. Sustainable local governance necessitates the integration of effective practices into the routine operations of Union Parishads, rather than confining them to transient project initiatives.

The social setting holds equal significance. Rural residents are not uniformly situated about the Union Parishad. Affluent homes, politically affiliated families, educated individuals, and socially prominent organisations frequently possess enhanced access to representatives and information. Disadvantaged households, women, minority populations, and socially excluded individuals may encounter obstacles in accessing services. Consequently, the provision of services by the Union Parishad transcends mere administrative concerns; it encompasses issues of authority, acknowledgement, and representation (Lewis & Hossain, 2008; Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001).

In this framework, Union Parishads embody both the potential and the constraints of rural democracy. They enhance the proximity of the state to citizens; but they also perpetuate certain societal inequities. They can enhance accessibility, although they may also transform into centers of patronage. They can facilitate involvement; yet such participation may be only symbolic if citizens lack the ability to make decisions. This paper thus examines Union Parishads as pragmatic entities where formal law, local politics, administrative structures, and citizen aspirations perpetually intersect.

The relationship between Union Parishads and citizens is reciprocal. Citizens assert claims, obtain documentation, express grievances over road conditions, seek allowances, participate in meetings, and negotiate with representatives. Representatives address, negotiate, postpone, prioritise, or redirect these claims based on institutional capability and political motivations. This participatory process fosters confidence when services are equitable and responsive, yet engenders distrust when services are sluggish, inequitable, or politically biased. The everyday state method is beneficial as it emphasises that the significance of the state is constructed through these recurrent interactions (Gupta, 1995; Sharma & Gupta, 2006).

## 4 Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 *Service Delivery Patterns and Performance Trajectories*

Evidence suggests that the delivery of services by the Union Parishad shows inconsistent trends across the rural areas of Bangladesh. Some Union Parishads are active, transparent and responsive, whereas others are hamstrung by limited capacity, political influence, poor planning and inefficient communication. This variability reflects disparities in leadership, resources, administrative backing, public knowledge, and project visibility. The legal framework creates a uniform institutional structure, but the actual outcomes differ from one local environment to another (Government of Bangladesh, 2009a; Siddiqui, 2005). The functions of the Union Parishads are most effective when they are clearly defined and backed by substantial resources. Certificate services, digital access, local road priority and village court operations function well when procedures are streamlined, papers are retained and citizens are informed of the relevant channels. When roles are uncertain or resources are limited, citizens may blame failures on Union Parishads, which are partly a product of constraints imposed by higher-level management. This creates a legitimacy problem when the institution closest to citizens takes on the responsibility for expectations it cannot reliably fulfil.

One important finding is that the Union Parishad often performs more effectively as a delivery service channel rather than as a fully autonomous service provider. It connects residents with the state through verification,

recommendations, digital assistance, local assemblies, and informal advice. This gateway role is critical as rural residents often need help with complex administrative processes. However, this indicates that the performance of Union Parishads is heavily dependent on cooperation with upazila offices, line agencies and national service platforms. This pattern is consistent with the vast body of research on decentralisation. Local institutions improve service delivery when they have a clear mandate, sufficient resources, downward accountability and administrative support (Crook & Manor, 1998; Rondinelli, 1981). Union Parishads in Bangladesh have local proximity and elected legitimacy; yet their fiscal and administrative capacities are limited. The real problem is not the relevance of Union Parishads but its suitability in empowerment to meet the aspirations of the community.

#### **4.2 Integration of Digital and Administrative Service Cycles**

The implementation of digital service delivery has emerged as a prominent transformation in Union Parishad governance. Union Digital Centres have facilitated greater accessibility to internet and administrative services for rural citizens. This has diminished trip duration, decreased informational barriers, and rendered certain services more reliable. Citizens may utilise registration, application, payment, and information services within or next to the Union Parishad premises (Aspire to Innovate, 2024).

The incorporation of digital services has altered the concept of municipal governance. The Union Parishad has evolved from being solely a meeting- or certificate-oriented institution to a digital access point. This enhances the state's daily involvement in rural life. Digital access enhances transparency by standardising operations and minimising the necessity for multiple visits to remote offices. It can enhance administrative efficiency by connecting local service requests to national databases and internet platforms.

Nevertheless, digital technologies do not inherently guarantee inclusivity. Individuals lacking literacy, financial resources, self-assurance, or digital proficiency may continue to rely on local intermediaries. Consequently, digital governance enhances access solely when supplemented by equitable costs, transparent information, established service

standards, and avenues for redress. In the absence of these controls, digital service delivery may perpetuate existing disparities via novel technological avenues. Global evidence indicates that digital governance must integrate institutional accountability and citizen-centric design to achieve equitable results (World Bank, 2016; United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

#### **4.3 Accountability, Citizen Engagement, and Informal Power**

Union Parishad governance has formal accountability mechanisms in place, including elections, citizen charters, ward meetings, open budget sessions, village courts, access-to-information regulations, and public disclosure requirements. These are efforts to make local authorities responsible to the people. However, they only work if the residents can use them.

In many cases, people may not know the full range of services, official costs, grievance procedures or qualifying conditions. This allows informal mediation and unequal access. Local elites may affect choice of recipients, project choices or conflict resolution. Political loyalties may shape the delivery of services. Hence, responsibility remains pertinent in both official and informal settings. The formal system defines the standards, but the informal system often shapes the practical execution of those norms (Taufiq, 2021; Lewis & Hossain, 2008).

The degree of citizen participation varies among social groupings. Men, landowners, educated people and political affiliation households may be more confident to deal with the Union Parishad officials. Barriers may exist in the availability of services for women, low-income households, senior persons, people with impairments, and ethnic groups. The reserved seats for women provide a tremendous institutional opportunity, but gender-inclusive governance needs more than representation. The female members require actual involvement in committees, budget discussions, village court processes, and planning decisions (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001; Goetz & Jenkins, 2005). This means local democracy is not just about elections. that is everyday language. People should be able to ask questions, get information, raise complaints safely, and set the agenda. If participation is just symbolic, the Union Parishad may look democratic but will be controlled by a small group of people. Thus, better

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social responsibility is essential for the strengthening of state-society relations.

### 4.4 *Dynamic Capabilities and Capability Building*

Union Parishads can strengthen their performance through the development of institutional capabilities in planning, budgeting, digital management, dispute resolution, public communication and inclusive participation. Capacity building is particularly important because rural governance is becoming increasingly complex. Currently, union parishads handle digital services, climate vulnerability, social protection databases, infrastructure priorities, gender inclusion, local justice, and citizen complaints.

Project-based projects illustrate that Union Parishads can learn and adapt if they are provided with training, financial aid and supervision. Village court programs and climate governance initiatives show that local institutions can be more effective when backed by clear processes and enough resources (United Nations Development Programme Bangladesh, 2022; United Nations Capital Development Fund, 2023). The Local Governance Support Project focuses on the need for sustainable finance, performance incentives, and accountability systems at the local level (World Bank, 2017).

The idea is to embed these abilities for the long term so that improvements continue after programs are completed. Training must be provided on a regular basis and based on actual service requirements. Budgeting should not be a mere administrative requirement but rather assist local priorities. Digital platforms must be more than simple technical service providers; they must cultivate transparency and accessibility. Village courts are to resolve disputes and build faith in local justice. Therefore, capacity development is crucial for the legitimacy of the Union Parishad.

### 4.5 *State–Society Trust and the Everyday Experience of Governance*

Trust is built via repeated meetings. Citizens are more likely to trust the Union Parishad and the wider state when they receive services on time, can access information openly and feel they are being treated fairly. Delays, favouritism, informal payments or political exclusion reduce citizens' trust. This is more

important in rural areas as the Union Parishad often is the first point of contact with the government.

The quotidian state approach emphasises the importance of small services. A certificate, road repair, birth registration, or fair village court decision may seem like nothing in the context of national policy; nonetheless, these services matter a great deal to how citizens see the state. The state seems within reach if the Union Parishad is attentive. The state seems remote or unjust if it is bigoted or ineffective. Therefore, improving the delivery service of the Union Parishads is one way to strengthen democratic legitimacy.

## 5 Recommendations

Various recommendations are being forwarded to improve service delivery of Union Parishad and strengthen the state society nexus in rural Bangladesh.

Union Parishads need to have more clear and reliable fiscal authority. Local authorities do not have the resources to adequately respond to citizen requests. Local development planning needs to be coupled with stable funds and defined criteria for allocation.

Citizen charters should be made more practical and visible. Each Union Parishad shall prominently display service lists, official fees, necessary documents, delivery time, responsible persons and grievance redress mechanism in English language clearly. This would reduce uncertainty and informal dependence.

Digital delivery service should be improved through transparency of fees, help for users and oversight. Union Digital Centres should not become new centres of unregulated brokering. Explicit information is essential to the public about service costs, complaint procedures and processing duration.

Meetings of the Fourth Ward and open sessions on the budget should be made more substantive. Participation is not limited to formal attendance. Planning and oversight must actively incorporate women, low-income households, seniors, ethnic communities and persons with disabilities.

**Figure 4. Union Parishad Service Delivery Improvement**

Village courts should be supported through training, careful record keeping, gender-sensitive rules and greater scrutiny. Local justice can only build trust when people recognise that verdicts are fair and not dictated by strong factions.

The coordination between the Union Parishads and line departments needs to be improved. Health, education, agriculture, engineering and social welfare agencies provide a lot of services. Regular coordination meetings and sharing local data can improve service outcomes.

Seventh, anti-patronage procedures must be strengthened in the processes of beneficiary selection and project implementation. Public lists, grievance hearings, social audits and community scrutiny can limit elite capture and improve equity.

Women members should be given greater substantive responsibilities for planning, budgeting, village court aid and committee leadership. Reserved representation must be converted into substantive authority and visible participation.

The Union Parishad staff and elected representatives must be regularly trained in digital governance, public finance, record keeping, participatory planning and

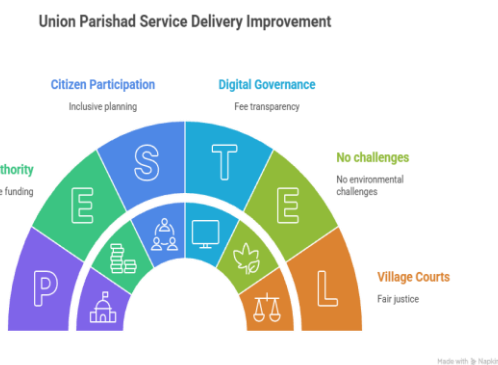
should be continuous and not depend on individual projects.

Local governance reform should protect citizen representation. Citizens need safe and accessible ways to ask questions, get information, challenge unfair decisions and report problems with services, without fear of political or social reprisal.

## 6 Conclusion

This article evaluated Union Parishad service delivery and state-society relations in rural Bangladesh using a qualitative examination of legal frameworks, official documents, digital service systems, project activities and scholarly literature. The study shows that Union Parishads are very important to rural administration as they are the closest elected bodies to the general people. They offer certifications, facilitate access to digital services, help resolve local conflicts, organise developmental projects, and mediate citizen engagement with the wider state. The main finding is that the Union Parishads are hybrid institutions. They are the political arenas, administrative channels and social mediators designated by local governments. The performance of these is contingent on legislative authority, financial resources, leadership quality, citizen awareness, administrative coordination, digital capacity, and local power dynamics. Union Parishads should not be judged only by their statutory mandates. They should be seen as pragmatic vehicles through which rural people interact with the state in their everyday lives. The study reveals that digital services, citizen charter, village courts, participatory planning and project-based local development have opened up considerable opportunities for improving local governance. These measures can reduce distance, increase transparency and improve access. But they cannot completely overcome structural problems such as limited autonomy, insufficient accountability, elite dominance, gender inequality and information deficits. Thus, at the level of Union Parishad state-society relations are defined by bargaining and discrepancy. Union Parishads need more than statutory recognition to empower them. It needs pragmatic reforms that make services accessible, rights enforceable and representatives accountable. The importance of reliable finance, transparent delivery of services, inclusive participation, greater interaction with appropriate ministries and improved safeguarding of citizens' input

redressal of citizens' complaints. Capacity building



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cannot be overstated. If these reforms are sincerely implemented, Union Parishads can be transformed beyond their role as simply frontline administrative offices. They can develop into important democratic institutions connecting rural citizens to the state with equity, respect, and responsibility. The article points to an important implication for research. Future research should incorporate field interviews, citizen surveys, case studies at the Union Parishad level, and cross-regional comparative analysis to understand differences in service delivery shaped by local leadership, gender inclusion, political competition, digital capacity, and project exposure. Such research would provide strong empirical data on the nature of rural citizens' engagement with the state through Union Parishads and how improvements in local administration could improve inclusiveness and accountability.

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