The Role of Union Parishads in Attaining SDG 16.6 in Bangladesh: From Policy to Practice

Pranab Kumar Panday, PhD[1]

Abstract

This study examines the role of Union Parishads (UPs) in making Sustainable Development Goal 16.6 more relevant to local communities. It focuses on three main aspects of governance: how well they deliver services, hold people accountable, and how transparentthey are about their decision-making. The study reveals moderate institutional progress but also highlights systemic problems. It used a mixed-methods approach that included household surveys, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in four Union Parishads in four northern districts of Bangladesh. The results show that UPs have made it easier for people to get basic services and use local infrastructure. However, weak accountability practices, financial transparency, elite capture, and gender-based exclusion limit their performance. People still mostly participate in statutory forums, such as Open Budget Meetings and Ward Shavas, for the show, and trust in local institutions is weak. The study demonstrates how informal norms and a lack of capacity often undermine formal mandates by combining Governance Theory, principal-agent theory, and New Institutionalism. The paper contributesto the body of work on decentralised governance and SDG localisation by providing data-driven ideas and policy suggestions for enhancing UP's capacity, inclusivity, and responsiveness at the local level.

1. Introduction

Local Government Institutions (LGIs) are widely regarded as crucial platforms for implementing development projects at the community level, particularly in

---

[1]Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh & Adjunct Professor, Central Queensland University, Australia

relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Union Parishads (UPs), the lowest level of rural local government in Bangladesh, provide public services, engage people, and promote inclusive governance (Panday, 2011; Aminuzzaman, 2010). As the world's attention shifts increasingly to the localisation of the SDGs, UPs are becoming increasingly crucialin translating national policy frameworks into actions at the community level (UCLG, 2019; Sarker et al, 2022). The SDGs have 17 main goals, but this study focuses on SDG 16.6, which is to "develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels" (United Nations, 2015). For UPs, acting on SDG 16.6 is particularly crucial, as they are legally obligated to conduct ward shavas (WS), open budget meetings (OBMs), and adopt citizen charters, all of which are means of increasing local government accountability and transparency (Chowdhury & Panday, 2018). However, many structural issues, including a lack of resources, political favouritism, and poor institutional capacity, limit the influence these local organisations can have (Khan, 2016; Jahan, 2023). This study determines how UPs can contribute to achieving SDG 16.6. It achieves this by examining three interdependent spheres: the quality of services provided, the accountability of individuals, and the transparency of their actions. The aim is to understand how UPs manage theory and practice to reach the institutional objectives established in SDG 16.6.

1.2. Objectives of the Research

This study mainly aims to critically analyze the role UPs play in implementing the goals of SDG 16.6 locally in Bangladesh. The specific objectives are as follows:

- To evaluate the effectiveness of UPs in delivering essential public services as part of fulfilling the mandate of SDG 16.6.

- To examine the extent to which legal and institutional accountability mechanisms are being implemented within UPs.

- To assess the degree of transparency in UP operations and its impact on citizen trust, participation, and satisfaction.

- To explore the extent to which the UPs can attain SDG 16.6, the challenges they face, and the recommendations necessary for overcoming these challenges.

3. Importance of Local Government in SDG Attainment: Focus on Bangladesh's Localisation Policy

Peace, justice, and robust institutions constitute fundamental pillars of the 2030

Agenda for Sustainable Development, established under the auspices of the United Nations. This agenda encompasses 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aimed at eradicating poverty, promoting equitable growth, and enhancing the health of our planet. Emphasising SDG 16, this agenda acknowledges the significant role that governmental systems play in promoting sustainability, as it is evident that the quality of institutions is essential for the attainment of all SDG objectives, particularly SDG 16.6, which underscores the necessity to "develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels" (Sarker et al., 2022). A proficient government cultivates public trust, encourages community participation, and ensures universal access to essential services. These factors collectively contribute to the local realization of the SDGs.

The implementation of SDG 16.6 falls under the control of local governments. They assist their constituents at the most local level and are better suited to solve issues unique to their area than central authorities (UCLG, 2019). The primary objective of the Bangladeshi government is to "localise" the SDGs by enabling UPs to translate global targets into projects that are feasible in their respective regions. Bangladesh's National Sustainable Development Strategy (GOB, 2013) emphasises the importance of local governments in achieving SDG objectives. It also emphasises how crucial decentralisation and local accountability are for advancement that is inclusive and promotes social justice.

The systematic approach offered by Bangladesh's localisation strategy will assist the nation's administration in integrating Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) principles. This policy designates local institutions—particularly universities—as pivotal in executing essential development projects, thereby ensuring transparency in governance processes, encouraging public participation, and enhancing service delivery (Panday, 2011). To bolster the accessibility and accountability of local government operations, the Government of Bangladesh has retained several provisions, including mandatory Ward Secrets (WS), Outdoor Bulletin Boards (OBMs), community monitoring systems, and citizen charters (CC), to fulfill SDG 16.6 at the Union Parishad (UP) level (Chowdhury & Panday, 2018). These initiatives exemplify the government's dedication to establishing governance frameworks that address local needs while adhering to the broader principles of sustainable development.

Attaining SDG 16.6 depends on UPs, as they offer essential services such as health, education, sanitation, and infrastructure. The quality of life and trust in political institutions significantly influence people's capacity for stability and

engagement in accountability operations (Jamil & Askvik, 2015). Frequent public reporting and community feedback channels are among the accountability tools that help UPs maintain service standards and adjust to society's evolving needs. Furthermore, Bangladesh's localisation strategy has promoted cooperation between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and UPs to ensure that appropriate technical skills and funding are directed toward local projects, thereby facilitating resource mobilisation.

In Bangladesh, priority has been given to local governments for building strong, self-reliant communities geared for continuous growth. The challenges that UPs face—such as resource shortages and management issues—highlight the need for ongoing policy support and capacity building (Panday and Maruf, 2025). The country's dedication to SDG localisation through its UPs shows that it is making notable progress toward the ambitious 2030 Agenda goals. To reach SDG 16 and develop a governance system that enhances accountability, inclusiveness, and sustainability at the grassroots level, the Bangladeshi government must effectively implement policies aimed at localising efforts.

4. Theoretical Framework

The literature on local governance and sustainable development emphasises how vital LGIs are for achieving the SDGs overall, especially Goal 16.6. However, when evaluating the capacity of local institutions, such as UPs in Bangladesh, to be successful, accountable, and transparent, empirical assessments often show mixed results (Khan, 2016; Aminuzzaman, 2010). According to traditional decentralisation theory, giving more authority to lower levels of government makes them more accountable, efficient, and capable of providing public services (World Bank, 2001). Yet, in reality, these standards are not always met. In many developing countries, decentralised institutions operate under strict legal and financial restrictions, which hinder their ability to make independent decisions (Smoke, 2015). Bangladesh is no exception.

This paper is grounded in **governance theory**, which examines how people in authority make decisions, hold others accountable, and use their power in complex situations (Pierre & Peters, 2000). Both political dynamics and institutional structures significantly impact governance, particularly at the local level. There are formal structures, such as WS and OBM, in UPs to promote accountability and transparency; however, their effectiveness largely depends on local power dynamics, elite capture, and the inclusiveness of citizen participation (Panday and Maruf, 2025).

The Principal-Agent Theory offers an alternative perspective on the challenges faced by local governments. It suggests that elected officials (agents) should act in the best interests of the people (principals). However, agents may prioritise their interests and overlook their duties to their constituents if there are no strong systems in place to monitor and hold them accountable (Besley, 2006). This situationis common in UPs because differences in information and power make participatory instruments less effective, leading to tokenism rather than genuine citizen empowerment.

New Institutionalism also emphasises how institutional norms, path dependencies, and informal practices can influence governance outcomes (March & Olsen, 1984). In Bangladesh, even with written rules, the presence of informal networks and political brokers can sometimes render institutions less accountable. These practices that rely on the past make it harder for changes to have a real impact in achieving SDG 16.6.

Critics of participatory governance argue that CCs and community meetings are designed to enhance democratic decision-making. However, these initiatives frequently fail due to the dominance of elites, the insufficient knowledge among citizens about the processes, and weak follow-through (Hickey & Mohan, 2005). In urban poor areas, only a few vocal participants may be able to engage, thereby excluding groups that are already disadvantaged, such as women and individuals experiencing poverty, thus maintaining existing power structures (Sarker et al., 2022).

Therefore, it can be stated that the literature indicates that while the localisation of SDG 16.6 has considerable potential, it will only materialise if several factors align, including institutional capabilities, the political climate, and granting people greater authority. This paper employs these theoretical ideas to investigate how UPs in Bangladesh address the challenges of delivering a good, accountable, and transparent government at the local level.

5. Union Parishad in Bangladesh: Evolution, Structure, and Core Functions

The UP has experienced many changes due to the country's historical political and administrative systems. It was established during British colonial rule to respond to demands for greater local involvement and better governance in rural areas (Aminuzzaman, 2010). Since independence, the UP has gone through various transformations to improve its effectiveness and independence. The Local Government (Union Parishad) Act of 2009 (hereinafter called the Act of 2009) required public meetings, participatory budgeting, and the inclusion of women (Panday, 2011), aiming to strengthen local governance.

These legislative accomplishments show the government's dedication to decentralising authority to meet the changing needs of rural residents and to foster democratic governance at the local level.

There are thirteen elected members in each UP: one chairperson, nine general members, and three women elected from reserved seats. These members are assigned to represent the minor administrative divisions-wards- inside the UP. The primary purposes of the UP cover a wide range of civic, administrative, and developmental functions. The 2009 Act named UPs as the primary authority responsible for maintaining public infrastructure, ensuring local cleanliness and health, issuing birth and death certificates, and resolving land conflicts (Panday, 2011). UPs are also crucial for planning disaster relief efforts and national initiatives, such as Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) and Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF). The Act requires participatory methods, such as WS and OBM, to involve more people in decision-making and financial management (Chowdhury & Panday, 2018). This aims to enhance accountability and transparency. Despite these duties, the UPs continue to encounter problems that hinder their ability to perform their jobs effectively in local government, such as having limited control over their budgets and facing political interference.

6. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research approach to examine how UPs contribute to achieving SDG 16.6, which focuses on creating effective, accountable, and transparent institutions. The research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how local government operates in Bangladesh by examining both quantitative and qualitative data.

6.1 Study Area and Sample

Data were gathered from four Union Parishads in four northern districts of Bangladesh between October 15 and December 10, 2023. These included: Barahar UP (Ullapara Upazila, Sirajganj), Walia UP (Lalpur Upazila, Natore), Paranpur UP (Manda Upazila, Naogaon), and Monaksha UP (Shibganj Upazila, Chapainawabganj). Selection was based on geographical diversity, variations in service performance, and logistical feasibility.

6.2 Data Collection Techniques

The research employed three primary techniques for data collection:Household Surveys: Structured questionnaires were administered to 80 respondents (20 from each UP), with equal representation of men and women. The survey

included closed-ended Likert-scale questions (1–5 scale: strongly disagree to agree strongly) and open-ended questions to capture citizens' experiences regarding service delivery, accountability, and transparency. The survey instrument was pilot-tested in a non-sample UP for clarity, consistency, and reliability. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): 32 KIIs were conducted with 4 Upazila Nirbahi Officers, 4 UP Chairpersons, 16 UP Members (including female members), 4 UP Secretaries, and 4 representatives from local NGOs. The interviews followed semi-structured guides focused on institutional performance, governance constraints, and perceptions of SDG 16.6 implementation. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Eight FGDs were organised (two in each UP—one with male and one with female). Each group comprised 8–10 participants, including service recipients and community leaders. Discussions focused on governance effectiveness, citizen awareness of accountability mechanisms, and perceived inclusivity.

6.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics, producing descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean) for each of the three governance dimensions. Qualitative data from KIIs and FGDs were subjected to thematic analysis using a coding framework aligned with the core analytical areas: service delivery, accountability, and transparency.

6.4 Ethical Considerations and Bias

All participants were informed of the study's purpose, and verbal consent was obtained before data collection. Respondents were assured anonymity and confidentiality. The study acknowledges the potential for social desirability bias, especially in responses concerning UP officials. Additionally, political affiliations may have influenced participants' opinions, particularly during FGDs. To mitigate these risks, data triangulation was applied, and interviews were conducted in neutral, non-political settings.

6.5 Limitations

The study's sample size—80 household respondents and 32 key informants— is relatively small and may not be statistically representative of all UPs in Bangladesh. However, the purposive design and methodological triangulation enhance the validity and depth of the insights. Generalisation should be approached cautiously, though the findings remain relevant for similar local governance contexts across the country.

7. Variables and Analytical Framework

The analytical framework for this study is grounded in the governance dimensions outlined under SDG 16.6, which advocates for the establishment of effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels of governance. To assess the role of UPs in localising this goal, the study used a dependent variable—the localisation of SDG 16.6—and three inter related independent variables: effectiveness in service delivery, institutional accountability, and transparency in governance. Based on studies of global governance and local institutional procedures, these elements are selected. Pierre and Peters (2000) argue that good governance stems from institutions that strike an appropriate balance between ability, integrity, and openness. These ideas are especially important in rural Bangladesh, where UPs manage basic services and make decisions with help from the community (Panday, 2011; Sarker et al, 2022).

7.1 Dependent Variable: Achieving global goals (SDG 16.6) at the local level in Bangladesh

This study primarily aimed to determine how effectively UPs have grasped and applied SDG 16.6 in their surroundings. This dependent variable examines how well UPs perform their jobs by offering services, being accountable, and honestly describing what they do. Localising the SDGs, as noted by UCLG (2017), involves ensuring that local government actions align with global objectives in a manner that is sensible in the local context and achievable. To determine localisation, this study examines the cumulative performance of UPs in the three regions listed below, which are considered as independent variables.

7.2 Independent Variable 1: Effectiveness in Service Delivery

As central to SDG 16.6 is effectiveness, which concerns the capacity of UP to provide fundamental services in a timely, accessible, and equitable manner. When local governments have sufficient power and resources, the literature suggests that decentralised service delivery can lead to more effective and accountable governance (Smoke, 2015; World Bank, 2001). In Bangladesh, however, UPs frequently face challenges such as delayed disbursement of funds, bureaucratic red tape, and limited staff capacity (Khan, 2016). Indicators of service delivery effectiveness in this study include: (i) Timeliness and quality of public services (e.g., birth registration, trade licenses, safety net distribution), (ii) Accessibility of services, especially for marginalised groups, (iii) Satisfaction levels among service recipients and (iv) The implementation and impact of community-based projects. By examining these indicators, the study evaluates whether UPs function as capable institutions that meet local needs.

7.3 Independent Variable 2: Institutional Accountability

Accountability mechanisms are crucial for ensuring that public officials act in the best interest of citizens rather than for personal or political gain. Drawing on Principal–Agent Theory (Besley, 2006), the study recognises that without strong accountability structures, elected representatives (agents) may not fulfil their responsibilities to constituents (principals). In Bangladesh, UPs are mandated by law to conduct WS and OBMs, which are designed to create spaces for participatory governance (Chowdhury & Panday, 2018). However, existing literature points to significant gaps in implementation. Many of these forums are held irregularly or symbolically, limiting their effectiveness in holding local elites accountable (Jahan, 2023; Uddin, 2019). This study measures accountability using the indicators like: (i) The existence and functioning of OBMs and WS, (ii) Responsiveness to citizen complaints and feedback, (iii) Financial audits and legal compliance, and (iv) Citizens' perception of fairness in decision-making processes.These elements collectively assess the integrity of UP governance in practice.

7.4 Independent Variable 3: Transparency in Governance

Transparency is crucial for fostering citizen trust and facilitating informed participation. According to the New Institutionalism framework (March & Olsen, 1984), institutional performance is shaped by formal rules, information disclosure practices, and administrative culture. In the context of UPs, transparency involves making financial records, meeting minutes, and project reports publicly accessible. While the Government of Bangladesh has introduced legal provisions to encourage openness—such as publishing budgets and using digital platforms—research suggests that such practices are unevenly applied (Muslim and Mais, 2023; Islam, 2024). To evaluate transparency, this study focuses on indicators, like (i) Availability of financial information (budgets, expenditures), (ii) Access to records of meetings and decisions, (iii) Dissemination of UP performance reports, particularly relating to SDG implementation and, (iv) Utilise digital tools (e.g., websites, SMS alerts) to disseminate information to citizens. Assessing these indicators provides insights into the openness of UP governance and its alignment with the ideals of SDG 16.6. Based on the above discussion, the following analytical framework was developed, which served as a guiding principle in achieving the research objectives.

Figure 1: Analytical Framework of the Study[11]

Figure 1: Analytical Framework of the Study
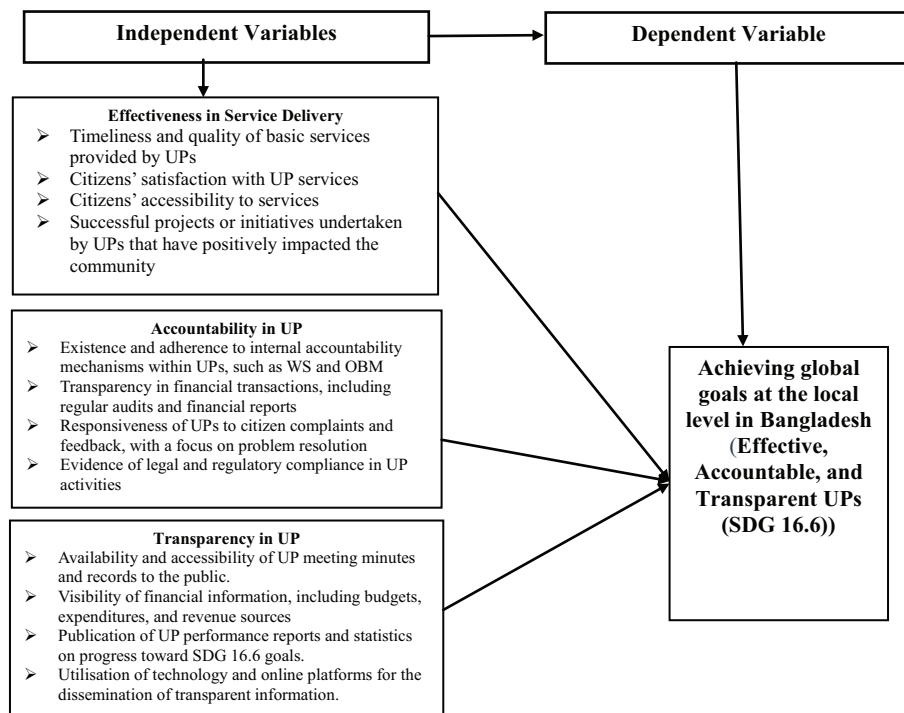
8. Performance of UPs in Achieving SDG 16.6: Evidence and Analysis

This section presents the empirical findings from data collected through a household survey with 80 service recipients, 32 key informant interviews (KIIs), and eight focus group discussions (FGDs). The results are presented across the three analytical dimensions of SDG 16.6—**effectiveness**, **accountability**, and **transparency**—and reflect the strengths and limitations of UPs in fulfilling their role as LGIs. Quantitative data is complementedby qualitative insights to provide a nuanced understanding of governance dynamics.

8.1 Effectiveness in Service Delivery

SDG 16.6 emphasises the importance of building transparent, accountable and effective institutions **that deliver public services equitably and reliably**. UPs are the first line of defence for rural local government in Bangladesh. Law and the Constitution require them to offer various services, ranging from basic paperwork to the distribution of social benefits and small-scale infrastructure development. This section examines how well UPs deliver services by assessing

---

The analytical framework was drawn by the author.

four key areas: timeliness, quality, accessibility, **and the impact of local development projects.**Table 1 summarises the citizens' perceptions of UP service delivery.

Table 1: Citizen Perceptions of Effectiveness of UP Service Delivery (n=80)

Service DeliveryIndicators	Sub-indicator	% of Respondents
Timeliness and quality of basic services provided by UPs	Satisfied with the timeliness of services	57%
	Experienced delays in receiving services	30%
Citizens' satisfaction with UP services	Satisfied with the quality of safety net/document services	65%
Citizens' accessibility to services	Reported favouritism/informal practices	Qualitative Insight
	Reasonable access to UP offices	68%
Successful projects or initiatives undertaken by UPs that have positively impacted the community	Benefited from local development projects	75%

Source: Field Work, 2023-24

8.1.1 Timeliness and Quality of Service Delivery

Quantitative results show that 57% of respondents were satisfied with the speed and quality of services, including registering births and deaths, obtaining trade permits, and receiving social safety net payments. However, 30% said they had to wait, indicating that service congestion, personnel absences, and inefficient procedures remain issues. One person said, "*Sometimes services are provided quickly, but other times the office is busy, which means people have to wait longer*" (Interview Data, 2023/24). These disparities are particularlynoticeable in UPs located fartherfrom urban areas, where inadequate roads and communication infrastructure exacerbatethe difficulty of delivering prompt services. These results are similar to those reported by Islam (2024), who noted

that rural service delivery in Bangladesh is heavily dependent on the ease of access and the government's ability to manage it effectively. The establishment of Union Digital Centres (UDCs) has improved service speed in some areas, particularly in issuing certificates and accessing public information. However, the digital divide remains a concern, as several respondents from Sirajganj and Naogaon noted that these centres are often underutilised due to power outages, internet disruptions, or a lack of trained staff. These findings partially validate Hossain and Yasmin's (2020) argument that digital governance infrastructure can enhance service delivery, provided it is properly maintained and supported by local capacity.

8.1.2 Citizens satisfaction with UP services

65% of respondents indicated that they were generally satisfied with how UPs handled documentation and social safety net distributions. However, qualitative insights uncovered serious concerns about favouritism, informal payments**, and** inequitable treatment**.** One service user observed: "*Familiarity with an insider speeds processes; otherwise, it becomes a challenge*" (Interview Data, 2023/24). This sentiment reflects a pattern of informal clientelism, as documented by Chowdhury and Panday (2018), where access to services is often mediated through personal or political networks, thereby undermining institutional impartiality and reducing citizens' trust in local authorities. FGDs also indicated that female and elderly service recipients, in particular, faced delays or had to make multiple visits to access entitlements due to opaque administrative practices.

8.1.3 Accessibility to Services

Although 68% of respondents reported having reasonable access to UP services, this figure masked considerable regional and spatial disparities. Respondents from flood-prone or remote villages cited poor road conditions and transportation challenges as barriers to reaching UP offices. A participant from Chapainawabganj stated: "*We must traverse miles to access the UP office. This is particularly challenging for the elderly*" (Interview Data, 2023/24). These findings are consistent with those of Sarkar et al. (2022), who highlight that rural infrastructure deficits hinder service delivery and civic engagement, particularly among vulnerable populations. Accessibility remains a logistical and structural governance concern, reinforcing inequalities between centrally located and peripheral communities.

8.1.4. Impact of Community-Level Projects

Despite the limitations in routine services, community members across the study areas acknowledged the positive impacts of UP-led development projects. 75% of respondents living in areas that received infrastructure support—such as road repair, tube well installation, and irrigation improvements—reported tangible benefits, including increased agricultural productivity, improved mobility, and enhanced local safety. For example, in Walia Union Parishad, Lalpur, Natore, one of the primary objectives has been to address the water shortage caused by excessive heat and limited rainfall. The UP boosted agricultural output and made farmers more resilient to climate issues by upgrading tube wells for better irrigation. Helping people have clean drinking water has also made the community healthier and happier. The UP has also built a primary school, which has been crucial in expanding educational opportunities and contributing to the area's social and economic growth (FGD, 2024). A farmer from Naogaon shared: "*The new water system has transformed our lives. We can now grow crops even in dry seasons*" (Interview Data, 2023/24). Such Evidence confirms the developmental role that UPs can play when projects are responsive to community needs and implemented equitably. These findings support Sarkar et al. (2022), who argue that small-scale infrastructure can significantly improve socio-economic and health outcomes in rural Bangladesh. Project success appeared more likely when community input was incorporated during the planning stages, suggesting that participatory elements enhance project ownership and effectiveness.

The findings tell a dual story of UP's performance in service delivery. Meanwhile, UPS is successfully fulfilling its core responsibilities and providing small infrastructure projects that improve rural life. However, issues like unequal access, weak networks, and regional differences continue to pose challenges that reduce their effectiveness. The results emphasize the importance of governance theory and New Institutionalism, as formal institutions like UPs are shaped not only by rules but also by practices, actions, and systemic limitations. To fully meet the goals of SDG 16.6, UPs need to shift from merely following rules to transforming local government operations through digital technologies, wider outreach, and better methods of monitoring.

8.2. Accountability Mechanisms

Open and accountable government structures are essential for achieving SDG 16.6. Therefore, effective accountability is crucial in achieving this objective. By employing instruments such as WS, OBMs, frequent financial reporting,

and public complaint-handling mechanisms, UPs in Bangladesh are expected to incorporate accountability into their work. However, the findings of this study indicate that even though these structures are officially in place, they are not always utilised properly and are often applied superficially, revealing a gap between what the law stipulates and what institutions do. Table 2 presents the indicator-wise date of the implementation of the accountability mechanism:

Table 2: Implementation of Accountability Mechanisms in Union Parishads

Accountability Indicator	Sub-indicators	% of Respondents (n=80)
Existence and Adherence to internal accountability mechanisms within UPs, such as WS and OBM	Awareness of WS and OBM	13.75%
	Participation in the Meeting	18.18%
	UP's Adherence to Internal Accountability Mechanisms	Adherence (18.75%) Somewhat Adherence (43.75%) Minimal Adherence (13.75%)
Transparency in Financial Transactions and Record-Keeping	Transparency in UP's Financial Transactions	Somewhat Transparent (50%) Minimally Transparent (16%)
	Access to UP's Financial Document	Yes (13.75%) No (86.25%)
Responsiveness of UPs to citizen complaints and feedback, with a focus on problem resolution	Believed UPs responded to complaints	35% (satisfied); 45% (not)
Evidence of legal and regulatory compliance in UP activities	Compliance with the legal and regulatory requirements in UP's activities	Yes (72.5%) No(27.5)

8.2.1. Existence and Adherence to Internal Accountability Mechanisms within UPs

The survey results show that people are frighteningly unaware of and not participating in two of the UPs' most crucial participatory tools: OBMs and WS. Only 13.75% of respondents were aware of WS and OBMs. Among those aware of the meetings of WS and OBM, only 18.18% participated, indicating that the majority of the general public remained absent from the meetings. When UP officials were asked to express whether they adhere to the accountability mechanisms, the findings suggest that 18.75% indicated their Adherence, while 43.75% and 13.75% indicated somewhat Adherence and minimal Adherence, respectively. These numbers show a significant gap between UPs and the people they represent. This finding is similar to Uddin's (2019) observation that a lack of systematic outreach and civic engagement hinders people in rural areas from participating in local government.Qualitative data reinforce this concern. A respondent from Natore remarked: "*Although the UP sporadically invites individuals to meetings, many remain uninformed about their purpose or impact*" (Interview Data, 2023/24). A female participant from Naogaon also noted: "*They read the budget quickly, ask no questions, and declare the meeting over. Ordinary people have no voice there.*" These quotes suggest that while meetings are sometimes held, they are largely ritualistic, serving as procedural formalities rather than genuine platforms for public accountability. This mirrors more general criticisms of participatory government in Bangladesh, where elite capture and symbolic participation frequently undermine openness and inclusivity (Chowdhury & Panday, 2018; Hickey & Mohan, 2005).

8.2.2.Transparency in Financial Transactions and Record-Keeping

Another important accountability dimension is financial and operational transparency. Table 1.2 suggests that the respondents have expressed some degree of positive statements regarding the transparency of financial transactions and record-keeping. 50% of the respondents considered the system as "somewhat" transparent, and 16.25% considered it as "minimally transparent". However, when respondents were asked whether they had easy access to information regarding the UP's financial activities, the findings suggest that 13.75% of those who responded positively about the transparency of the UP hold the view that they had easy access to financial activities, indicating a mismatch between the findings. This is consistent with research by Chowdhury and Panday (2018), which notes that rural local governments in Bangladesh often struggle to maintain publicly accessible financial records

due to technical, administrative, and logistical constraints. In support of this, a UP official stated: "*Limited resources and technical barriers hinder the execution of regular audits and the updating of financial records*" (Interview Data, 2023/24). Such statements indicate a lack of institutional capacity to implement transparency measures, particularly in resource-poor or remote UPs. This situation compromises fiscal oversight and erodes public trust, further weakening accountability.

8.2.3. Responsiveness of UPs to Complaints and Grievances

Democratic accountability rests largely on a well-functioning grievance resolution system. Mixed results are revealed by the data, however. Though 35% of those surveyed thought UPs adequately responded to citizen complaints, a bigger 45% revealed disappointment with the complaint resolution procedure. One person observed: "*You can file a complaint, but its solution is unknown.* " (Interview Data, 2023/24). UP officials echoed these ideas; many of them admitted structural constraints, including inadequate personnel and the absence of official grievance monitoring systems. The lack of established complaint-handling systems highlights the need for more disciplined, citizen-oriented accountability structures that fit international best standards in local government (Chowdhury & Panday, 2018).

8.2.4. Evidence of legal and regulatory compliance in UP activities

Under the law, UPs must adhere to different requirements, including open meetings, yearly budgeting, and statutory disclosures. Although 72.5% of the respondents believed that UPs maintain compliance with legal and regulatory requirements, field surveys and interviews revealed regular departures from these standards, primarily due to low organisational capacity and funding restrictions. One UP official remarked, "*Fulfilling all regulatory requirements is difficult without enough financing and qualified personnel*" (Interview Data, 2023/24). Mojumder and Panday (2019) contend that local government entities in Bangladesh frequently fail to follow the rules because of underfunding and a lack of qualified human resources; this aligns with the findings. The outcome is a disjointed and reactive governance approach where legal obligations are met selectively.

The Evidence paints a complex and uneven picture of accountability implementation in UPs. Although formal mechanisms such as OBMs and WS exist, their low public visibility and limited participation rates indicate institutional weaknesses in engaging the community. Financial transparency remains a significant challenge, constrained by technical and staffing

limitations. Meanwhile, complaint handling systems are underdeveloped, and regulatory compliance is hampered by resource scarcity. These findings support the theoretical argument that accountability is not solely a function of legal mandates but is shaped by political will, administrative capacity, and civic pressure (Besley, 2006; Pierre & Peters, 2000). Addressing these gaps will require comprehensive reforms, including targeted capacity-building, digital accountability tools, and stronger oversight by higher-level government authorities and civil society.

8.3 Transparency in Governance

Transparency is a cornerstone of SDG 16.6, which envisions responsive and inclusive institutions that are grounded in open decision-making and foster public trust. In the context of Bangladesh's Union Parishads (UPs), transparency entails the availability of information regarding budgets, project expenditures, performance reports, and institutional proceedings. Although legal requirements call for openness, the study shows that actual information disclosure is often fragmented, inconsistent, and symbolic. This section assesses the performance of UPs in terms of transparency across four key dimensions: access to institutional records, financial transparency, awareness of SDG performance, and the use of digital platforms for information dissemination. Table 1.3 presents citizens' perceptions of transparency and access to information in UPs.

Table 1.3: Citizen Perceptions of Transparency of UP (n=80)

Transparency Indicator	Sub-indicators	Yes (%)
Availability and accessibility of UP meeting minutes and records to the public.	Accessed UP meeting records or minutes	28.75%
Visibility of financial information, including budgets, expenditures, and revenue sources	Rated UP financially transparent	20%
Publication of UP performance reports and statistics on progress toward the SDG 16.6 goals.	Aware of SDG performance reports	<2%
Utilisation of technology and online platforms for the dissemination of transparent information.	Used digital tools to receive UP-related information	25% (varies by location)

8.3.1. Access to Meeting Records and Proceedings

Transparency begins with the availability of institutional records such as meeting minutes, development plans, and decisions taken in Union Parishad sessions. Survey data indicate that only 28.75% of respondents have ever accessed such records, suggesting a significant information gap. In some UPs, meetings were reportedly conducted internally without public disclosure. A participant from Walia, Natore**,** noted: "*The monthly meetings are not open to the general public. Only UP members and the chairman participate in these meetings*" (KII, 2023/24). Conversely, some UPs demonstrated relatively participatory practices. A service recipient from Monakosha, Chapainawabganj, shared: "*In our area, the chairman consistently convenes meetings every three months, enabling service recipients to participate actively*" (FGD, 2023/24). These divergent practices highlight the absence of a standardised mechanism for institutional openness across UPs. The findings align with those of March and Olsen (1984) within the framework of New Institutionalism, whichposits that institutions may appear to adhere to formal regulations on paper but divergesignificantly in practice owing to informal norms and discretionary leadership behaviours**.**

8.3.2. Financial Transparency and Budget Disclosure

Financial openness is a critical measure of transparency and accountability. However, only 20% of respondents rated their UP as transparent in managing budget allocations or disclosing revenue. The rest either lacked knowledge of budget matters or expressed suspicion about the opaque handling of funds. A resident from Poranpur, Naogaon**,** stated: "*We are unaware of the revenue generated by the UP and the budget allocation received... I suspect the government disburses our allowance, yet the UP chairman and members obstruct our access to it*" (FGD, 2023/24). This lack of financial transparency undermines public trust and validates prior research by Panday and Maru (2025), which emphasised that transparent fiscal management is foundational to legitimising local governance**.** Several KIIs revealed that some UP officials struggle to post or update financial information due to technical barriers or low prioritisation.

8.3.3. Awareness of SDG Performance Reporting

An essential element of transparent governance is public awareness of institutional performance, particularly regarding national and global commitments, such as the SDGs. Alarmingly, over 98% of respondents stated that they had never seen or heard of performance reports related to SDG 16.6

or any related documents from their UPs. A participant from Barahar, Sirajganj**,** said: "*I am not aware of any report publications*" (Interview Data, 2023/24), highlighting the lack of communication from UPs. A development practitioner interviewed noted: "*UP representatives exhibited a deficiency in awareness concerning the SDGs and did not prioritise disseminating the UP's performance report*" (KII, 2024). This systemic information void suggests that UPs are failing to operationalise the transparency mandates of SDG localisation and are also missing an opportunity to demonstrate performance and engage citizens constructively.

8.3.4. Use of Technology for Information Dissemination

Digital platforms—such as websites, mobile apps, and SMS notifications—are increasingly recognised as enablers of inclusive and real-time transparency. However, usage of such tools varied sharply across UPs. InMonakosha, Chapainawabganj**,** all respondents confirmed extensive use of digital platforms to access information and receive service updates. In contrast, in Walia and Natore**,** 75% of respondents said they had "not at all" used digital tools for this purpose. Still, pockets of innovation exist. A Walia respondent shared: "*We receive an SMS on our mobile phones when our allowance arrives*" (Interview Data, 2023/24). Meanwhile, a respondent in Naogaon highlighted structural limitations: "*Not everyone possesses the resources to access the internet. Consequently, offline platforms are more appropriate for our village*" (Interview Data, 2023/24). These findings suggest that while digital infrastructure holds promise**,** the unequal distribution of digital literacy and internet access has created a digital divide in transparency outcomes. Islam (2024) similarly notes that digital engagement in rural Bangladesh remains stunted due to technological underinvestment and citizens' unfamiliarity with online tools.

The overall picture of transparency in UPs is mixed at best and inadequate at worst. While some practices—such as SMS notifications or periodic public meetings—show promise, the broader pattern is restricted access, low awareness, and inconsistent digital integration**.** These findings confirm the persistence of opaque institutional practices, often protected by weak oversight and exacerbated by capacity gaps at the local level. The analysis also supports the view of New Institutionalism that institutional behaviours are shaped less by formal mandates and more by deep-seated informal norms and contextual constraints (March & Olsen, 1984). Without deliberate policy interventions—including communication training for UP officials, investment in digital infrastructure, and awareness-raising campaigns—transparency will remain more symbolic than substantive.

8.4. Cross-Cutting Themes in Local Governance Practice

Beyond the discrete analytical dimensions of effectiveness, accountability, and transparency, the study revealed several cross-cutting dynamics that pervade UP governance, collectively hindering the attainment of SDG 16.6. These themes—**elite capture, gendered exclusion**, and a **trust deficit**—are systemic and shape citizens' interactions with local institutions across service delivery and participatory platforms. One of the most prominent themes was elite capture. Across all research sites, it was observed that access to services, decision-making forums, and project benefits was often monopolised by locally influential individuals, typically elected officials or their close associates. This not only constrained transparency and accountability but also undermined equitable access. During FGDs, many respondents noted that those without personal ties to UP members or partisan affiliations faced delays, neglect, or exclusion in receiving services. These patterns validate long-standing concerns in the governance literature that informal hierarchies and patron-client dynamics may subvert formal decentralisation, where decision-making becomes concentrated among a few powerful actors (Chowdhury & Panday, 2018).

A second critical theme was gendered exclusion, particularly in participatory forums such as OBMs and WS. Although legal provisions mandate women's inclusion in these platforms, female participants in FGDs frequently expressed that they were either not informed about such meetings or discouraged from attending due to sociocultural norms or perceived irrelevance. Some female respondents stated that even when present, they rarely felt confident speaking or influencing decisions. This indicates a structural gap between formal inclusion and substantive empowerment, reinforcing critiques of tokenism in participatory governance frameworks (Hickey & Mohan, 2005).

Finally, a persistent trust deficit characterised citizens' perception of UPs. In all four research sites, many participants expressed scepticism about the motives of UP representatives, citing selective service provision based on political loyalty, nepotism, or vote-bank calculations. Respondents were often unsure whether UP decisions were made transparently or whether public funds were used as intended. This erosion of trust has far-reaching implications: it discourages citizen engagement, weakens the demand for accountability, and undermines the social contract between local governments and the communities they serve (Besley, 2006).

These cross-cutting issues are not isolated administrative failures but embedded within broader institutional, social, and political structures. Addressing them requires a holistic reform approach—beyond technical capacity-building—to

include normative shifts, civic education, and stronger oversight mechanisms. By identifying and analysing these interlocking dynamics, this study contributes to a more grounded understanding of the complex realities that shape governance in Bangladesh.While UPs demonstrate partial effectiveness in service delivery, their performance in terms of accountability and transparency falls significantly short of the expectations outlined in SDG 16.6. Participation is largely symbolic, and where they exist, transparency mechanisms are weakly institutionalised and inconsistently applied. The triangulated data highlight the persistence of structural and behavioural constraints that limit the realisation of democratic local governance. These findings underscore the need for a renewed policy emphasis on institutional reform, citizen education, and enhanced monitoring systems to bridge the gap between policy intent and actual practice. Without addressing these systemic issues, the localisation of SDG 16.6 will remain aspirational rather than achievable.

8.5. Union Parishads' Rolein SDG Attainment

UPs, as the frontline units of rural local governance in Bangladesh, play a pivotal role in advancing the SDGs at the grassroots level. Their functions—public service delivery, participatory planning, and community resource management—position them as indispensable agents in localising SDG 16.6, specifically for building effective, accountable, and transparent institutions. This section synthesises evidence of UPs' contributions toward SDG 16.6 across different locales while highlighting variations in performance and key operational constraints.

8.5.1. Mixed Perceptions of Effectiveness Across Regions

Citizen responses across the four study areas reflect moderate but cautious approval of UP performance. While 55% of respondents rated their UP's overall contribution as "somewhat effective," satisfaction levels varied notably across districts. In Walia, Natore, a resident expressed a common sentiment: "*We are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with UP's performance. We receive improved services compared to before. However, there remains potential for enhancement*" (FGD, 2023/24). In contrast, participants from Sirajganj highlighted recent improvements in awareness and access: "*A few years ago, we were unaware of our ability to access services from UP. Now we have numerous resources*" (FGD, 2023/24). However, this optimism was tempered in areas like Naogaon, where residents felt that UPs fell short of high standards, particularly in quality and responsiveness. One service recipient stated that "*The UP is working, but the services do not always reach those who need them*

most" (FGD, 2023/24). These contrasting views indicate that effectiveness is geographically uneven and shaped by local leadership capacity, resource availability, and citizen engagement.

8.5.2. Equity and Inclusion: A Persistent Challenge
Despite formal commitments to equity, many respondents pointed to gaps in inclusive service provision**.** One participant emphasised the importance of universal access: "*Not all individuals receive services from UP. I will consider our UP highly effective when all individuals obtain the services they merit*" (FGD, 2023/24). Issues surrounding the distribution of safety nets, such as Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) cards**,** were particularly contentious. Respondents noted disparities in allocation, with some implying favouritism or lack of transparency in the selection process. These observations align with the findings of Chowdhury and Panday (2018), who argue that fair and inclusive service delivery is crucial to building public trust and fulfilling SDG 16's vision of leaving no one behind**.**

8.5.3. Divergence Between Community Perceptions and Official Narratives
A notable finding was the disconnect between citizen assessments and UP officials' self-perception of performance. While most citizens rated UP's performance as moderate, officials provided far more optimistic evaluations. A chairman from Natore remarked: "*UP is more effective than before. By delivering those services responsibly and transparently, UP facilitates the proper attainment of SDGs*" (KII, 2023/24). Indeed, 60% of officials classified their UPs as 'highly effective', reflecting either genuine confidence in progress or a lack of critical self-assessment. This divergence suggests a potential communication gap between service providers and recipients, hindering accountability and iterative improvement.

8.5.4. Resource Constraints and Limited Autonomy
Across all study sites, UP officials consistently cited **resource limitations** as a critical barrier to SDG-aligned governance. A chairman from Natore candidly explained: "*Individuals have boundless demands... Approximately 5,000 residents in my area are eligible for subsidised rice. I can only distribute a maximum of 1,500–1,600 cards*" (KII, 2023/24). Another official from Chapainawabganj added: "*The role of UP can be fortified if it receives increased budget allocation, decision-making authority, and autonomy*" (KII, 2023/24). These comments highlight the tension between mandated responsibilities and actual capacity**,** reinforcing calls in the literature for greater

fiscal decentralisation and institutional strengthening of UPs to enable effective SDG localisation. Table-4 presents the perception of the citizens on the role of the UPs in the attainment of SDG 16.6.

Table 4: Perceptions of Citizens on the Role of UPs in Attainment of SDG 16.6

Indicator	Citizen View	UP Officials' View
Overall effectiveness	55% "Somewhat effective"	60% rated as "Highly effective"
Satisfaction with service access and equity	Mixed concerns about fairness	Generally positive
Awareness of SDG-related initiatives	Low	Moderate
Perceived capacity to meet local demand	Limited	Dependent on budget and autonomy

This analysis reveals that UPs have made incremental progress in promoting the principles of SDG 16.6, particularly in raising public awareness and improving access to basic services. However, their effectiveness varies due to resource gaps, inconsistent inclusion practices, and limited institutional autonomy. The perception gap between citizens and officials further complicates local governance, underlining the importance of strengthening feedback loops and promoting mutual accountability. Systemic support is required to fully realise the potential of UPs as SDG implementers: greater budgetary allocations, enhanced administrative capacity, and structured citizen engagement must accompany legal mandates. Without addressing these foundational gaps, UPs risk becoming symbolic implementers rather than substantive drivers of the global development agenda at the grassroots.

9. Challenges Facing UPs in Advancing SDG 16.6

Despite the crucial role UPs play in advancing SDG 16.6, which focuses on building effective, accountable, and transparent institutions, this paper identifies several challenges that hinder their functioning. Structural limitations, resource constraints, and sociopolitical dynamics undermine Ups' capacity to address community needs and contribute meaningfully to local sustainable development.

Resource Constraints

UPs mostly face the inadequacy of financial and material resources, significantly limiting their operational capacity. A UP official claims that "*individuals have boundless demands... I can only provide a maximum of 1500–1600 cards*" *for services like subsidised food access, despite a significantly higher need* (KII, 2023/24). This shortfall of resources reduces UPs' ability to

provide essential services, make infrastructure investments, and carry out activities in line with the SDGs. The financial dependence on higher government levels limits UPs' autonomy, reducing their ability to meet community needs quickly.

Inconsistent Implementation of Accountability Mechanisms

Although accountability mechanisms have been developed, their implementation remains inconsistent. Mechanisms like OBM and WS often exhibit inadequate community involvement, with resident awareness still being deficient. This paradox compromises openness and limits community interaction. "*Citizens' access to information regarding UP's financial activities is restricted,*" cited by a respondent (Interview, 2023/24), pointing out a discrepancy between institutional policy and execution. Reduced public confidence and involvement follow the lack of openness in financial paperwork and inadequate citizen involvement in decision-making.

Limited Technological Adoption and Information Dissemination

Effective information dissemination and openness depend on access to technology and digital platforms; therefore, their adoption is limited. According to this research, only a few regions show significant online contact, so UPs' technological use is limited. Inadequate technical infrastructure limits UPs' ability to provide the public with updates, financial reports, and service information, thereby impeding transparency and openness. Moreover, the absence of digital records reduces performance monitoring and compromises UPs' capacity to answer public questions, hindering effective government.

Lack of Citizen Awareness and Engagement

The lack of citizens' understanding of their rights, combined with the readily available UP services, presents a significant obstacle. According to the studies, active citizen participation is sometimes hindered by misinterpreting service eligibility and privileges. Furthermore, instead of viewing UPs as complete government institutions helping toward developmental goals, community members often view Ups merely as providers of infrastructure projects. This limited viewpoint reduces people's motivation to participate actively in local governance procedures and hinders the viability of a participatory local government model.

Political and Factional Dynamics

Governance efficacy suffers from internal conflicts among UP officials and factionalism inside councils. As factions fight for power, conflicts between UP chairpersons and members might compromise the unity necessary for a cooperative government. Frequent outcomes of this political conflict include biased service delivery, which is often dependent on political ties, thereby compromising justice and transparency. Political dynamics erode public confidence, as people may perceive services as biased rather than based on genuine need, thereby affecting UP's accountability.

Gender Inequities in Representation and Decision-Making

Women are under-represented and involved in less than ideal levels in UPs' decision-making processes. Obstacles to active participation often arise for female legislators, which undervalues women's opinions in governance. A lack of gender balance compromises the variety and inclusivity of UP decision-making, which are vital for effective governance. It also restricts UPs' ability to serve all community groups fairly, impeding the inclusive government meant for SDG 16.6.

Challenges in Adapting to SDG Goals and Accountability Standards

Many UP officials and citizens lack adequate knowledge of SDG targets, particularly SDG 16.6, and have a poor understanding of relevant accountability systems. This difference creates a discrepancy between local projects and international development objectives. According to the survey, some UP officials lack awareness of the more significant consequences of sustainable development, as they view the SDGs solely through the prism of infrastructure development. UPs find it challenging to carry out activities that align with SDG targets and track their progress sufficiently without specific training and assistance.

Lack of Training and Capacity Building

Eventually, the lack of training and assistance among UP officials compromises their capacity to meet governance and service delivery demands. The absence of consistent capacity-building programs often leaves UP officials lacking the necessary skills for implementing modern governance policies, such as participatory planning, digital literacy, and open financial management. The lack of skills limits UPs' capacity to sustain values of openness and accountability, creatively solve community needs, and innovate how services are provided.

Ultimately, the challenges facing UPs in their pursuit of SDG 16.6 highlight

the complex interplay of structural, social, and political factors that influence the effectiveness of local government. Limited resources compromise UPs' operational capacity, reducing their ability to provide essential services and maintain responsiveness. Furthermore, compromising openness and eroding public confidence are differences in how accountability processes are carried out, as well as inadequate citizen participation and technological integration. Political factionalism and gender inequalities exacerbate this situation by undermining the inclusiveness and equity of decision-making; insufficient training and poor awareness of SDG targets hinder UPs' alignment with sustainable development objectives.

10. Recommendations for Enhancing UPs' Capacity in Advancing SDG 16.6

Consistent with SDG 16.6, this article suggests strategic actions to establish UPs as effective, accountable, and transparent institutions. These ideas centre on reducing resource limitations, improving governance strategies, and increasing community involvement—all essential for promoting sustainable development at the grassroots level.

Increase Financial and Resource Autonomy

Giving UPs more financial autonomy and providing them with more resources to help meet community needs more effectively is imperative. Such strategies help UPs more easily meet local needs and provide tools for projects outside basic infrastructure. Policies encouraging different funding sources, such as community-based finance projects, could improve the financial capacities and autonomy of UPs.

Strengthen Accountability and Transparency Mechanisms

Building confidence and promoting public participation rely on strengthening internal accountability measures, which in turn boosts transparency. All UPs should conduct regular mandatory audits, implement effective grievance procedures, and maintain open financial reports everywhere. Improving the operation of forums like OBM and WS can also increase community engagement and gather valuable development suggestions. Additionally, it is essential to train UP officials on these procedures and to improve public understanding of accountability methods.

Expand Technological Capacity for Information Dissemination

Investing in digital infrastructure can help UPs increase openness and communication with inhabitants, augmenting their technological capacity for information dissemination. Enhancing online tools, including social media, would facilitate the effective dissemination of information, such as financial documents, service updates, and SDG reporting. Encouraging mobile-compatible solutions and digital tools for instant communication would help urban designers enable people to track service requests, retrieve performance data, and engage in remote governance activities.

Improve Public Awareness and Civic Education on UP Functions and SDGs

UPs should conduct regular awareness campaigns on accessible services, SDG targets, and citizen rights to boost citizen participation. Community education programs can help bridge the information gap and enable people to actively engage in government procedures, especially in areas with low literacy rates. Partnering with local NGOs and community organisations can enhance outreach efforts and make materials available to a broader audience.

Adopt a Two-Pronged Approach to Service Delivery and Communication

Use a dual strategy for service delivery and communication to close the understanding gap between UP officials and service users by simultaneously emphasising the improvement of service quality and enhancing communication about UP constraints. Along with encouraging openness by teaching locals about the problems experienced by UPs, this approach could include improvements in service quality through staff training and changes in resource management. Closing this perception gap will help UPs foster better public knowledge and reasonable expectations.

Foster Inclusive Governance through Gender Equity and Representation

Promoting gender parity in UP decision-making can help increase inclusive governance through gender equity and representation, thereby ensuring the consideration of diverse perspectives. Policies should encourage women representatives to participate actively and help female UP members in leadership roles. In line with SDG 5 on gender equality, gender-sensitive training courses and seminars on successful representation could help foster a more inclusive government model.

Implement Targeted Training and Capacity Building for UP Officials

Execute focused training and capacity development for UP officials to improve

the efficacy of UPs by concentrating on governance competencies, financial management, digital literacy, and participatory planning. Regular capacity-building initiatives would equip UP officials with the necessary skills to address growing challenges, preserve transparency, and adopt a citizen-centric government model. Customised training programs can be developed and implemented with the assistance of development agencies and educational institutions.

Promote Community-Centred Monitoring and Feedback Systems
Robust monitoring and evaluation systems can help UPs assess their performance and identify areas for development by utilizing community-centered monitoring and feedback systems. Implementing community-based feedback mechanisms that involve people in evaluating UP services provides vital information for enhancing the quality of these services. Feedback meetings and annual public evaluations help improve accountability by ensuring that UP policies align with community expectations and SDG objectives.

Facilitate the Integration of SDG Awareness and Localisation Efforts
UPs must incorporate SDG awareness into their planning and development plans if local governments are to be effectively linked with the SDG aims. Encouraging seminars, gatherings, and community forums focused on SDG localisation would help UP leaders and communities understand the primary development goals. With UPs acting as essential channels for SDG implementation, such projects may help to translate global goals into practical solutions at the local level.

Strengthen Political Neutrality and Integrity in Service Provision
Reducing political factionalism and guaranteeing fair service delivery will help UPs run effectively and maintain public confidence by employing political neutrality and integrity in service delivery policies that prioritise non-partisan decision-making and support fair recruitment practices within UPs, helping to reduce political influence on service delivery. Setting standards for objective service delivery and encouraging non-partisan decision-making can help a government prioritise its people's needs above party connections.

In conclusion, focusing on strengthening institutional capacities, encouraging openness, and increasing public involvement, the suggested strategies address the challenges facing UPs. These strategies will help UPs work more closely toward SDG 16.6, improving their position as change agents in advancing

sustainable development throughout Bangladesh. UPs that embrace these values will be positioned to be central in advancing inclusive, accountable, and sustainable local governance, thereby creating a model for grassroots development throughout the region.

11. Integration of Findings within Theoretical Frameworks

The empirical findings of this study can be meaningfully interpreted through the theoretical frameworks that underpin the research, namely, Governance Theory, Principal–Agent Theory, New Institutionalism, and thecritical literature on participatory governance. These frameworks help situate the performance of UPs within broader conceptual debates on decentralisation, institutional reform, and democratic accountability.

11.1. Governance Theory: Institutions Beyond Structures

Governance Theory emphasises that the performance of public institutions depends not only on legal frameworks and formal authority but also on the quality of interactions between actors and the embedded norms that shape institutional behaviour (Pierre & Peters, 2000). The study's findings confirm that although UPs are legally mandated to deliver services and host participatory forums, their performance is heavily influenced by informal norms, power asymmetries, and political interests. In several cases, governance functions procedurally rather than substantively, aligning with the theory's emphasis on process over structure.

11.2. Principal–Agent Theory: Explaining Accountability Gaps

Principal–Agent Theory helps explain the accountability deficits found in UPs. Despite being elected by and accountable to citizens, UP representatives often act with limited oversight. The study found that most citizens lacked awareness of mechanisms such as OBMs, and few had ever participated in them. These findings suggest a breakdown in the principal-agent relationship, wherein the agents (UP officials) operate, and the principals (citizens) lack information and mechanisms to enforce accountability. As Besley (2006) argues, agents will likely pursue their interests without clear incentives and sanctions.

11.3. New Institutionalism: The Power of Informal Norms and Path Dependency

From a New Institutionalist perspective, the persistence of informal norms—such as elite dominance in decision-making or superficial compliance with

participatory mandates—explains why formal reforms fail to produce meaningful governance change. While legal instruments exist for transparency and accountability, the lack of behavioural change within institutions limits their effectiveness. FGDs revealed that politically connected individuals often dominated participatory meetings, and documentation (such as budgets) was not proactively shared. These findings affirm the theory's insight that institutional "stickiness" and historical patterns shape current outcomes (March & Olsen, 1984).

11.4. Critiques of Participatory Governance: Tokenism and Elite Capture

The findings also resonate strongly with critiques of participatory governance that question the assumption that participation automatically leads to empowerment or better outcomes. Scholars like Hickey and Mohan (2005) have shown that in many developing countries, participatory mechanisms are often tokenistic—used to legitimise decisions already made by elites rather than facilitate genuine citizen voice. This dynamic was evident in the UPs studied, where OBMs were frequently held without prior notice to the community or meaningful deliberation. Women and marginalised groups were often excluded due to social and political barriers. As such, participation in these cases served more as a symbol of inclusion than a mechanism of influence, highlighting the limitations of institutionalised participation when not coupled with broader empowerment and accountability reforms.

Together, these frameworks suggest that the underperformance of UPs in localising SDG 16.6 stems from more than technical or administrative shortcomings. Instead, it reflects a convergence of structural constraints, behavioural incentives, and systemic power imbalances. Institutional design alone cannot drive effective governance unless accompanied by changes in the informal rules, accountability relationships, and participatory cultures that govern daily practice. This theoretical integration strengthens the study's contribution to understanding why decentralised governance often fails to deliver on its democratic and developmental promises in practice.

12. Conclusion and Future Directions

This study examined the role of UPs in attaining SDG 16.6 in Bangladesh, focusing on three core dimensions of governance: effectiveness**,** accountability,and transparency. Drawing on field-level data from four purposively selected UPs and employing a mixed-methods design, the study finds that while UPs exhibit signs of institutional development and community

outreach, their performance is shaped by systemic challenges and structural constraints. UPs have made tangible contributions to rural service delivery, particularly in infrastructure development and the distribution of social safety nets. However, disparities in access, inconsistent quality, and uneven digital adoption remain key obstacles to service equity. Accountability mechanisms, though formally established, often operate as symbolic rituals rather than vehicles of citizen empowerment. Transparency, the weakest pillar, is undermined by poor record-keeping, limited public access to budgetary information, and low levels of digital literacy. Beyond these dimensions, the study identifies three cross-cutting challenges—elite capture**,** gender-based exclusion**,** and atrust deficit—that systematically erode the potential of UPs to serve as inclusive and democratic local governance institutions. Additionally, while UP officials express confidence in their role in SDG implementation, community feedback reveals a gap between perception and lived experience, particularly regarding equitable service delivery and public participation. Despite these challenges, the findings demonstrate that UPs possess the latent capacity to function as key drivers of SDG 16.6, provided they receive the necessary policy, financial, and institutional support to evolve into responsive, accountable, and transparent entities. The comprehensive recommendations outlined in Section 10 aim to translate this potential into practice through a combination of reforms in governance structure, civic engagement, digital infrastructure, and political integrity.

UPs in Bangladesh are strategically positioned but structurally underprepared to fulfil the governance ambitions of SDG 16.6. This study makes significant contributions to the literature in several important ways. First, it provides a context-sensitive, empirical assessment of SDG 16.6 at the grassroots level**.** This topic is often underexplored in the literature, which typically focuses on national or urban governance. Second, by integrating citizen voices, official narratives, and institutional performance across multiple governance dimensions, the study exposes the disjuncture between formal decentralisation policies and their implementation in practice—an area still insufficiently theorised in South Asian governance research. Third, the study advances conceptual understanding by linking the empirical findings to Governance Theory, New Institutionalism, and Principal-Agent Theory, as well as critiques of participatory governance. These theoretical integrations help frame how local political economy, informal power relations, and institutional culture jointly shape governance outcomes. Finally, identifying cross-cutting themes—elite capture, gendered exclusion, and trust deficit—extends the literature by

highlighting systemic constraints that cut across otherwise discrete governance functions. By grounding SDG localisation in real-world political and institutional contexts, this study deepens our understanding of the structural and behavioural barriers to achieving sustainable development at the last mile. As a case-based inquiry, this study focused on four UPs across four districts in northern Bangladesh. While the findings offer rich empirical insights, their generalisability to all UPs nationwide is limited. The sample size—80 service recipients and 32 key informants—also constrains statistical inference. Moreover, social desirability bias and political sensitivities may have influenced some qualitative responses. Nevertheless, triangulated methods, geographical diversity, and thematic depth lend strong internal validity to the analysis. Future studies could build on this research by expanding to a nationally representative sample of UPs and incorporating longitudinal methodsto track governance improvements over time. Further exploration of gendered participation, therole of intermediary actors (e.g., NGOs and the private sector)**,** and comparative analysis across South Asian countries could deepen understanding of decentralised governance reforms and their contributions to SDG localisation. In conclusion, UPs in Bangladesh are strategically positioned but structurally underprepared to meet the governance ambitions of SDG 16.6. Transforming them into effective, accountable, and transparent institutions will require policy reform and a recalibration of the political economy, administrative culture, and social expectations of local governance. Only through such transformation can the SDGs be fully grounded in the realities of grassroots development.

References

Aminuzzaman, S. M. (2010). *Local government and development in Bangladesh: Lessons learned and challenges for improving service delivery of Union Parishad (UP)*. LGSP-LIC Technical Paper, Ministry of Local Government, Bangladesh.

Besley, T. (2006). *Principled agents? The political economy of good government*. Oxford University Press.

Chowdhury, S., & Panday, P. K. (2018). *Strengthening local governance in Bangladesh: Reforms, accountability and participation*. Springer.

Government of Bangladesh (GOB). (2013). *Bangladesh National Sustainable Development Strategy*. Planning Commission.

Hickey, S., & Mohan, G. (2005). Relocating participation within a radical

politics of development. *Development and Change, 36*(2), 237–262.

Hossain, M. Z., & Yasmin, T. (2022). Factors affecting public sector innovation during COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh: An analysis on three cases. *International Review of Public Administration, 27*(1), 1–14.

Islam, S. (2024). Role of local government in localising SDG in Bangladesh. *Journal of Information Systems and Informatics, 6*(2), 719–728.

Jahan, M. (2023). Understanding social accountability at rural local governance in Bangladesh and the way forward: In the case of Union Parishad. *South Asian Journal of Social Studies and Economics, 17*(4), 36–45.

Jamil, I., & Askvik, S. (2015). Citizens' trust in public and political institutions in Bangladesh and Nepal. In I. Jamil & S. Askvik (Eds.), *Governance in South, Southeast, and East Asia: Trends, issues and challenges* (pp. 157–173). Springer International Publishing.

Khan, N. A. (2016). *Challenges and trends in decentralised local governance in Bangladesh* (Institute of South Asian Studies Working Paper No. 222). Institute of South Asian Studies.

March, J. G., & Olsen, J. P. (1984). The new institutionalism: Organisational factors in political life. *American Political Science Review, 78*(3), 734–749.

Mojumder, M. J. H., & Panday, P. K. (2019). *Government and NGOs in South Asia: Local collaboration in Bangladesh*. Routledge.

Muslim, M., & Mais, R. G. (2023). The interplay between transparency, accountability, and corruption: A contemporary discourse. *Advances: Jurnal Ekonomi & Bisnis, 1*(6), 332–343.

Panday, P. K. (2011). Local government system in Bangladesh: How far is it decentralised? *Lex Localis – Journal of Local Self-Government, 9*(3), 205–230.

Panday, P. K., & Maruf, A. A. (2025). *Local governance transformation and citizen engagement in Bangladesh*. Routledge.

Pierre, J., & Peters, B. G. (2020). *Governance, politics and the state*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Sarkar, M. S. K., Okitasari, M., Ahsan, M. R., & Al-Amin, A. Q. (2022). Localisation of sustainable development goals (SDGs) in Bangladesh: An inclusive framework under local governments. *Sustainability, 14*(17), 10817.

Smoke, P. (2015). Rethinking decentralisation: Assessing challenges to a popular public sector reform. *Public Administration and Development, 35*(2), 97–112.

United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). (2019). *The localisation of the global agendas: How local action is transforming territories and communities*. UCLG.

Uddin, N. (2019). Empowerment through participation in local governance: The case of Union Parishad in Bangladesh. *Public Administration and Policy, 22*(3), 40–54.

World Bank. (2001). *Decentralisation and governance: Does decentralisation improve public service delivery?* World Bank.