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Examining the Role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Promoting Participatory Local Governance at the Grassroots in Bangladesh

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Abstrak

Studi ini menilai sejauh mana organisasi masyarakat sipil (OMS) dapat membuat pengambilan keputusan pemerintah daerah lebih inklusif dan partisipatif untuk memenuhi tuntutan warga di akar rumput di Bangladesh. Studi ini secara khusus mengeksplorasi peran OMS dalam memobilisasi keterlibatan publik dan mempengaruhi pengambilan keputusan untuk mempromosikan pemerintahan partisipatif di serikat Jhilongjha parishad, tingkat terendah pemerintah daerah, di Bangladesh. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan penelitian kualitatif, tulisan ini mengungkapkan bahwa OMS tidak terlalu berperan dalam membangun tata kelola partisipatif di lokasi penelitian. Jalan partisipatif di akar rumput seperti pengadilan desa, pertemuan lingkungan, dan penganggaran terbuka ditemukan berjalan tanpa tingkat partisipasi masyarakat yang diharapkan. Alasan di balik kegagalan OMS dalam mempromosikan pemerintahan lokal partisipatif dalam konteks ini termasuk budaya jarak kekuasaan yang tinggi, lingkungan politik yang merugikan, kurangnya pendidikan di antara warga, dan ketidakpercayaan di antara warga mengenai pemerintah daerah.

***Kata kunci**: Organisasi Masyarakat Sipil, Lembaga Pemerintah Daerah, Tata Kelola Pemerintahan Daerah Partisipatif.*

Abstract

This study assesses the degree to what extent civil society organizations (CSOs) can make the local government's decision-making more inclusive and participatory to meet the demands of citizens at the grassroots in Bangladesh. The study specifically explores the role of CSOs in mobilizing public engagement and affecting decision-making to promote participatory governance at the Jhilongjha union parishad, the lowest tier of local government, in Bangladesh. By utilizing qualitative research approach, this paper reveals that the CSOs are not very instrumental in establishing participatory governance in the study location. The participatory avenues at the grassroots like village court, ward meetings, and open budgeting are found to be running without expected level of people's participation. The reasons behind the CSOs failure in promoting participatory local governance in this context include high power distance culture, adverse political environment, lack of education among citizens, and distrust among the citizens regarding local government.

***Keywords:** Civil Society Organizations, Local Government Institutions, Participatory Local Governance.*

INTRODUCTION

Citizens' participation in governance process can supposedly improve the quality of decision-making, improve the efficacy of service delivery, and increase citizens' trust in government institutions, especially at grassroots (Konisky, 2011; Bhuiyan et al., 2018). For ensuring quality participation of the citizens into the governance process and decision making at local and national levels, different stakeholders' involvement on the establishment of vibrant social networks is deemed necessary (Pandeya, 2015; Bhuiyan et al., 2018). The recent paradigm of public administration recognizes the role of non-state actors in service delivery, consensus building and mobilizing the citizens into the governance process (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). Specially, the role of civil society organizations (CSOs), in building strong social networks, enhancing social capital among different social strata and promoting citizens' participation in governance process, is remarkable (Edwards, 2014; Islam & Ehsan, 2019; Marchetti, 2010; Roy, 2007; Zukrowska, 2014).

CSOs and their social networks can function as a watchdog and advocate for democratic ideals and in Asia their role in democracy and governance is much more eminent. Because they had positively contributed to democratic change in Malaysia, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, actively engaging in governance process such as elections, local governments, ensuring human rights, and enhancing accountability (Cheema, 2011).Moreover, civil society in South Asia is pluralistic and emerged as a powerful third sector of the state (Sahoo, 2017). Despite their contribution in democratization at national level, in local governance context they are less effective (e.g., in Pakistan) (Rosilawati et al., 2018; Baniya, 2014; Bhandari, 2014), and due to shrinking in civil spaces their prominent role is in decline in Southeast Asia (Bünte & Weiss, 2023).

In academic literature, civil society refers to an organization that operates proactively in economic, social, and cultural spheres while staying beyond the scope of family, business, and governmental entities. However, the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as non-profit and non-government entities supported by a pool of volunteers, can also form and work as CSOs in the context of developing countries by doing various voluntary, advocacy and awareness-building activities in the grassroots (Majumdar, 2009). Generally, the CSOs participate in a wide range of activities like conducting policy research, maintaining policy advocacy, monitoring government performance, building social capital, and empowering citizens (Edwards, 2014; Marchetti, 2010; Momen et al., 2020). Additionally, CSOs also serve as watchdogs and a voice for democratic reform at local and national levels in any country

(Hadi, 2014). However, the role of CSOs in making the process of governance more democratic, inclusive, and participatory in developing countries is often ambiguous in literature. In the context of Bangladesh, a developing country, the role of CSOs in establishing a democratic and participatory governance (Bhuiyan et al., 2018; Islam & Ehsan, 2019; Rahman, 2018; Sharma 2008) has been understudied. Given this backdrop, the role of the CSOs in ensuring participation of citizens in affecting the decision-making process, as an important aspect of democratic local governance, in terms of the local government institutions has been explored in this paper.

It has been centuries that local government institutions (LGIs) like village republics are in the existence in Bangladesh, first as part of the Indian sub-continent and as part of the British India (Ferdaus and Hossain, 2020; Ullah and Pongquan, 2010). The concept of Union Parishad (UP) in Independent Bangladesh as the lowest tier of LGIs has its root in its predecessors like village republic, village panchayats, and union council concepts (Ferdaus and Hossain, 2020). In independent Bangladesh, LGIs are categorized into rural and urban areas where the Union Parishad is the most widely available LGI at the grassroots through which more than sixty thousand of villages of Bangladesh are governed (Khan et al., 2021; Panday and Rabbani, 2011). Currently, the UP is composed of thirteen elected members including one chairman, nine members from nine wards, and three female members from reserved seats. Other than the elected members, there are a secretary, a computer operator, and ten members of village police (Ferdaus and Hossain, 2020; Khan et al., 2021; Panday and Rabbani, 2011).

The Local Government (UP) Act of 2009, amended in 2010, has imparted UP a plethora of responsibilities like ensuring infrastructure development, collecting revenues, making village courts functional, implementing social protection programs, monitoring the operation of union health centers as well as local primary schools, and running campaigns on various social issues. Moreover, on the local governance end, forming as well as making UP standing committees functional, conducting open budget sessions, conducting ward meetings, and preparing comprehensive development plans are some obligatory tasks of the UP (Ahmed, 2016; Ferdaus and Hossain, 2020; Khan et al., 2021; Panday and Rabbani, 2011). Literature portrays that, as in many other developing nations (Achimugu et al., 2013; Mimba et al., 2007), the performance of LGIs at the grassroots in Bangladesh has remained poor in terms of ensuring participatory and democratic local governance (Aminuzzaman, 2010; Kidd and Khondker, 2013; Panday and Rabbani, 2011; Uddin, 2019). Yet, the Union Parishad is the most significant local government agency coordinating and performing various economic, social, and legal activities at the grassroots. Hence, UP is the most vital avenue for people at the grassroots to

affect local governance as well as development and requires the attention of researchers and policy makers alike.

Ghaus-Pasha (2004) examined the role of CSOs in the governance system in South Korea and found that it is highly significant in eradicating poverty, promoting local economic development, assisting government in achieving MDGs and contributing to overall governance. Sharma (2008) further added that CSOs can contribute to raise the voice of the citizens, ensure accountability of the public-private sector agencies by strengthening participatory governance mechanisms within the society. Institutionalization of good governance is impossible without an active civil society (Islam & Ehsan, 2019). Comparative studies show how civil society works for democratic transition. A vast number of development practitioners argued the positive association between the actions of civil society and good governance outcomes (Roy, 2007). Multiple studies have been done to prove that good governance depends significantly on the quality of civil society (Zukrowska, 2014; Sharma, 2008).

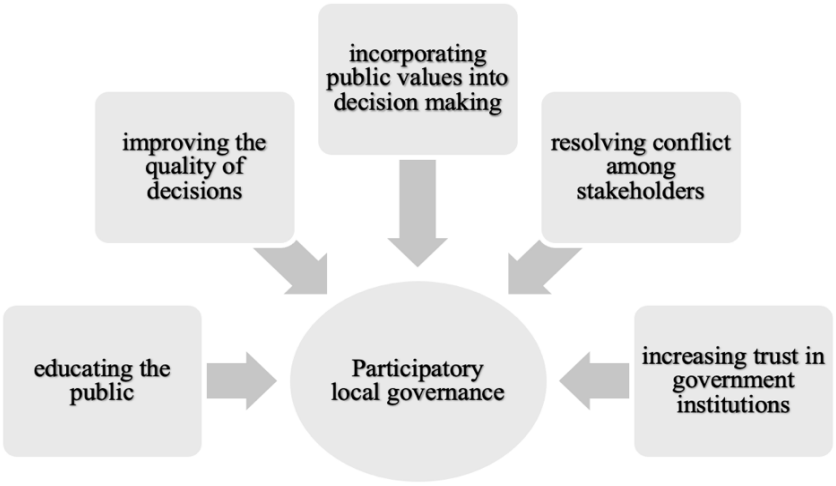
Like most other developing country contexts, CSOs participate in a wide range of activities in Bangladesh. Activities by CSOs include policy research, advocacy, monitoring the performance of government organizations, monitoring local governance, building social capital, and empowering citizens from socio-economic as well as political viewpoints (Bhuiyan et al., 2018). Especially in Bangladesh, CSOs have been playing a critical role in strengthening democratic local governance by increasing citizen involvement at the grassroots levels (Bhuiyan et al., 2018; Islam & Ehsan, 2019; Rahman, 2018; Sharma 2008). Hence, participatory, and inclusive governance at the Local government institutions (LGIs) has been given attention by the researchers, policy makers, and CSOs as the LGIs can foster socio-economic as well as political development at the grassroots. Activities by CSOs in relation to participatory local governance at the grassroots include educating as well as informing the local citizens, integrating public opinions into decision-making, and upgrading the quality-of-service delivery at the LGIs (Abegunde, 2009; Bhuiyan et al., 2018; Datta, 2007; Islam, 2015; Stoker, 2011; Vadeveloo & Singaravelloo, 2013).

The efficacy of CSOs in encouraging citizen participation at the decision making and service delivery processes of LGIs in developing countries has been studied, but in-depth studies are limited in the context of Bangladesh (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007). Most of the studies assert that the CSOs play an instrumental role in fostering accountability and transparency at the governance of LGIs in the grassroots by ensuring civic awareness as well

as engagement (Bhuiyan et al., 2018; Islam & Ehsan, 2019; Rahman, 2018; Sharma 2008). However, a critical understanding of the role of CSOs in stimulating participatory local governance, and underlying reasons of its' failure if there are such cases, at the grassroots of Bangladesh has been studied in limited number of literatures.

To evaluate the effectiveness of CSOs in upholding participatory local governance, this paper utilizes the 'social goal' framework developed by Beierle and Konisky (1999). The social goal framework assesses the approaches of citizens' participation in the decision-making process of government agencies. The criteria to assess public participation include educating the public, refining the quality of decisions, combining public values into decision making, resolving disagreement among stakeholders, and increasing trust in government institutions (Konisky, 2011). Citizens' participation was measured by Beierle and Konisky (1999) in terms of the scope of tasks, deliberative process, decision-making approaches as in bottom-up or top-down, freedom of participants, commitment of government agencies, external communication, leadership, and citizens' perceived impact on decision-making.

Figure 1. The Social Goal Framework to Assess Public Participation in Local Governance.



Source: Beierle and Konisky (1999)

First, educating the public, in this study, has been assessed by the role of CSOs in informing the citizens regarding the local governance process and the civic as well as other rights at the grassroots. Second, the quality of the decisions can be considered to have improved when the CSOs help the decisions taken by the LGIs to be pro-poor and inclusive (Bhuiyan et al., 2018). Third, the role of CSOs in helping citizens to incorporate their opinions into the decision-making process of LGIs has been assessed by observing to what extent the CSOs have influenced participatory decision making at ward meetings and open budget meetings. On the

other hand, the role of the CSO representatives in influencing the decisions of the UP-standing committees has also been assessed. Fourth, the role of CSOs in resolving any direct or indirect conflict among the local citizens, local government representatives, LGI officials, and local politicians regarding any activity of the LGIs have been assessed. Fifth, to what extent the activities of the CSOs have helped the local citizens in trusting the LGIs has also been assessed.

METHODS

An exploratory approach has been used in this paper to portray an in-depth understanding of the CSOs involvement in promoting citizens' involvement in the decision-making and in the implementation processes of activities by the LGIs. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods have been employed to gather data from the local citizens, the citizens' representatives, and the duty bearers of LGIs. The use of mixed methods is more common in the rural research context and offers broader scope for its increased application (Strijker et al., 2020). Mixed methods research provides a boarder and more complete vision of a problem and allow researchers to obtain rich information that could not be obtained from them independently by overcoming limitations in each quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Almeida, 2018).

A structured questionnaire survey has been conducted among the local citizens to gather quantitative data and assess the performance of the CSOs in promoting citizens' participation in local governance. Moreover, an open-ended checklist was developed for in-depth interviews to collect data from public representatives and various professionals working in the LGIs. Furthermore, relevant documents and literature have been reviewed to gather secondary data regarding the CSOs working in the study location.

For this study, Jhilongjha Union in Cox's Bazar was selected to collect data for both the convenience of the authors and the presence of multiple CSOs working in the area. Moreover, Cox's Bazar has been a hotspot for the local and international CSOs and NGOs to work on humanitarian and social development activities due to its geographical location and the recent influx of Rohingya nationals from bordering Myanmar (Krishnan et al., 2022). Geographically, Jhilongjha Union is a tourist spot, being a coastal region with long sandy sea beaches, where people from all over the country as well as foreigners come to visit on long vacations. Most of the people living here participate in the tourism business and draw their livelihood from it. For this study in Jhilongjha union, authors have purposively chosen the CSOs which have programs on promoting good governance and empowering the marginal

people. Data has been collected from three CSOs working in that area including Young Power in Social Action (YPSA), Pulse Bangladesh, and Coast Trust.

As part of gathering primary data for the study, two hundred questionnaires have been distributed among the citizens of Jhilongjha union who have taken any relevant service from the Union Parishad in the last two years. Among the potential respondents, we have received 127 responses and, hence, the response rate has been about 64 percent. Moreover, the authors have conducted eighteen in-depth interviews of which three interviewees have been the CSO officials, five interviewees have been the citizens' representatives, five interviewees have been the duty bearers, and five interviewees have been the locally influential people like teachers as well as politicians. Data was collected intermittently between September 2022 to February 2023. In this study, besides the methodological triangulation, data triangulation has been ensured by collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. Finally, quantitative data has been analysed by using SPSS software to be presented as descriptive statistics while qualitative data collected from the interviews has been analyzed by using thematic analysis method.

The field study reveals that there are three prominent CSOs in Jhilongjha union, namely, YPSA, Pulse Bangladesh, and Coast Trust. Among the CSOs, YPSA, established in 1985, work with the LGIs and shapes their citizen groups by maintaining the equal engagement of males and females to raise awareness among people of the grassroots. Especially, YPSA has been working on raising awareness at a grassroots level through its Gender-Based Violence Activities (GBVA) to help female victims to seek justice officially through legal aid from the court where necessary. Coast Trust, another CSO of Jhilongjha, has been working since 1998 for promoting people's participation, transparency, accountability, and gender sensitivity at the LGIs and educational institutions at the grassroots. Coast Trust also trains the local people on their rights, sensitizing the duty bearers on their responsibilities, and organising dialogues to facilitate interactions of general citizens with the local government representatives and the duty bearers of the LGIs. Finally, Pulse Bangladesh started working in the study location since 2008 on issues like protecting citizens' rights, especially the rights of women and children, and on addressing the needs of the underprivileged groups at the grassroots.

Data from the survey reveals that the CSOs have been less effective in making the local governance process participatory by ensuring people's participation in local government's decision making. The findings indicate that only about 21 percent (see Table 1) of the respondents believe that the CSOs in Jhilongjha Union have successfully educated the citizens and have contributed to the improvement in quality of decisions taken in the LGIs. Likewise, about 18 percent (see Table 1) of the respondents believe that the CSOs have helped to

incorporate citizens' opinions in the final decisions of the LGIs and to resolve conflict among the local stakeholders including the citizens, the local government representatives, and the LGI officials. On the other hand, only about 8 percent (see Table 1) of the respondents believe that the activities of CSOs have helped the citizens in trusting the Union Parishad as a pro-poor and inclusive organization.

While only a small percentage of respondents have found positive impact of CSOs in making the local governance at Jhilongjha Union Parishad participatory and inclusive, most of the respondents believe otherwise. About 70 percent (see Table 1) of the respondents believe that the CSOs have failed in educating the citizens regarding the local governance process and the civic as well as other rights. About the same percentage of respondents also believe that the CSOs have failed in improving the quality of decision making at LGIs. Moreover, about 74 percent (see Table 1) of the respondents believe that the CSOs have been less effective in influencing the incorporation of citizens' opinions in the final decisions of the LGIs and also in resolving conflicts among the local stakeholders including the citizens, the LGI officials, and the local government representatives. Furthermore, about 78 percent (see Table 1) of the respondents believe that the activities of CSOs have been less helpful for increasing citizens' trust in the Union Parishad as a pro-poor and inclusive organization.

Table 1. The Role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Promoting Participatory Local Governance

Variables	Satisfying	Unsatisfying	Undecided
Educating the citizens on local governance	21.25%	68.50%	10.23%
Resolving conflict among stakeholders	18.26%	74.50%	7.23%
Increasing trust in local government institutions	8.66%	77.95%	13.38%
Incorporating public opinion into government's decisions	18.11%	73.22%	8.66%
Enhancing the quality of decisions	20.47%	70.07%	9.44%

Source: Obtained From Primary Data

Besides the quantitative data, the qualitative data from the in-depth interviews also reveal the local socio-political context in which the CSOs remain less effective in promoting participatory local governance in Jhilogjha union. The CSOs in Jhilongjha union have been working on various social as well as political issues for a couple of decades. There are some programs by the CSOs to make local citizens aware of their rights as well as to ensure their

participation at the public meetings and community dialogues organized by the LGIs and the CSOs. Though the public meetings organized by the LGIs and the community dialogues organized by the CSOs work as avenues for people's participation at the LGIs, the outcomes are not satisfactory, as the interviewees reveal. The interviewees blame the concentration of power in the hand of a group of powerful local elites who have been ruling the Union Parishad for more than a decade now. As the power has been concentrated in the hands of few, general citizens have been keeping distance from the LGIs as well as other important institutions captured by the elites. A resident of Jhilongjha Union has expressed his concerns and frustrations, in this context, regarding the situation in the following way:

> *Our opinion doesn't matter in the decision-making process of the Union Parishad. Sometimes, we feel that the Union Parishad just serves the willingness of the representatives themselves and some of the powerful people as well. They meet with a few local elites by the name of open-budgeting and ward-shava and decide about our needs while we are mostly kept in dark about the meetings. Hence, we are always left behind and excluded from expressing our needs and demands. The matter of regret is that the people have accepted it, and we don't show any deep concern regarding this kind of exclusion in the decision making of LGIs (A local resident, 2022).*

As Jhilongjha Union is a tourist spot, most people are busy in different economic activities related to tourism industry. However, according to the local interviewees, the crime rates in the locality is a bit high in Jhilongjha union as a tourist hotspot where not only the tourists but also a big number of local migrants also come to work in the tourism industry. According to the interviewees, the Jhilongjha union as a tourist hotspot earn large revenue in terms of household and business taxes which create the scopes of rent seeking unlike most other unions in the country. Moreover, women of Jhilongjha are not encouraged to participate in the official and public meetings organized by both the CSOs and the LGIs. According to the interviewees, conservative social values restrict the participation of women in public meetings and women are almost left out in the local governance of the Jhilongjha union. As a result, the powerful local elites are apparently in the control of the rents produced while the mass people are busy with their own livelihoods and households. In this context, the CSOs keep a safe distance from the locally powerful elites in the issues of rents while the citizens' lack of involvement and trust in the activities of UP has apparently grown in recent years. A local teacher opined,

> *I think the people and the CSOs have all grown apathetic to the existing scenario of local governance in recent years. The CSOs have cut down their activities on local governance up to a limit which does not disturb the local power structure that is controlled by the local elites. On the other hand, the*

> *people have always been less hopeful about participatory governance and that hopefulness has only grown in recent years (A local teacher, 2022).*

While the local citizens state that the CSOs are coordinating with the local government representatives and keeping a balance with the local elites, the representatives of different CSOs also acknowledge this fact. For smooth implementation of different socio-political projects of the CSOs, they need to maintain a balance with all the local elites, local government representatives, and the local government officials while also keeping people connected to the UP in different platforms. As a result, the CSOs mainly focus on projects like skill development, health service delivery, and microfinance projects. However, despite various limitations, the CSOs still educate the citizens through different meetings and seminars, organize collaborative dialogues between the citizens and other relevant stakeholders at the grassroots, assist the citizens in need of legal and other social assistance from the LGIs, and provide patronage to different citizens' groups to make local governance participatory and accountable. Here, the CSO representatives believe that the lack of interest from the citizens' side is also a reason why participatory local governance is still non-existent in the Jhilongjha union. Both the lack of citizens' formal education and lack of interest in local governance are also the reasons behind the CSOs failing in promoting participatory local governance. Furthermore, standing committees of the UP that incorporates public representatives, CSO member, and government officials barely work amidst the continuous efforts of CSOs in Jhilongjha Union. According to a representative of a local CSO,

> *There are huge anomalies in the approaches of the Union parishad in ensuring participatory local government. The open budget meeting and ward meetings are not widely practiced and are instead implemented on a limited scale. The UP representatives mostly hold exclusive discussions with select local elites and political leaders, during which a proposed budget is formulated based on the outcomes of these meetings. Despite our continuous efforts, the Ward meetings and open budgeting have not become a public and participatory event in Jhilongjha UP. It is not only a result of the concentrated power structure in the locality, but also due to the lack of people's education and interest in local governance. The people here are more interested in their livelihoods from tourism industry than to think about formal education and local governance (A representative of a local CSO, 2022)*

Despite various limitations and poor remarks from other stakeholders, the UP representatives believe that the efforts by the UP to ensure public participation in local government's decision making is an ongoing process in Jhilongjha. Many local government representatives and locally powerful political elites believe that the scope of people's participation in local governance is bigger than ever. The UP representatives acknowledge that

there are various limitations in organizing public meetings and ensuring public participation in local decision making, but they claim that the efforts by the UP in recent decade is noteworthy. Moreover, the UP representatives believe that, it is not only the job of the UP, but also the responsibility of the citizens to come to the UP during public meetings and also beyond the meetings which they think is not happening in Jhilongjha. The local government representatives and the local elites claim that the citizens here are busy in earning their livelihoods than to participate in public meetings of the UP to discuss about the distribution of limited public resources. A Union Parishad member in this context has responded as follows:

> *"As a representative of Jhilongjha Union, I can say that we encounter challenges in promoting citizens' awareness of their rights and encouraging their active involvement in local government institutions. I observe that people aren't enthusiastic to participate in the local government participatory decision-making processes as they are busy with their own lives and livelihoods. Also, there we see fear and inertia among the citizens in expressing their demands and requirements. Only few people including local businessmen, landlords, political party members, and CSO members are concerned about the governance issues here. We accommodate all these stakeholders in the local governance who are interested to participate. At the same time, we are working to bring more citizens in the decision-making process and in public meetings to local governance more participatory and transparent than ever (A local government representative, 2022)".*

DISCUSSION

The lack of people's participation in the local governance process and the failure of CSOs in promoting participatory governance in Jhilongjha is not an isolated case in the context of Bangladesh. Though many literatures have found positive impact of CSOs in promoting participatory, inclusive, and democratic local governance in various places (Bhuiyan et al., 2018; Islam & Ehsan, 2019; Rahman, 2018), this study has uncovered a prevalent scenario of local governance at the grassroots of Bangladesh in recent times. The current scenario of people distancing themselves from the LGIs and its decision-making process as the power is concentrated in the hands of few powerful elites, while the citizens accept this power structure as inevitable, can hence be described as the high-power distance culture (Hofstede et al., 2010). The high-power distance culture has made the local citizens, the CSOs, and other stakeholders, who are not part of the concentrated power structure, more apathetic towards the local governance process. They are more likely to stay away from expressing their opinions or suggestions for governance at the grassroot levels despite having the opportunity in many participatory governance activities such as open budgeting.

An important reason behind the failure of the CSOs of Jhilongjha union in promoting participatory local governance is that the CSOs, unlike many other instances across the country (Bhuiyan et al., 2018), have not helped forming and supporting local citizens groups to work on ensuring democratic local governance. Though the CSOs and their representatives work to promote people's participation as well as to represent people's demands in different platforms, ensuring participatory local governance has not been a strong agenda of the CSOs in Jhilongjha in recent years. Hence, the accountability structure in Jhilongjha union has remained weak and has given way to less participatory local governance. Moreover, like most other UPs of the country (Ahmed et al., 2016; Islam, 2016; Panday & Rabbani, 2011), the UP-standing committees- where the CSO representatives can influence pro-people decision making- have also remained less effective in Jhilongjha. Inadequate workforce, a lack of terms of reference, a limited scope for training, and the lack of motivation among UP secretaries and CSO members are considered the main challenges in making standing committees effective (Islam, 2016).

In Jhilongjha, high power distance culture, people's interest in livelihood opportunities stemming from tourism industry, and the lack of formal education altogether have resulted into the lower level of people's participation in the decision making of the LGIs. Additionally, the lack of female participation in the official and public meetings of the LGIs have been evident in Jhilongjha union like many other unions (Nazneen & Tasneem, 2010), though women groups in some cases remained instrumental in ensuring democratic local governance (Bhuiyan et a., 2018). Furthermore, the CSOs have also maintained a balance while implementing political awareness and local governance related activities in Jhilongjha, keeping the local context in mind. The lack of proactiveness of the citizens and the CSOs has, hence, made the decision-making process of LGIs in Jhilongjha less participatory and less inclusive. As this power concentration and power distance culture have become common phenomena in recent years (Ahmed et al., 2022; Ahmed et al., 2016; Chowdhury, 2015), local citizens have grown a lack of trust as well as a lack of interest in the decision-making process and the activities of the LGIs. This lack of interest and lack of trust has eventually contributed more towards the people's lack of participation in the local governance process (Ahmed et al., 2022; Chowdhury, 2018; Faguet, 2017). As a result, a vicious cycle of less-participatory local governance has been established in the study area.

CONCLUSION

This study has assessed the degree to what extent the CSOs have made the local government's decision-making and activities more participatory at the grassroots, especially in Jhilongjha union parishad under Cox's Bazar district, in Bangladesh. The study has found that the CSOs have been less effective in mobilizing public engagement and affecting decision-making to promote participatory governance in the study area. The participatory avenues of local government at the grassroots like village court, ward meetings, and open budgeting are found to be running without expected level of people's participation. A key reason behind less participatory local governance is the high-power distance culture where the power of local governance is concentrated in the hands of few powerful elites and mass people are distancing themselves from the LGIs. Moreover, people's interest in livelihood opportunities stemming from the tourism industry and a lack of formal education among most of the citizens have resulted in the lower level of people's involvement in the decision making of the LGIs. Furthermore, while the CSOs work to promote people's participation as well as to represent people's demands in different platforms, no bold steps by the CSOs in ensuring participatory local governance has led to a less accountable local government in Jhilongjha union.

A key underpinning of the study is that, where the political power is concentrated in the hands of few and the culture of high-power distance is evident in a society, both the CSOs and the local citizens there have limited scope to affect decision making at LGIs. As a result, the local citizens become apathetic to local governance and grow a lack of trust as well as a lack of interest in the decision-making process and the activities of the LGIs. This lack of interest and lack of trust eventually contribute towards the people's lack of participation in the local governance process creating a vicious cycle of less-participatory local governance. However, though this paper provides an interesting case of on the role of CSOs in stimulating participatory governance at the grassroots of Bangladesh, the key limitation of this paper remains in its focus on a single union- as the lowermost tier of local government- of the country. Hence, there is scope for further research concerning more LGIs at different tiers (i.e., union parishad, sub-district/upazila parishad, municipality, and city corporations) across the country.

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