

Status of civic engagement in rural local government in Bangladesh for combating the COVID-19 pandemic period

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused various economic and political challenges in Bangladesh. In this regard, Bangladesh's local government has initiated civic engagement to help solve the problem. The study focuses on analysing the status of civic engagement in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its necessity, classification, and challenges faced during this initiative in order to provide possible solutions are deeply discussed. Civic engagement is classified into advocacy, civic learning, community service, and service-learning. Some of the primary tools that Bangladesh's government can use to enhance civic engagement include the internet as well as digital and print media. Some of the challenges experienced in Bangladesh include lack of knowledge and motivation, limited resources and misuse of public funds. Undoubtedly, civic engagement emerges as a vital tool for enabling Bangladesh's rural local governments to encourage people to follow the required healthcare procedures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As a result, Bangladesh's local government should adopt the following recommendations: 1. Collaborate with other stakeholders to ensure citizens learn protective measures for COVID-19. 2. Increase resources for civic engagement at the grass-root level. 3. Educate citizens about the benefits of engaging in civic education.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Civic engagement, COVID-19, pandemic, rural local government

1. INTRODUCTION

Civic engagement is a critical requirement for growth and development of any society. The civic engagement basically refers to both individual and collective actions of people,

whether formal or informal. These changes aim of strengthen the community and bring positive social change for a better future [1]. It means working to change people's lives by developing their skills, knowledge, and motivation. In Bangladesh, the government has attempted to

utilize civic engagement to enhance the effectiveness of combating the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this initiative has not been embraced as expected by the citizens, which necessitates an investigation of the factors that have contributed to these challenges, as well as recommendations of strategies that can be used to promote civic engagement. This goal can be better achieved through political and non-political processes. There are various indicators for civic engagement which are divided on three broad categories including civic, electoral, and political indicators [1]. By analysing the level of civic engagement in rural local government in Bangladesh and the existing challenges, it is possible to understand its role and effectiveness in combatting the impacts of COVID-19 in this country, as well as ways through which it can be enhanced.

Awareness of the existing problems in society is necessary for effective formulation of possible solutions. According to Theiss-Morse (2005), active participation in society encourages people to boost their knowledge of their community and its issues [2]. Additionally, civic engagement enables community members to collaborate and work together to achieve a common goal by prioritizing their own interests. Most notably, this engagement provides a platform for groups of people who have long been excluded or ignored, to air their views and participate in decisions regarding their community's future [3]. Moreover, it makes individuals remain tolerant and seek solutions for the problems affecting their lives. Therefore, civic engagement involves working which creates positive difference in a community.

The recent global health threat posed by COVID-19 turned the spotlight on the importance and impact of civic engagement in safeguarding the vulnerable population and achieving a collective response. The Novel coronavirus emerged from Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and was declared a global emergency on January 30, 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO) [4]. When the COVID-19 pandemic caught most countries by surprise, some of them like Bangladesh initiated civic engagement strategies to address the problems caused by this global health threat. Bangladesh was a bit prepared in terms of civic engagement, since it used to manage natural disasters through mobilizing the community and seeking their collaborative efforts [5]. These strategies have proved very beneficial in mitigating the spread of the virus in Bangladesh, which a densely-populated country with a notable shortage of health resources. Through these strategies, Bangladesh has been quite successful in combatting COVID -19 as compared to other countries.

The pandemic has ravaged many countries' economy, especially during the first wave of the disease, which forced most countries institute lockdown, travel restrictions, and other strategies to help combat the spread of the COVID-19. Additionally, the pandemic has exerted a lot of pressure on the limited humanitarian systems worldwide [6]. In addition to fast-tracked precaution development, the Food and Drug Association's (FDA) approves various vaccines with some qualified clinical trials. Various measures were implemented during the first wave of pandemic to strengthened civil engagement. This can lead a big impact on the trajectory countries will take

socially and economically. In this regard, reviewing civic engagement in rural local government in Bangladesh will enable policymakers and opinion shapers to understand how the country has dealt with the pandemic.

2. BACKGROUND / RATIONALE

COVID-19 has affected the economic and social situations of many countries, including Bangladesh. The pandemic slowed down the country's economic growth rate, which previously had a consistent growth rate above 6% over the last decade [7]. The primary reason for conducting this research is that just like many countries, Bangladesh initiated several measures to mitigate the spread of the virus, but most of them have been quite ineffective. As the cases of COVID-19 increased, the country's government ordered lockdowns in different phases and times [7]. Thousands of people lost their jobs, potentially leaving many at risk of plunging into extreme poverty. This action led to the loss of employment, hence affecting the country's economy. Despite the problems caused by the pandemic, citizens have been reluctant to support the government through civic engagement, which necessitates an investigation of the reasons behind this adverse behaviour.

COVID-19 has left a massive scar in the economy that would take a lot of time to heal. According to Shammi, Bodrud-Doza, Islam, and Rahman (2020), the pandemic has increased the poverty levels in many developing countries worldwide [8]. This outcome has increased stress and diseases, which have in turn increased mortality

rates. On this note, Bangladesh's rural local government needs to conduct civic engagement to enable citizens to learn how to protect themselves from COVID-19 and its aftermaths. This process will allow people to remain vigilant and adopt strategies that would cushion them from the pandemic's devastating effects. Only after the country has a complete grasp of the disease's transmission can it fully embark on a rigorous mission to restore its economic and social situation. By understanding the reasons for the slow progress in civic engagement, it is possible to recommend ways of accelerating it.

The three local government institutions in Bangladesh rural, urban, and hill districts have stepped up to manage the COVID-19 crisis. The rural local government has especially played an important role during this challenging time by actively being involved in civic engagement. According to Abdullah (2018), Bangladesh's rural local government operates in three tiers: Zila Parishads (district), Upazila Parishads (sub-district), and Union Parishads [9]. The Zila Parishads are at the top of the rural hierarchy, representing the local government body at the district level. The smallest rural administrative body is the Union Parishads, constituting the third tier of the rural local government.

Bangladesh's organized system of rural local government makes service delivery efficient in Bangladesh. The local government, guided by the National Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19, mounted a lot of effort to ensure social responsibility and raise awareness during the pandemic. The rural local government also liaised with other organizations to sustain essential services and reduce social impact.

Isolation centres were set up within the Union Parishad, and volunteer teams assembled to help with emergency response. These measures were crucial to regulating the disease's spread.

During a pandemic, Bangladesh's local government is tasked with educating the people on how to protect themselves from infections. The local government also liaises with non-governmental organizations to acquire the resources needed to reduce the impact of COVID-19. This coordination has been made possible by activating the Union Disaster Management Committee (UDMC) at the Union Parishad level. The UDMC can work under the Upazila leadership to facilitate fundraising at a local level to support the most deserving needy people. The UDMC also ensures the local people are informed and take practical measures to minimize transmission of the virus.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Civic engagement has been used in the past to address various community problems. In fact, certain community projects cannot be completed effectively in the absence of civic engagement. According to McBride (2013), the civic engagement enables the organization and empowerment of citizens to pursue a common goal in the elimination of various social, economic, and political problems [10]. Even in developed countries, the status of social and political engagement is still wanting, since a large number of people either do not recognize the importance of this practice or are reluctant to participate in it [10]. Therefore, a country like Bangladesh has made significant steps in promoting civic engagement, considering that

this strategy has been used successfully to address certain social problems in the past. On this note, the Bangladeshi rural local government already has a head start in the journey towards maximizing the efficiency of civic engagement throughout the country. For instance, Hillier *et al.*, (2020) state that prior to the advent of COVID-19, notable public health planning had been undertaken in Bangladesh, including policy formulation and promotion of social preparedness actions [11]. Therefore, one would expect that Bangladeshi citizens would have responded positively to the rural local government's efforts to initiate civic engagement. However, the fact that these efforts have not been largely successful shows that there are substantial underlying challenges.

Lack of knowledge has been a significant barrier to the success of civic engagement in Bangladesh. Despite the fact that some Bangladeshi citizens are already familiar with the topic of civic engagement, COVID-19 is a particularly unique social problem, which explains why the rural local government has experienced various challenges in its attempts to engage the public in combating this pandemic. To begin with, the world has not experienced such a devastating health crisis in the recent past, which means that most of the Bangladeshi citizens have not had the necessary emotional preparedness to commit themselves to work amidst the pandemic. As a result, Anwar *et al.*, (2020) explain that many Bangladeshi citizens have demonstrated lack of motivation in supporting the government to fight the crisis [12]. This attitude could be as a result of skepticism, considering that there have been numerous conspiracy theories circulating across

the country concerning the origin of COVID-19 [13]. If the citizens have embraced such myths and misconceptions, they will definitely be reluctant to show full commitment to eradicating this crisis, since Imhoff and Lamberty (2020) explain that most of these conspiracy theories are presenting the disease as a laboratory-engineered pandemic or that it was intended as a biological weapon [14]. Therefore, the rural local government must establish the cause of their citizens' lack of motivation before making further efforts. If it is related to these conspiracy theories, the government must work to debunk those myths so that the citizens can appreciate the urgency of the situation.

4. CLASSIFICATION OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Civic engagement is classified into advocacy, civic learning, community service, and service-learning. Advocacy involves championing the rights of other vulnerable people in society by amplifying their voices. This civic engagement offers independent support to people who feel they are discriminated against by the government. Advocacy ensures that people have the proper knowledge and tools for making an informed decision about a particular issue. In Bangladesh, several non-governmental organizations are conducting advocacy in the rural areas to help people cope with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) team has provided a proposal to the government to develop a transport and logistics system in the rural areas that follow COVID-19 safety protocols [15]. Essentially, advocacy enables the government to

provide essential resources for managing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Civic learning is another category of civic engagement, which entails acquiring knowledge of social and political issues. It empowers people and enables them to remain informed about particular problems affecting their lives. Civic education emerges as an essential requirement of any democracy, since it equips people with knowledge about their rights and freedoms, as enshrined in the constitution. In Bangladesh, civic learning has not been effective, since many people still do not know the threat posed by COVID-19. According to Anwar *et al.*, (2020), most Bangladeshis living in poverty are not aware of the danger caused by COVID-19 [12]. This outcome indicates civic education is needed to enable people to adopt strategies that would prevent them from contracting the disease and understand its social and economic impacts. With the recent boom of online activity during this epidemic, the local government of Bangladesh can utilize virtual public forums and other digital tools to facilitate civic learning [16].

Moreover, community service or volunteering is civic engagement that entails involving people in activities that benefit the community. This type of engagement enables people to interact with community members and develop the skills, values, and sense of empowerment for becoming active citizens. It further allows the participants to reflect on their impact on society and the difference they are making, and also enables them to gain discerning experience in various fields in which they are engaged. In Bangladesh, organizations such as Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) and Red Cross

Red Crescent Movement Partners (RCRCMP) have engaged youths and volunteers in rural areas in response to the COVID-19 crisis [17]. The volunteers are required to distribute lifesaving awareness messages. National organizations such as Bidyanondo Foundation, philanthropist organizations, and other youth group initiatives have also volunteered to distribute free food, personal protective equipment (PPE), as well as lead the frontlines of various coronavirus awareness campaigns. In general, volunteering enables people to participate in activities geared toward improving the community, thereby creating a better future.

Lastly, service-learning refers to a civic engagement that involves linking service activities with student learning objectives. This type of engagement benefits the community organization and the provider since it helps address genuine community needs. Bangladesh's service-learning has not been common, since students were not engaged in

solving issues caused by COVID-19. Students should be allowed to participate in projects that would contribute to holistic development as they share experience and knowledge and learn the value of serving the community. Such an approach would encourage the whole of society to join hands and work hard to eliminate the pandemic.

5. PRIMARY TOOLS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Bangladesh's local government can use various tools to engage people during the COVID-19 pandemic. With advancements in technology, online platforms are helpful tools that Bangladesh's local government can use to conduct civic engagement. According to Harode-Rosario *et al.*, (2019), the internet has become a significant channel of online interactive participation [18]. On this note, Bangladesh's local government has captured this opportunity to enhance citizen engagement in political and social affairs.

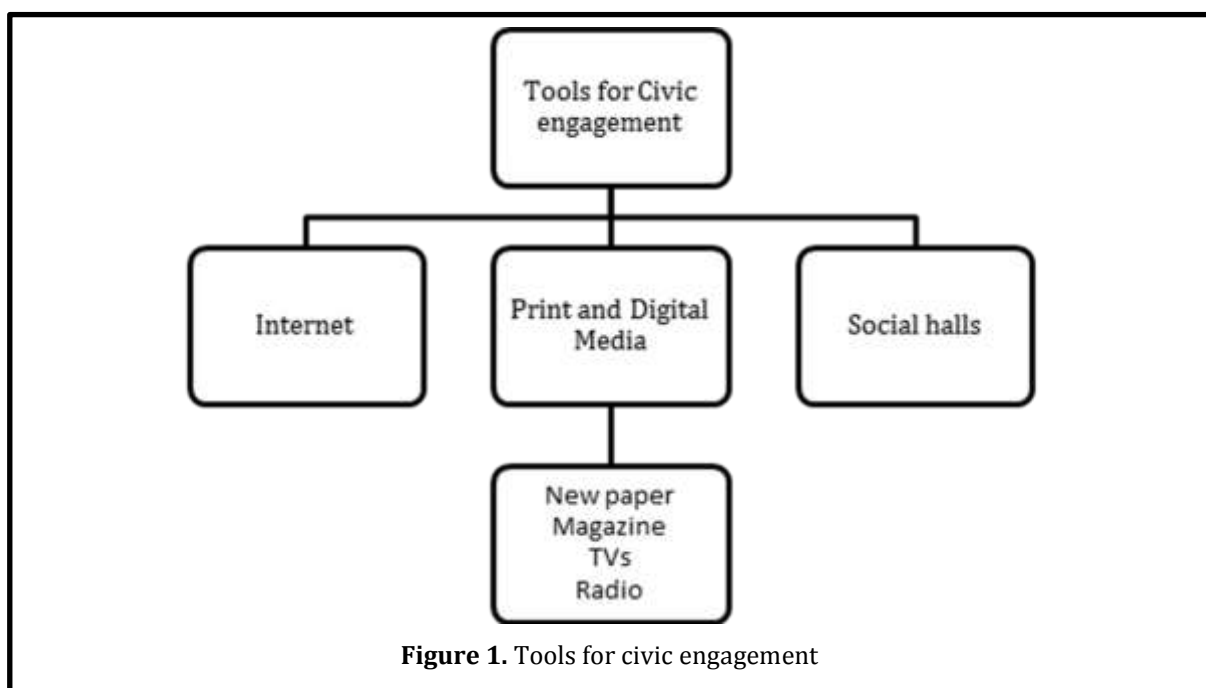


Figure 1. Tools for civic engagement

The print media also act as an effective tool for social engagement. Specifically, local newspapers and magazines may stimulate civic engagement by establishing a common agenda and increasing awareness of local problems and the community's interest [19]. Bangladesh's local government can also conduct civic participation in social halls. Other non-digital engagement tools include making phone calls to engage with people who cannot access the internet, using community networks, and finally utilizing gatherings are also useful. Overall, these tools provide an opportunity for the Bangladeshis to interact and share their problems, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. CHALLENGES OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- Bangladesh's local government has limited resources to conduct a robust civic education
- Bangladeshi citizens lack awareness about civic participation, hence making it difficult for the local government to accommodate diverse views.
- Many Bangladeshis feel dissolution and wary of political life, therefore lacking the motivation to engage in civic discussion.
- Lack of coordination in the local administration.
- Misappropriation of relief funds coupled with corruption.
- Minimal communal input.

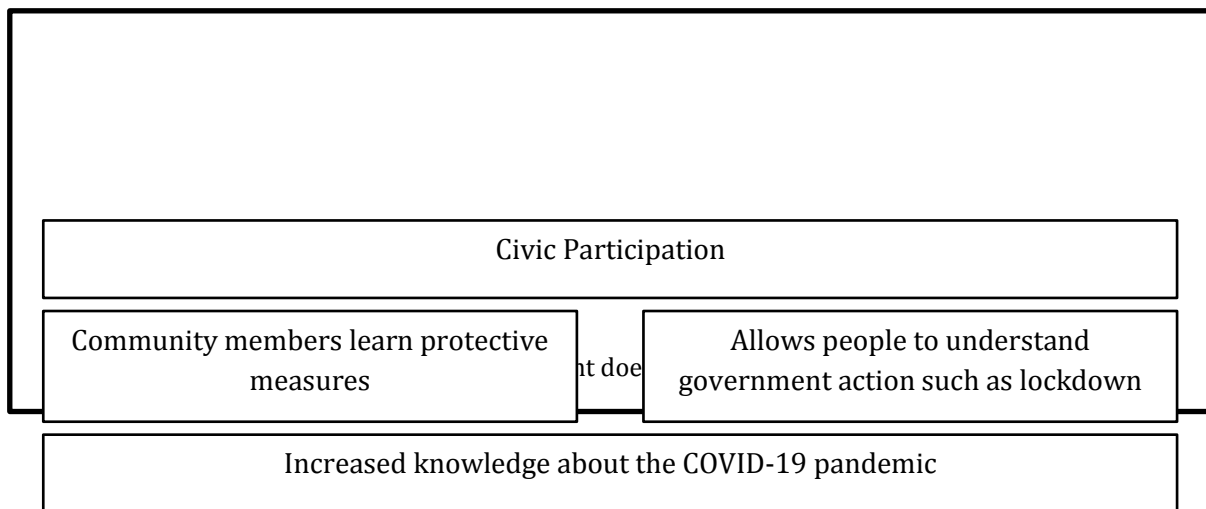
The above challenges have prevented Bangladesh's local government from ensuring effective civic engagement.

Lack of resources has made it difficult for the government to purchase the required material for civic participation. Lack of awareness and the feeling of dissolution have derailed civic engagement. Additionally, despite the government's announcement of several packages intended to help the needy and marginalized citizens, the local government's lack of coordination has hampered efforts to cushion these people.

Even during these trying times, self-cantered, corrupt individuals are misappropriating funds meant for the poor. It is absurd that some individuals are attempting to enrich themselves at the expense of the community. However, it is worth noting that the government has shown zero tolerance to such vices. Finally, the local government has primarily been involved in telling the people what to do, seemingly putting less communal input into consideration. The rest of the citizens that are actively engaged in collective participation are not having their voices heard. As such, measures put in place by the local government are met with low compliance. In this regard, Bangladesh's government should find appropriate strategies to ensure citizens learn critical strategies for surviving during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as integrate communal ideas.

7. HOW CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PERFORMS EFFECTIVELY DURING A PANDEMIC

Civic participation is a fundamental component during a pandemic. It allows a collective response in case of an emergency, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, it can promote people's conformity to lockdowns and



other strategies meant to minimize interactions. Active community engagement enables people to understand the government's actions, such as implementing lockdowns and task relief, therefore increasing compliance. Through this approach, the community members in Bangladesh can learn various protective measures and follow healthcare guidelines to prevent disease spread. During a pandemic, such as COVID-19, people need the broadest possible range of knowledge and insight about the situation. This outcome can be achieved through robust community engagement. In general, civic participation allows Bangladeshis to comprehend actions that should be taken during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Listening to idea from members of the community can also enhance civic engagement. By incorporating ideas from members of the community, such as the vulnerable and marginalized groups, health professionals are able to work together with the people to identify solutions, plan, deliver, and evaluate the best possible healthcare services that meet the needs of the diverse populations [20]. For example, by collaborating with the local people,

healthcare professionals can identify and plan how to deliver services such as contraception and safe childbirth when hospitals are overwhelmed and can no longer tend to these groups of people. When community members are involved in the decision making and national plan, they are more motivated to participate through offering volunteering services. Given that the final plan is a joint one, people become more invested in achieving a successful outcome. During a pandemic, members of the public can volunteer to for rapid response team, make local food donations, volunteer virtually, and support essential responders on the front lines. Such an approach can minimize the adverse impacts of any crisis.

Civic engagement can also prove beneficial during a pandemic in terms of tracking and addressing rumours. Bangladesh deployed a participatory surveillance system based on self-reported symptoms to augment the surveillance system in place [22]. This system helped identify disease hot spots and provide an avenue for circulating public health guidelines and reliable information regarding COVID-19 to the participants. The shared



Image 1. Bangladeshis learning COVID-19 safety measures (“Preparing for the Unpredictable,” 2020).

information can help to address rumours and misinformation propagated through social media and other mass communication forums. This form of engagement contributes to a sustainable response, especially in a country like Bangladesh with limited testing capabilities.

8. THE NECESSITY OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Civic engagement in Bangladesh is necessary, since it improves people's knowledge and skills about health, social, and political issues. In essence, diverse people's inclusivity brings forth a wide range of knowledge and insights, which can make cooperation difficult. Through

civic engagement, people acquire knowledge on how to fight a particular crisis like COVID-19 [22]. Additionally, it enables the additional needs of specific groups to be addressed. For example, some government-imposed restrictions may be more detrimental to a particular group of people, such as pregnant women, and proper solutions can only be attained through civic engagement.

Civic engagement enables people to share their opinions and cultivate positive change. A civically-engaged population indicates that people care about their community, which generated the motivation necessary to engage in constructive social and political affairs. Moreover, civic participation promotes inclusivity in the country. In this regard, citizens' interests and needs are considered when making policies to address the pandemic.

The pictures shown above indicate Bangladeshis learning how to protect themselves from COVID-19. These pictures show that Bangladeshi citizens remained cooperative and adhered to COVID-19 safety guidelines. Citizen engagement remains one of the vital measures to reduce the spread of this disease. Washing hands and keeping social distance are crucial measures for protecting



Image 2. A relief program distributing food to the needy in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic

people from contracting COVID-19. By teaching members of the community these practices, it has been possible to control the spread of the disease.

The picture showed above displays various relief distributions programs in Bangladesh, which were organized to cater for the needy members of the community during the COVID-19-pandemic. Since most economic activities came to a halt, some of the people that live from hand to mouth were left with no money to afford food. These relief programs ensured that such individuals at least have enough food to last them for a significant period.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- The local government should collaborate with non-governmental organizations such as United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and IFAD. Uddin (2019) recommends that leaders, activists, and the Bangladesh community should collaborate with UNICEF and NGOs to ensure the effective dissemination of information.
- The local government should educate the public about the importance of participating in civic activities during a pandemic.
- The national government should allocate more resources for the rural local government to conduct effective civic engagement during the pandemic period.

10. CONCLUSION

Civic engagement is a critical activity during economic, political, and social crises.

Bangladesh, like many developing countries, has experienced the devastating effects of COVID-19. The local government has tried to engage people to follow healthcare guidelines and anti-COVID-19 safety measures such as a restricting movement, practicing social distancing, and promoting proper hand-washing. Advocacy, civic learning, community service, and service-learning are various classifications of civic engagement. Bangladesh has used these categories of civic engagement to engage its citizens to collaborate with the administration in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. Bangladesh's local government has utilized digital and print media to promote civic engagement purposes. However, civic engagement in Bangladesh has faced various challenges due to limited resources, lack of awareness among the citizens, ineffective coordination, and misappropriation of funds by corrupt officials. Despite these limitations, the modest civic engagement performed throughout Bangladesh has still allowed the country to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic collectively. This approach is a necessity, since it aims to boost people's knowledge, skills, and willingness to support the government in its social development endeavours. To ensure more effective implementation of civic engagement, Bangladesh should provide resources and educate people about the benefits of collaboration during a pandemic, motivate them to cooperate with the administration, and discourage the misuse of public funds by punishing corrupt leaders.

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12. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have declared that there is no conflict of interest.

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