

Citizen Participation in Local Government Decision-Making Process: South Asian Perspective

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Abstract: It is considered that citizen participation at local level decision-making process is fundamental because it empowers the citizens. Citizen participation also promotes the transparency and accountability in decision-making process at local level. The main aim of this study is to explore the current status of citizen participation in South Asian countries by reviewing the related literature. Though South Asia is a diversified region for her famous culture, geo-political landscape, economic performance, democratization and local government system, the level of citizen participation in local government decision-making process is not satisfactory level. Subject political culture, lack of willingness of political office bearers; inequality and authoritarian leadership are the main impediments for strengthening the local government in South Asian countries. It is also evident that government of South Asian countries has been encouraged to engage citizen in local government decision-making process by adopting and making different policies and regulations.

1. Introduction

Throughout the democratization and development process, donor agencies, development academicians and practitioners have to think that the accommodation of citizen in decision making process in local government bodies is fundamental, because citizen participation promotes the democratic governance (Islam, 2020). Cupps (1977) in his research emphasized that citizen participation increases the responsiveness of political institutions and “heightens citizen’s sense of political efficacy (p. 478)”. One of the most prominent scholars has pointed out that citizen participation in local government activities particularly decision-making process is considered as citizen power (Arnstein, 1969). Though citizen participation is important in many aspects in local government in developing countries especially to empower the deprived community by inclusive participation of the citizens, but some ideal conditions are necessary to effective citizen participation like “the careful selection of a representative group of stakeholders, a transparent decision-making to build trust among the participants and a clear authority in decision-making (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004, p. 61)”.

Due to globalization and good governance since 1980s, development paradigm has changed, and it has been assumed that through the process of citizen participation, local government would be inclusive and participatory. Citizen participation covers all positive elements that could enhance citizen humane development and create a bridge between the society and the government. In developing countries people are not aware of their rights and entitlements. Citizen participation promotes the citizen capacity by involving and informing the local government activities and could expand public spaces, gives greater legitimacy to democratically elected authorities. It works as a promoter of the quality of politics and strengthens solidarity and cooperation. It is also important for social stability.

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Participatory theorists argue that “meaningful citizen participation facilitates social stability by developing a sense of community, increasing collective decision making, and promoting acceptance and respect of the governance process (Pateman, 1970 Cited in Callahan, 2007, p. 1180)”.

Though the level of citizen participation in decision-making process in developed countries are high, but in developing countries especially South Asian countries citizen participation are minimal because of parochial political culture and markedly inequality in socio-economic status of the citizens. In this backdrop, this study explores the current status of citizen participation in South Asian countries by reviewing the related literature. The first section looks into conceptual framework of citizen participation. The second section examines the present state of citizen participation in South Asian countries except Bangladesh. The third critically shed light on the relationship between citizen participation and local level development in Bangladesh along with government initiatives to engage citizens in local level decision-making process in Bangladesh.

2. Citizen Participation: Theoretical Framework

Nowadays citizen participation is a contentious issue in the policy process. Though citizen participation, the concept has been used since 1960s in the US, in decision-making process in local council level has been widely used in the western world and developing countries, but the outcome of participation is not same as developing countries compared to developed counties. Citizen participation refers the engagement of citizen in policy process that empowers the citizen and citizenry to become an asset of a given society. Scholars have pointed out that there are some key factors that can play effective role in citizen participation in local government activities, these are: competent and unbiased group facilitators, regular meetings, honesty of public officials, willingness of elected representative and active citizen's (Berner et al., 2011; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004). Citizen participation makes a bridge between citizenry and local government authorities that increases the legitimacy of local bodies. For example, Devas and Grant (2003) have stated that ‘citizen participation is about the ways in which citizens exercise influence and control over the decisions that affect them’ (p. 61)”. In this connection, Arnstein (1969) stated that ‘citizen participation is the strategy by which ordinary people join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programs are operated and benefits like contracts and patronage are parceled out (p. 216). She also commented that participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless.

Some scholars have identified that power and extend of control in specific decision-making process as distinguishing factors in citizen participation, on which basis; citizen participation could range from pseudo to strong participation.

Several researchers (Berner, et al. 2011; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004; Geissel, 2009; Agarwal, 2001; Cupps, 1977) take a neutral approach about citizen engagement in local government decision making process. They think that sometimes citizen engagement in policy process is untenable, idealistic, critical and time consuming because direct participation has social and economic cost. And it is not desirable in some circumstances like community size, wealth and homogeneity. Geissel (2009) opined that citizen

participation has “a little impact on input-legitimacy and contains the risk of dominance by pseudo-democratic elite (p. 402)”.

Table-1: Various types, level of Participation, and effect of participation

Type of Participation	Description of type of participation	Level of participation	Effect
Information sharing	Operations managers and designers and managers share information with beneficiaries in order to facilitate individual and collective action	Lowest level of participation useful at managerial or administrative level activities	Minimal not suitable for or intended for community level participatory development task oriented
Consultation	People are not only informed but are consulted on key issues Level of popular participation increases	Agency retains control of design and implementation	Opportunity for disadvantaged people to interact and provide feedback Upstream and downstream issues accounted for in process
Decision making	People especially disadvantaged groups have decision making roles in matters of policy, design and implementation	Community or the poor hold extensive decision-making abilities and can decide on their own projects	Popular participation ensured to the extent of decision making
Initiating action	The poor are able to take initiatives in terms of actions and decision making	People centered, community based Different from capacity to act or decide on issues or task proposed or assigned by external development organizations	Popular participation peaks proactive capacity and confidence to get going own projects

Source: Bhatnagar and Williams (1992) cited in Sanyare (2013, p. 55)

Similarly, Berner, et al., (2011) in her research on municipal participatory budgeting process proclaimed that budgeting and allocation is a complex process and that only a handful of people have time, resources and know-how to review it. She advocated that for effective participation, there needs advocacy in favour of citizen. In developing countries, citizen participation in governance mechanism depends on different factors like citizens' endowments, customs of the society and gendered norms. For example, Agarwal (2001) in her research on 'Participatory exclusions, community forestry, and gender' found that in South Asia domestic work and childcare are considered as women's work and such gendered norms restricts women from community participation.

3. Citizen Participation and Local Government Decision-Making Process in South Asia

South Asia is a diversified region for her famous culture, geo-political landscape, economic performance, democratization and local government system. India, for

instance, has been practiced multiculturalism, and has established democracy from the beginning. Although the system of governance in Bangladesh and Nepal are unitary form of government, India is a federal state. The level of citizen participation of all three countries is guaranteed by their respective constitutions. It is also guaranteed that the rights of citizen will be protected by establishing rule of law. Moreover, different laws and policies have been enacted to accommodate citizens in local government activities in different times. Post independent period, Government of India has adopted top down policy which dominated development model where they believed that wealth would be created in the top and such development will percolate down. But in the 1960s, they witnessed that this model has serious defect. By late 1960s they searched for the alternative model of development with active citizen participation (PRIA Report, 2009).

From 1970s to the beginning of 1990s, India has modified its notions for the pressure of donor agency and tries to integrate the masses in decision making process particularly social development aspects like health and education. And this time, a number of community-based organizations have been developed to advocate the inclusion of citizen in policy making process. But a remarkable change occurred by amending 73rd and 74th amendment of the constitution. For example, Act of 74th stated that a three-tier local government would be established in urban areas which are municipal corporations for large cities, municipal councils for smaller size cities and *nagar* panchayats for transitional areas. And this act provided enormous opportunity for citizen participation in urban local government in India (Report of PRIA, 2009). According to the legislation, local councils (*Gram Sabha*) should arrange meetings twice in a year in each village. The purpose of such meetings was to ensure council's accountability to citizens and to identify priority target populations for assistance. However, in most places the authorities have not arranged any meeting in one or two years and sometimes the authorities will arrange unannounced meetings when most of the villagers were away at work or at the market (Manor and Crook, 1998, pp. 29-30). Although *Gram Sabha* has created better policies but it has not performed its responsibilities for various reasons such as structural differences and unwillingness of councilors.

In Nepal, Local Self-Governance Act, 1999 has ensured the participation of citizens in local government decision-making process. In addition, government of Nepal have made other provisions/ policies like reserved seats in local governments for women and disadvantaged groups that promotes inclusive and participatory governance at local level. There existed two-tier local government system. Pandeya (2015) in his research, 'citizen participation in local government decision-making process in Nepal' posited that in Nepal, institutional and policy frameworks and participation mechanism to citizen participation in local government is favorable. He also found the following impact of citizen participation:

'citizen participation in local government showed positive impacts on achieving development gains, improving local planning systems, strengthening local accountability, and empowering citizens, because participation imparted more awareness, knowledge, and skills among citizens and encouraged local government officials to be more transparent, legitimate, and inclusive (p. 92)'.

In Bangladesh, citizen participation in local government has been encouraged by adopting and making different policies and regulations. The process of citizen participation in local government activities in Bangladesh are different regarding the types of local government like rural local government has special arrangement for citizens to participate in decision making. But urban local government in this process is somehow latent. For example, Local government (City Corporation) Act, 2009 (Amended in 2011) has given citizens the rights and access in the decision-making process and there are also limitations, for example, if the majority of elected representative decided that the meeting is private then no bodies will be allowed to the decision-making process. And there are also cultural and political factors that are hindrances to citizen participation in local government in Bangladesh. Haq (2014) and Waheduzzaman and Sharif (2015) posited that citizen participation in local government decision-making process in Bangladesh is very much low. The constitution of South Asian countries like Bangladesh, India and Nepal, however, have guaranteed and promoted citizen participation in local government, in reality citizen participation in local government decision making process are hardly positive. This is because of lack of willingness of political office bearers; inequality and authoritarian leadership that has weaken the citizen participation in local government decision- making process.

4. Citizen Participation and Local Government Decision-Making Process in Bangladesh

Citizen participation in local government of Bangladesh has gained a momentum to donor agency and policy makers of Bangladesh for inclusive development. As we know that Bangladesh is a developing country with huge population, need to establish equality, transparency and accountability of decision making process and service delivery of local government that could enhance the democratic process and legitimacy of the local government. Recently Government of Bangladesh has taken extra initiatives to engage citizen in local government activities by formulating policy and regulations. Although Bangladesh constitution has guaranteed the accessibility of citizen in decision-making process but this accessibility only ensured the formal participation of citizen. For example, in NSAPR² II, Government of Bangladesh has promised ‘effective systems of citizen participation as well as accountability that will ensure that public servants are responsible to elected officials, and elected officials are in turn responsible to their constituency’ (NSAPR II, p.72). Other policies like the perspective plan, 7th five-year plan is also given priority to ensure citizen participation in local government for promoting and upgrading of local populace livelihood status. In response to this state affair, a good number of projects have been taken to address the issue of citizen participation and strengthening urban local government and such projects are in progress and such have been completed. In Rangpur City Corporation, WB and JICA has been working to promote capacity development and enhancing the people’s power by participatory decision-making tools.

At present, three tier of Rural Local Government system is functioning in Bangladesh namely Union Parishad, Upazilla Parishad and Zilla Parishad. Union Parishad (UP) is the

² NSAPR II refers the National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction II FY 2009–11, Prepared in the light of Election Manifesto of the Bangladesh Awami League 2008.

lowest tier that is administered by the UP Act of 2009. This act encourages the active participation of citizens and ensures the transparency and accountability of the UP. Ward meeting through Ward Committee and open budget meeting are the two main pillars that accommodate citizens in decision making process. Ward meeting is a forum where each segment of people including elected ward member, social worker, beneficiary, school teacher, technical experts has an opportunity to participate in Ward meeting. UP act of 2009 stipulate that each Ward Committee of a UP must be organize a Ward meeting at least twice a year and it is also directed that UP shall issue a public notice to the concerned members at least seven days before the Ward meeting. UP act 2009 has given enormous power to Ward Committee that are prepare the budget, prepare the priority list of beneficiaries, generating the public awareness about cleanliness and environmental protection, and to create harmony of various group of people. Research report shows that after the inception of Ward meeting system in UP, engagement of people in decision making process has been increased and it creates a harmonious relations between the elected officials and citizenry because voices of the people are accepted by the elected officials. And it promotes democratization process at local level and ensures the downward accountability of local elected officials to a great extent. Chowdhury (2017) in her research reported that by engaging Ward meeting—

“Ordinary people – including villagers with limited formal education – were fully able to prioritize between policies which affected their livelihoods. They had prioritized demands against specific allocation on donors or NGOs. People had information about monetary allocation from various funding agencies and prioritized demands of reconstruction of roads, tube well placement, distribution of ring slub, skills development, training and distribution of materials to women. These demands were documented at a Ward meeting (p. 124)”.

However scholars like Barkat (2015) has given the opposite opinion about the outcome of Ward meeting. He found that citizen participation in Ward meeting and open budget meeting at UP are at below satisfactory level. He also stated that “the various activities of Union Parishad is captured by a small number of people who are either like minded to the Chairmen and members or belongs to the same political party or related by kinship (p. 164)”. Similarly Majumder (2015) in his research found that “a huge gap exists between desired level of participation and real participation of people in local government activities (p. 218)”. He also posited that the levels of participation of rural areas women in Ward meeting and open budget meeting are not optimistic at all.

Other studies i. e., Waheduzzaman and Sharif, 2015; Banks, 2008, also show the opposite features of local government in Bangladesh regarding accommodation of citizen participation in policy making process. Due to parochial political culture and economic inequality of masses, local government in Bangladesh has been subjected by elite class people and sometimes central government. Local government did not accommodate all groups of people like minority, women and disadvantaged people. For example, Haq (2014) found that socio-political context, parochial political culture and institutional factors are the main hindrances of effective citizen participation in urban local government of Bangladesh. He also found that vote bank mechanism and clientistic politics are visible in urban local government in Bangladesh that brings about negative consequences in local politics.

WahedUzzaman and Alam (2015) stated that the subject political culture is the main barrier to participatory governance in Bangladesh at local level where local elected representatives and local government officials have an affinity for power and centralized authority and they work as an extended arm of central government. They also found that lack of political will and weak institutions also disengage citizens at the local level in Bangladesh. In this regard, Banks (2008) stated that citizen participation in decision making process of urban poor is very much limited. She also found that there have existed clientelist relationships between policy makers and urban poor. Citizen participation in urban poor in decision-making process was affected by a lot of factors like Mastans³, government service providers and NGOs who played the role of mediators to solve problems between service providers and service seekers. Other studies also show that the level of citizen participation and the quality of governance in local government are minimal because of socio-economic disparity and patron-client relationship between the government and governed. It also finds that policies and regulations made by government are not really congenial to accommodate citizens in local government level in Bangladesh.

5. Citizen Participation and Local Development in Bangladesh

It assumes that citizen participation in decision making process ensures and advocates the local development because citizen participation promotes democratic local governance through popular participation in local elections, improved representation and empowerment, which would lead to effective local planning, decision-making and implementation of development projects that can increase benefits for all (Kakumba, 2010). Development thinkers and practitioners believed that development would change and improve lives, livelihood and well-being of people in various dimensions particularly economic, social, and political (Barkat, 2015, p. 1). In local development, 'citizen participation will bring about positive changes in the socio-economic and political lives of the people in the country side or peripheral areas' (Kakumba, 2010, p. 173).

For local development, citizens are vanguard because they uphold hidden power that could reconstruct the society by ensuring their true participation by identifying the problems, taking decisions, preparing plans and implementing the projects. One of the leading economists in Bangladesh, Barkat (2015) has drawn a diagram where he analyzed that participation in decision-making and execution of development activities by elected local government institutions spearhead the development process.

Citizen participation promotes the empowerment of the citizens and there is a close connection between empowerment and development because 'the notion of empowerment has evolved within the development discourse to emphasize the need to build capacity in societies to respond to the challenges of their political and economic environment' (Kakumba, 2010, p. 173). Empowerment is a process where people freely exchange the views and opinions that enable people's access to and control over resources and decisions that affect their lives. Blair (2000) has made a figure where he posited that citizen participation is a key element of local development.

³ Mastans refers a group of people who works as mediator in policy making between service providers and service seekers.

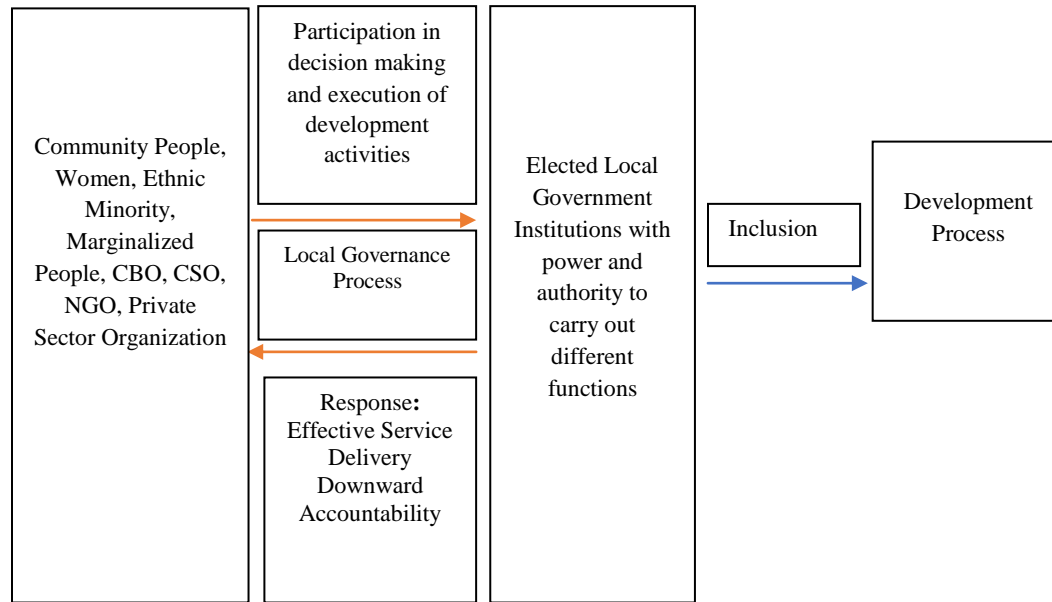


Figure-1: Local government and development process nexus Source: Barkat, (2015, p. 3)

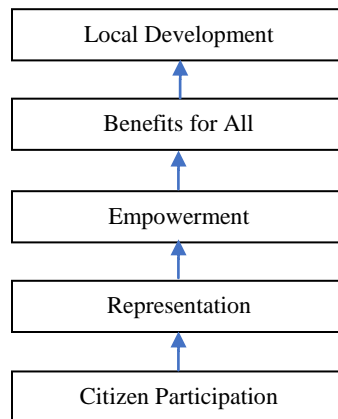


Figure-2: Causal Relationship between Citizen Participation and Local Development

Source: Blair, (2000) cited in Kakumba, (2010, p. 174)

During the 1970s and 1980s, theories of development and strategies have shifted to local participatory development from central planning that could meet the basic needs of all people. In 1982, government of Bangladesh apparently has taken initiatives to local development through engaging citizens in local government decision-making process. That time government promulgated the local government ordinance, 1982 and that upgraded the old thana (police station) to new upazilla (lowest administrative unit of the unitary form of government in Bangladesh). However, the first election for upazilla chairman was held in 1985 (Barkat, 2015). The main aims of this new system were that upazilla parishad will be the focal point of local development like 'planning, promotion and execution of development programs, primary education, health and family welfare, various rural infrastructure programs and so on' (Siddiqui, 2005, cited Barkat, 2015, p. 41).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

It is evident that in developing countries, citizen engagements in decision-making process especially local government institutions are minimal compared to the developed countries. In developed countries, the level of citizen participation in local development programs are satisfactory, and almost all local government bodies of western countries take opinions before finalize the decision (WahedUzzaman and Alam, 2015), and local peoples knowledge is considered as social capital. Though there is a debate on which categories people will participate in policy level, but scholars both north and south have unanimously argued that citizen participation is essential for good governance and development. Local cultural milieu, political or social, of developing countries hinders to the citizenry of engagement in policy process in local government institutions. In south Asia, local political leader is affiliated with mainstream political party that influences them to take party line decisions without taking views of grassroots level citizenry. Top-down policy that is the main characteristics of South Asian public policy, and this policy do not adjust to the local environment. It is also evident that bureaucratic control and inappropriate decentralization as the main barriers to effective participation of local government institutions in South Asia especially in Bangladesh, though some regulations have been acted for the engagement of the citizenry to local government institutions. Civil society organizations (CSOs) and community-based organizations in South Asia are weak and sometimes politically motivated. CSOs in Bangladesh have no influence in local governance policy making and their involvement is only by naming and shaming like organizing seminars, processions, human chains and media reporting.

However, sometimes citizens are not interested to participate in decision-making process in developing countries. In that, poor socio-economic status (such as education, money and civic skills) prevents them to participate in local government activities. It is perceived that citizen participation is needed for fairness and legitimacy of local government authorities. Necessary steps are needed to engage citizenry in local level decision making process in South Asia. First and foremost step could be awareness building of local people through education and training. Secondly, government initiatives to engage citizenry in local level and finally make a healthy culture at local level in which people spontaneously participate and contribute the decision-making process.

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