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WHETHER DECENTRALISATION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IS A GOOD PATH TOWARDS DEVELOPMENT? EVIDENCE FROM BANGLADESH

Abstract

Decentralisation is one of the significant processes for social and economic development at the grass-root level of the developing countries. As development and decentralisation concepts are closely interlinked to each other, it has become an avowed goal for the governments in the developing countries. Although the process is an important step for democratisation in most of the developing countries, often, it brings challenges because of some social, political, structural and administrative barriers. To perceive these issues in details, this paper has taken an initiative to explicate the benefits and challenges of the local government system of a developing country like Bangladesh. Based on the historical and contemporary evidences, the paper explores that despite some successful events, decentralisation practices in the country are badly affected by various challenges, which may turn the process into an elusive effort.

Key words: decentralisation, local government, development, Bangladesh.

1. Introduction

In the twenty first century, decentralisation process has been perceived as a crucial process of democracy in many of the developing countries. To strengthen democratic process, governments are taking various initiatives at local and national levels based on development agenda and context. However, the major goal of decentralisation, in other words, autonomous Local Government (LG) is to ensure greater participation of people in development activities at the grass-root level. This bottom-up approach assesses that government representatives will be more efficient in local areas to meet the needs of local people. Has decentralisation become a paramount way to ensure efficient development process especially for the developing countries? To answer this pertinent question, this paper will address decentralisation as a feature of local governance,

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from its conceptual context. Moreover, to critically analyse the issues of local government in planning and practice, the paper will particularly focus on the role and function of local government of a developing country like Bangladesh. The paper also examines the benefits and challenges of decentralisation process in Bangladesh. The rationale of taking Bangladesh as a case study is that the country has given utmost importance of local government in its governance structure. Articles 68 and 69 of Bangladesh Constitution recognised decentralisation as an important element of development process. As a unitary country, the process is crucial for Bangladesh to reach the facilities at the grass-root level. Besides, rural poverty is acute and natural calamities emanating from climate change is very common in the country.

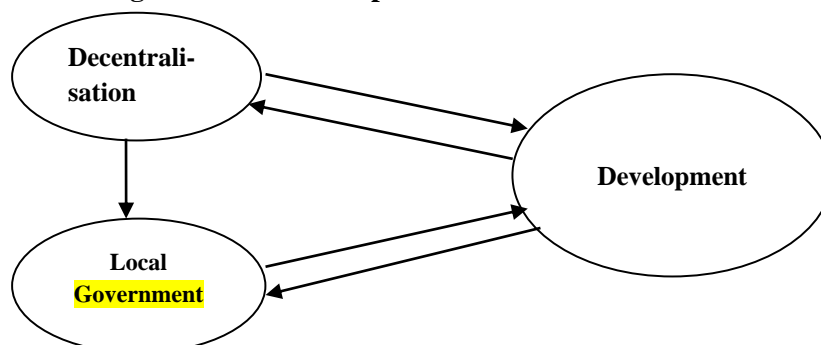
To address these problems, locally induced solutions are very important and hence disentralisation is considered as a good path to increase local level participation. Additionally, Bangladesh government is committed to achieve Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and it is trying to promote good governance. Accordingly, decentralisation has been an important element for the government to attain these goals and targets in the years to come.

The paper is organised in the following way. After introduction in Section 1, Section 2 shows the linkage between development and decentralisation. Section 3 gives some empirical evidences of decentralisation and development. Section 4 upholds the local government system in Bangladesh. Section 5 and Section 6 respectively discuss the benefits and challenges of local government system in Bangladesh. Section 7 provides some suggestions to address the challenges of local government system through decentralisation. Section 8 ends with concluding remarks.

2. Development and Decentralisation: An Interlinked Concept

From the last couple of years, decentralisation has become a crucial part of development for the developing countries. While defining decentralisation, DA Rondinelli et al. pointed out that this process includes certain issues including reallocation of control, accountability of executives, planning, supervision and resource mobilisation from the central bodies to its local authorities.¹ On the other hand, the concept of development includes certain goals and objectives which have been changed over the last few decades to ensure political, economic and social wellbeing of the people. Figure 1 (see next page) shows that the concept of development and decentralisation is interlinked to each other. The question is how decentralisation process is interrelated with the development process?

¹ DA Rondinelli, JR Nellis and GS Cheema, *Decentralization in Developing Countries: A Review of Recent Experience*, Staff Working Paper, No. 581, 1983, World Bank, Washington DC.

Figure1: Linkages between Development and Forms of Decentralisation²

Decentralisation is considered as a “policy instrument of development” since the World War II.³ This policy is mainly based on equity and evenness towards every citizen in the society.⁴ As decentralisation ensures the greater participation of people irrespective of the rich and poor, it can be a good way for country’s overall growth and development. In this regard, B.C Smith argues more precisely that decentralisation brings six advantages namely political edification, political management, political steadiness, political capability, responsibility and awareness building to the society.⁵

To ensure development at every segment of society, decentralisation is divided into six categories, i.e. “deconcentration, delegation, devolution, privatisation, top-down and bottom-up principal agency”.⁶ Among these typologies, devolution, as said by many, is one of the most popular forms that allows flexible representatives to make their own policy guidelines, administration, economy and individual aptitudes.⁷ According to P. Mawhood, decentralisation is a feature of local government that assists to transfer the five

²Information collected from Abu Elias Sarker, “The Illusion of Decentralization: Evidence from Bangladesh”, *The International Journal of Public Sector Management*, Vol. 16, No. 7, 2003, pp. 523-548.

³*Ibid.*

⁴Kazi S. M. Khasrul Alam Quddusi, “Empowering Local Government in Bangladesh”, 2006, available at http://nation.ittefaq.com/artman/publish/article_29731.shtml, accessed on 27 April 2012.

⁵B.C Smith, *Decentralization: The Territorial Dimension of the State*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985, pp. 18-30.

⁶Kempe Ronald Hope, “Decentralization and Local Governance: Theory and the Practice in Botswana”, *Development Southern Africa*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2000, pp. 519-534.

⁷JM. Silverman, *Public Sector Decentralisation: Economic Policy and Sector Investment Programmes*, Technical Paper No. 188, 1992, World Bank, Washington DC.

notions from state centric approach to local level government.⁸ These are mainly separation of local government from central body; formation of considerable representatives to maintain its own budget; create opportunity to employ its own workforce; maintaining internal systems by the elected committee and limit the role of central government.

3. Decentralisation and Local Government: Some Empirical Evidences

Essentially, to promote development in education, health, environment and other socio-economic sectors, most of the governments of Asia, Africa and Latin America have initiated decentralisation as a significant strategy.⁹ In this aspect, a wide range of variations have been noticed in the forms and scopes of decentralisation in these countries. Thus, decentralisation, on the one hand, has brought noteworthy successes in some countries; on the other, it often promulgates crises and conflicts in some other countries.¹⁰ Table 1 (see next page) shows the examples of some developing countries in which decentralisation has entailed significant positive changes. According to Kempe Ronald Hope, after the post independence periods, Botswana has gained success than any other African countries owing to its greater accountability of local people and impartial role of central government.¹¹ As pointed out by W. Harry Blair, since 1959 onward, the long endeavour of India to make the *panchayat* system effective for social development by increasing administrative capacity and ensuring greater participation at the grass-root level has been noteworthy.¹² In case of the Philippines, central government is playing a crucial role for effective decentralisation by endorsing local body autonomous, providing empowerment through instructive taxes provisions and local budget procedures.¹³

⁸ P. Mawhood, "Decentralization and in the Third World in the 1980s", *Planning and Administration*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1987, pp. 10-22.

⁹ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Evaluation of Programs Promoting Participatory Development and Good Governance*, Synthesis Report, Paris, France, 1997, p. 47.

¹⁰ Nick Devas and Simon Delay, "Local Democracy and the Challenges of Decentralising the State: An International Perspective", *Local Government Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 5, 2006, pp. 677-695.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² W. Harry Blair, "Participation, Public Policy, Political Economy and Development in Rural Bangladesh, 1958-85", *World Development*. Vol. 13, No. 12, 1985, pp. 1231-1247.

¹³ The Philippines Country Paper, *Country Reports on Local Government Systems: Philippines, 2003* available at www.unescap.org/huset/lgstudy/new-countrypaper/Philippines/Philippines.pdf, accessed on 20 May 2012.

Table 1: Examples of Effective Decentralisation in Some Developing Countries¹⁴

Country	Sectors	Category of Initiative	Positive Change through LG
Botswana	Social development through population control, financial reform, preparing costing manual and improve revenue sources	Awareness building, good governance and greater participation	High
India (West Bengal)	Rural development	Public-private partnership, community participation law to increase greater involvement, and improvement of management and financing system	High
The Philippines	Social and community development	Providing full autonomy of LG, empowerment of local authority and strong public-private partnership	High

On the other hand, in some countries, decentralisation has brought potential conflicts and tensions at local levels because of imperfect planning, excessive central domination and regional group interests. For example, in some parts of Asian countries such as in China, a case study on Uxin Banner of Inner Mongolia shows that local government has failed to bring environmental sustainability under the environmental reformation process called “ecological construction”.¹⁵ Incidentally, it has brought massive environmental degradation because of top-down central policies and bureaucratic form of local government. Likewise, at Central Kalimantan in Indonesia, it is revealed that political system at local level is highly controlled by central body which generates anxieties and escalates chaos over resources among the local people.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Ibid*, also, information compiled from Kempe Ronald Hope, 2000, *op.cit* ; W. Harry Blair, 1985, *op.cit* .

¹⁵ Hong Jiang, “Decentralization, Ecological Construction, and the Environment in Post-Reform China: Case Study from Uxin Banner, Inner Mongolia”, *World Development*, Vol. 34, No. 11, 2006, pp. 1907-1921.

¹⁶ John F. McCarthy, “Changing to Gray: Decentralization and the Emergence of Volatile Socio-Legal Configurations in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia” *World Development*, Vol. 32, No.7, 2004, pp. 1199-1223.

Besides, based on the empirical studies in environment management divisions on six countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America (Senegal, Nepal, Uganda, Indonesia, Bolivia and Nicaragua), Jesse et al. showed that the control of central body and defective reform and planning of decentralisation are the significant barriers to make the local government accountable in these countries.¹⁷ More precisely, in some Latin American countries such as in Brazil and Argentina, the power of specific elite groups is so strong at the local areas that it extremely hampers the decentralisation process.¹⁸ Furthermore, in some African countries, conflicts arise because of ethnic diversity and interest of elite groups. For instance, in Ghana, government launched the decentralisation process with the motto 'bring the government to the people' during 1980s.¹⁹ But, the reality was that it had failed to motivate local people and further increased the political consolidation among certain interest groups. In Uganda, the ethnic diversity is so extreme that government always needs to consider the areas of local government while formulating the local councils.²⁰ Thus, based on these evidences, it can be argued that decentralisation has brought some mixed results in the developing countries. Hence, there is now increasing uncertainty whether decentralisation brings development considering its existing limitations and challenges in various countries. To examine this thoroughly, the rest of this paper analyses the overall scenario of local government in Bangladesh as a case study.

4. Local Government System in Bangladesh

The idea of decentralisation through local government system of Bangladesh is not new. Rather, the system is almost resembled to those of India and Pakistan as these two countries shared common culture and history until 1947, before the partition. Over the period of time, a number of initiatives and reformation strategies had been taken to strengthen the local government system. During the British period (1757-1947), *Village Chawkidary Act* (1870), the Lord Repon Declaration (1882) and the Bengal Municipal Act (1932) were the basis to

¹⁷Jesse C. Ribot, Arun Agrawal and M. Anne Larson, "Recentralizing while Decentralizing: How National Governments Reappropriate Forest Resources", *World Development*, Vol. 34, No. 11, 2006, pp. 1864-1886.

¹⁸Berg Kliksberg, "Rebuilding the State for Social Development: Towards 'Smart Government'", *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, Vol. 66, No. 2, 2000, pp. 241-257.

¹⁹Carola Lentz, "Decentralization, the State and Conflicts over Local Boundaries in Northern Ghana", *Development and Change*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2006, pp. 901-919.

²⁰R Cameron, "Local Government Reorganization in South Africa", in J. Meligrana (ed.) *Redrawing Local Government Boundaries: An International Study of Politics, Procedures and Decisions*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004, pp. 206-226.

promote local government system in this subcontinent.²¹ However, during the whole colonial era, the autonomy of local councils was noticeably low.²²

During the reign of East Pakistan regime since 1947 to 1971, local government system was recognised as basic democracy. The system was mainly initiated based on the four tiers following some British Acts. However, after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, a number of initiatives were taken to reform local government system considering the devolution of power. In 1973, the first *Union Parishad* election was held, though elections of *Thana Development Committee* and *Zila Councils* were nullified.²³ However, based on the decree of Local Government Ordinance during President Ziaur Rahman's regime in 1976, *Union Parishad* (Council), *Thana Parishad* and *Zila* (District) *Parishad* were formed at different levels.²⁴ For further strengthening the ties between state and the rural people, the Zia administration set up *Gram Sarkars* (Village Government) throughout the whole country.

In 1982, a significant step of decentralisation took place when Ershad government declared three tiers of government system at the local levels. Under *Upazila Parishad* Ordinance, all the *Thanas* were upgraded as *Upazila* (Sub-District) *Parishad*.²⁵ *Upazila Council* was comprised of an *Upazila Chairman*, some intellectuals, women representatives and members. Generally, the *Upazila Council* declared annual budget for revenue earnings and had the authority to take any decision regarding project formulation and implementation so that the development activities of the government could reach to the grass-root levels. To decentralise power, the first and second elections of *Upazila Parishad* were held in 1985 and 1990 respectively. During these times, confrontations between *Upazila Chairman* and Members of Parliament (MPs) were considered as major challenges to make the local government system functional.

However, during the BNP government in 1991, the *Upazila* system was abolished and a two-tier government system (*Union Parishad* and *Zila Parishad*) was formulated by the central government.²⁶ Again during the reign of Awami League government in 1997, four-tier of local government system was

²¹Nizam U. Ahmed, "Government Politics and Village Reform in Bangladesh: A Note on Alternative Approaches", *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, Vol. 55, Vol. 3, 1989, pp. 493-516.

²²L.H. Choudhury, *Local Self Government and Its Reorganization in Bangladesh*, Dhaka: National Institute of local Government (NILG), 1987.

²³ Abu Elias Sarker, 2003, *op.cit.*

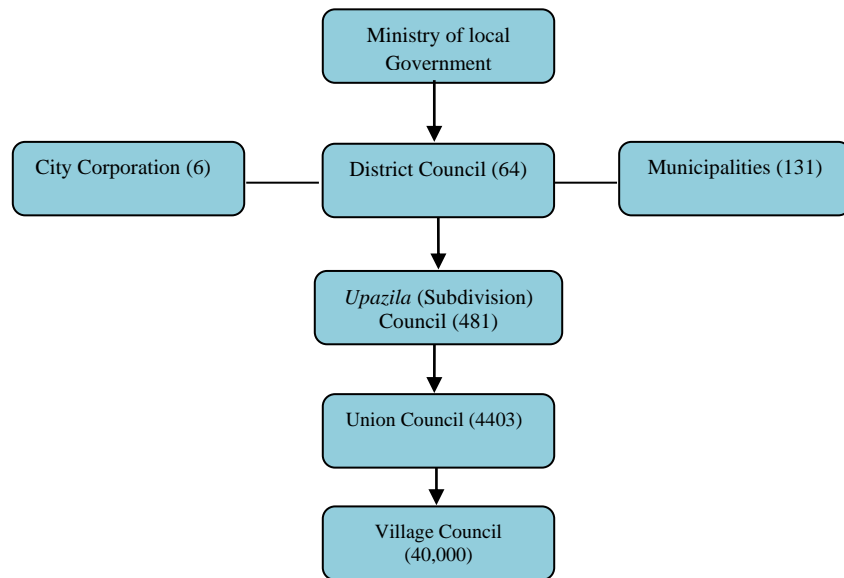
²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵Nizam Ahmed, "Experiments in Local Government Reform in Bangladesh", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 28, No. 8, 1988, pp. 813-829.

²⁶ K. Siddiqui, *Local Government in Bangladesh*, Dhaka: University Press, 1994, pp. 67-102.

introduced and legislations were formulated to give power to *Upazila Parishad* for collecting revenues, organising financial plans and recruiting its own employees.²⁷ Conversely, from 2001 until 2003, different initiatives were proposed by the BNP led government including the formation of *Gram Sarker*, however, most of the decisions were not materialised.²⁸ As shown in Figure 2, on 10 May 2008, the structure of local government was approved by the Caretaker Government to make the local government more functional.

Figure 2: Local Government Structure of Bangladesh²⁹



Additionally, in June 2008, the government formulated new *Upazila Parishad Act* excluding the rights of the Member of Parliaments (MPs) to interfere in the actions of *Upazila Parishad* and followed the jurisdiction to fix the definite timeframe of *Upazila Parishad* election.

Theoretically, the four-tier system of local government has been prevalent in the country for long, but practically, only two-tier (*Union Parishad* in rural areas and City Corporation and *Pourasabha/Municipalities* in urban areas) system is working with regular election basis. The elections of *Union Parishad* are generally held on regular basis and it is the only body of local government which has been operated for many years. However, by the election of *Upazila Council*

²⁷K. Westergaard, *Decentralization in Bangladesh: Local Government and NGOs*, paper presented at the Colloquium on Decentralization and Development at Department of Political Science, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, 2000.

²⁸Abu Elias Sarker, 2003, *op.cit.*

²⁹ *The Prothonm Alo*, 11 May 2008.

held on 22 January 2008, *Upazila Parishad* was activated as a mini-parliament after long 19 years and considered as the land mark event in the history of local government.³⁰

In the rural areas, the main functions of local government are to take necessary measures to prevent illegal acts in villages, ensure community participation and initiate various socio-economic activities including enhancing family planning programmes, developing local resources, protecting public properties, registering births and deaths and executing all types of surveys.³¹ On the other hand, the roles of City Corporations and *Pourasabhas* in urban areas are mainly infrastructural development, waste management, tree plantation, relief distribution during flood and famine and other social welfare services.³²

5. Benefits of Decentralisation

In Bangladesh, around 85 per cent people are living in the rural areas. Therefore, most of the challenges derive from the local contexts.³³ As decentralisation creates a scope of participation of rural people residing in local areas, it has brought some successes in the social, political, economic and environmental sectors.

5.1 Political Development

5.1.1 Bottom-Up to Top-Down Approach

Decentralisation process, in other words, the bottom-up to top-down approach, nevertheless, has created an opportunity to ensure the decision making representatives who could explain the needs of local people. As the process involves the local people, it reduces the information and communication gaps between the local people and bureaucrats who are appointed locally in some rural areas. Generally, local government conducts socio-economic surveys on the local people at every village.³⁴ Therefore, central government gets the opportunity to

³⁰ Shakhawat Liton, "Nation Goes to Polls of Hopes Today", *The Daily Star*, 22 January 2009, p.1.

³¹ Abu Elias Sarker, 2003, *op.cit.*

³² UNESCAP, *Local Government in Asia and the Pacific: A Comparative Study*, Country Paper, Bangladesh, United Nations Economic Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2000, available at <http://www.unescap.org/huset/lgstudy/country/bangladesh/bangladesh.html>, accessed on 11 June 2012.

³³ A.T.M Abdullahel Shafi and Farzana Mannan Borna, "Local Participatory Governance: A Study of Five Union Parishads in Bangladesh", paper for *Third International Conference on Interdisciplinary Social Sciences*, Monash University Centre, Prato, Tuscany, Italy, 22-24 July 2008, available at http://i08.cgpublisher.com/proposals/626/index_html, accessed on 13 June 2012.

³⁴ UNESCAP, 2000, *op.cit.*

collect the information and utilise these data for taking decision in development planning at the local levels. By means of that, this bottom-up approach of local government has become a significant step to institutionalise the democratic process throughout the whole country.

5.1.2 Ensure and Extend the Grass-root Participation

Eventually, in several areas, local level participation has become successful due to some plans and programmes implemented by the local government bodies in association with the NGOs. For example, Healthy City Projects of several Municipal Corporations in metropolitan cities with the local authority guidance have increased greater participation of the local people.³⁵ Besides, *Union Council*, an active body of the local government system in Bangladesh, participates in various types of development and government policy implementation activities by thirteen local development committees. In these committees, all the members of council and local intellectuals could play their roles in local level decision making process and this initiative helps to reduce conflicts among the local people.

5.2 Social Development

5.2.1 Empowerment of Women

To achieve significant growth as well as connect with the mainstream trend, participation of women in the development process is an important goal of Bangladesh government as more than half of the population consists of women. Article 10 and 60 of Bangladesh Constitution ensure the empowerment of women in the local government.³⁶ Under the Local Government Amendment Act in 1997, government has created quota for women at the *Union Parishad* level which is considered as a significant “milestone” to make the rural women empowered.³⁷ By the Act, some seats are preserved for women and they are allowed to participate at local level elections. This positive achievement, however, entails a structured form for women to participate in political decision making and creates a scope for them to stay at the midpoint of local level development. Though participation of women as Chairmen and Members is low, it has, nevertheless, gradually been increased (as shown in Table 2 next page).

³⁵*Ibid.*

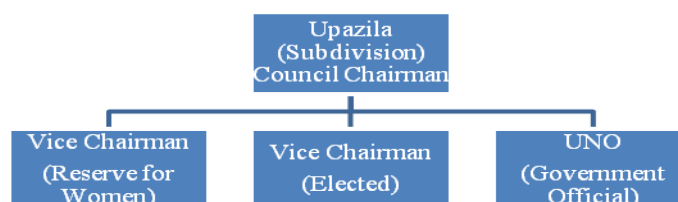
³⁶Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), *The Constitution of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh*, 2004, available at <http://www.mofa.gov.bd/>, accessed on 21 May 2012.

³⁷Md. Mostafizur Rahman Khan and Fardaus Ara, “Women Participation and Empowerment in Local Government: Bangladesh Union Parishad Perspective”, *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2006, pp. 73- 92.

Table 2: Women's Involvement at Union Parishad Elections within 20 years (1973-2003)³⁸

Elections	Election Year	Women Contestants		Elected Chairman and Member	
		Chairman	Member	Chairman	Member
First	1973	-	-	1	-
Second	1977	19	19	4	7
Third	1984	-	-	6	-
Fourth	1988	79	863	1	-
Fifth	1992	115	1135	8	20
Sixth	1997	102	43969	23	12,882
Seventh	2003	232	43764	22	12,684

In recent times, approved "Local Government Amendments 2008" ensures women's participation which is also a significant step in local government structure. For instance, at *Union Council* level, some seats are precisely preserved for women, that are considered as a breakthrough for grass-root women. Besides, in *Upazila Council* election, the posts for two Vice Chairpersons have been created and one of them is for woman which is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Executive Body of Upazila Council in Bangladesh³⁹

5.2.2 Improvement of Health and Education

In Bangladesh, local government is significantly contributing to improve education among the poor people. As a matter of fact, the local representatives are encouraging more enrollments at primary and secondary school levels to reduce the dropout rates.⁴⁰ Besides, they oversee the primary educational institutes, inspire parents to send their children to school and create

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

³⁹ Made by the Author.

⁴⁰ Bangladesh Report, *State of Women in Urban Local Government, Bangladesh, 2002*, available at <http://www.unescap.org/huset/women/reports/bangladesh.pdf>, accessed on 12 June 2012.

consciousness among adult and female regarding the importance of education. Therefore, from 1985 to 2005, the overall literacy and enrollment rates among the adult, youth and children were gradually increased in the country.⁴¹ Apart from this, local government is working in collaboration with the NGOs to improve health of people through awareness building regarding family planning methods. As an outcome, the fertility rate has been decreasing significantly since 1990s. Also, due to reduction of fertility rate, infant and maternal mortality rate are gradually decreasing in the country.⁴²

5.2.3 *Reducing Early Marriage and Dowry*

In Bangladesh, early marriage is a social custom which is negatively associated with the issues of school attainment, reproductive health complexities and high fertility rate. The contribution of local government is appreciable especially to reduce early marriage and dowry. In the 1970s, women's average age at marriage was 16 years but in the 1990s, it reached to 18 years.⁴³ Though it is estimated that 75 per cent of rural women still get married at the age of 16 and only 5 per cent of them usually obey the state law that the minimum age at marriage is 18 years.⁴⁴ In case of dowry, local government authorities are trying to build awareness among the villagers to remove the ritual of gifts and grants during marriage.

5.2.4 *Awareness Building Regarding Birth Certificate and Marriage Registration*

Local government is trying to build awareness about registration of births, deaths and marriage to have a clear picture of demography. Before decentralisation, there is no system of listing and recording of this information. Currently, local government preserves these statistics to solve the problems about land ownership and registration of marriage. As well, *Union Parishad Chairmen* and *Pourasabha Commissioners* are playing important roles to settle the disputes over possession of land, home and market places through consultations and mediation with the conflicting parties.

⁴¹United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World*, Human Development Report, New York, 2007-2008. Also see, UNDP, *International Cooperation at a Crossroads: Aid, Trade and Security in an Unequal World*, Human Development Report, New York, 2005.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³Human Development Report, 2005, *op.cit.*

⁴⁴Abul Barkat and Mazid Murtaza, *Adolescent Reproductive Health in Bangladesh Status, Policies, Programs and Issues*, POLICY Project Report, USAID, Asia, Near East Bureau, 2003.

5.3 Economic Development

5.3.1 *Scope of Distribution of Resources*

On the whole, local authorities create the scope of distribution of resources to those people who are really disadvantaged. For this, they prepare policies for local resource management and improvement. Usually, *Union Council* is responsible to distribute relief, initiating different safety net programmes such as old age pension, widow allowance, vulnerable group feeding and distribution of fertilizer among the farmers. Furthermore, the members of local bodies always play an important role in any types of natural calamities including flood, cyclone and droughts.

5.3.2 *Employment Generation*

The Local Government Commission suggests various programmes to ensure greater involvement of disadvantaged and disabled groups in local body actions through the appointment of the committees.⁴⁵ To accomplish this, local authorities have initiated a number of programmes including micro-credit and handicrafts training which have entailed some positive impacts to generate employment particularly for vulnerable women in the local areas.⁴⁶ Besides, to reduce poverty, divorced, widows and helpless poor women in the rural areas are appointed in road and culverts reconstruction activities by the *Union Council*. In urban areas, local level employment generation and greater services for community people have been ensured through initiating some projects such as Urban Slum Improvement Projects, Green Umbrella Programme and Urban Primary Health Care Project (UPHCP). These programmes, nevertheless, have been effective particularly for the overall improvement of women.

5.4 Environmental Aspect

5.4.1 *Waste Management and Urban Settlement*

In urban areas, solid waste management is a mandatory task of urban local government as it is significantly a critical issue for urban development. Currently, Dhaka City Corporation is supporting the community based institutions and local NGOs to promulgate the solid waste management programmes especially for waste collection from each house and increasing awareness among the people.⁴⁷ Also, twenty *Pourasabhas* along with the four City Corporations have been working with UNICEF for slum improvement by rehabilitating slum people and street hawkers.

⁴⁵UNESCAP, 2000, *op.cit.*

⁴⁶Bangladesh Report, 2002, *op.cit.*

⁴⁷Department of Environment (DOE), Waste Concern and ITN-BUET, *SAARC Workshop on Solid Waste Management*, Dhaka, Bangladesh, October 10-12, 2004.

5.4.2 Social Forestry

In rural areas, for economic benefits and ecological sustainability, government commenced social forestry programmes in the 1980s and it has brought a great success at the grass-root levels.⁴⁸ Additionally, government persuades and instigates tree plantation projects with sharing basis with the poor village people. In the project, government provides land and plants to the poor and landless people who look after these plants until trees are fully grown up with the help of local government bodies. Thereafter, the profit of timbers of mature trees is distributed among the growers and the *Union Council*. The project, however, is environment friendly and helps to build resource among the poor people. It was estimated that from 2000 to 2003, about 23,000 people became benefited from social forestry plantations.⁴⁹

6. Challenges of Local Government

Despite some positive outcomes of decentralisation initiatives in Bangladesh, successful and authoritative local government system has not yet been developed. Hence, the prospects of local government have become bleak and often debatable in the country. The limitations in some areas are still prevalent considering the underlying broader socio-economic as well as political factors.

6.1 Lack of Central and Local linkage

Article 65 of the Bangladesh Constitution states that the elected MPs will not interfere in any activities of *Upazila Council* and if it happens, it would be a destructive and unexpected event for the country.⁵⁰ Though in the Constitution, strong hold up of the local government authorities is mentioned, often, they are highly controlled by the central body and this is one of the major impediments in forming decentralised local government system. It is perceived that central government is still formulating the legislations to carry out the elections, review the taxes, allocate budget and execute other important issues of local government. Yet, they are the sole authority to decide the size, formation and composition of the local government. At the district level, absence of synchronisation between local and central levels is so severe that the local bodies have been facing great challenges. In the financial sector, central government is

⁴⁸Nur Muhammed, Masao Koike, Md. Sajjaduzzaman and Kim Sophanarith, "Reckoning Social Forestry in Bangladesh: Policy and Plan versus Implementation" *Forestry*, Vol. 78, No. 4, 2005, pp. 373-383.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰Badiul Alam Mazumder, "Upazila Parishad: Should Refrain from Suicidal Initiatives", *The Prothom Alo*, 24 January 2009, p.8.

the supreme authority who decides up to what extent they would allocate or reduce grants in a particular local area.⁵¹

6.2 Village Politics and Inadequate Equal Participation

Article 59 of the Bangladesh Constitution gives emphasis on framing local government bodies with a spokesman to ensure equal participation of grass-root people. However, in actual fact, this principle is not maintained adequately. The findings of Matiur Rahman showed that local government is primarily controlled by the “divisive party politics”.⁵² The recurrent changes of local government structure are somewhat responsible for this. As an impact of this, the quality and eminence of local candidates significantly vary. Though one of the best ways to ensure greater participation of local people is holding free and fair elections of the local government bodies, in most cases, it does not take place. Sometimes, some of the local people are involved in local level activities based on their assets and good linkages with the local elites. Due to this village politics in the rural areas, greater involvement of people in the local level activities significantly differs. Moreover, in case of *Union Parishad*, many people cannot participate equally, as they do not know the procedures and actions of this particular local institution.

6.3 Gender Discrimination

Article 27 and 28 of Bangladesh Constitution clearly mentioned the equal rights and opportunities for women and men alike. However for women, it is not materialised practically at local level as there is a common view that the laws do not clearly specify the roles and activities of women. Besides, from the local level bodies, women are highly ignored and not given any specific tasks.⁵³ Even, there are no specific terms of reference and procedures for them to operate the local level activities. Moreover, lack of capabilities of female spokespersons, absence of proper education, narrow scopes to get involved themselves in decision making process, favouritism to male representatives and domination by husbands and extended families are considered as the real obstacles for women to involve actively in the local level activities.

⁵¹M.M Khan, “Urban Local Governance in Bangladesh: An Overview”, in Nazrul Islam and Mohabbat Mohammad Khan (eds.), *Urban Governance in Bangladesh in Pakistan*, Dhaka: Centre for Urban Studies, 1997.

⁵²Matiur Rahman, “Econometric Analysis of opinions of Union Parishad Representatives on Local Governance”, *Social Science Review*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2006, pp. 126-135.

⁵³Asian Development Bank (ADB), *Country Briefing Paper on Women in Bangladesh*, Program Department (West), Division 2, ADB, 2001.

6.4 Corruption

Generally, it is expected that decentralised form of government reduces corruption as it is a good opportunity to monitor and evaluate the tasks of bureaucrats who are entrusted with local institutions.⁵⁴ However, in Bangladesh, the locally appointed bodies often hold up the money from taxes and revenues; especially, in the coastal and disaster prone areas, rampant corruption takes place in case of relief distribution.⁵⁵ In Municipalities, tax collection system has become very ineffective due to corruption, incapability and inefficiency of collecting high rates of taxes.⁵⁶ Therefore, corruption has become a challenge at every stage of decentralised process that entails more uncertainty and negative impacts on local economy.⁵⁷ Mostly, the poor people are sufferer of corruption in public health and education sectors.

6.5 Favouritism, Mismanagement and Misuse of Power

Nepotism, mismanagement and misuse of power have been some common features during local level election in the country. Although there is a rule that the elected party cannot nominate candidate, but in practice, all Chairmen and Commissioners are somehow supported by the particular political parties.⁵⁸ In 2009 *Upazila Parishad* election, violent activities such as open clashes, acts of revenge, fighting between the supporters, illegal or forceful filling of ballot boxes and harassments of polling agents of the disputed candidates to come into power were evidences as a legacy of the previous times.⁵⁹ In many cases, it is perceived that the elected representatives especially the women came into power by unfair means. Some women are empowered who are the relatives of local elite groups. Furthermore, misuse of power by the *Upazila Parishad* Chairmen is very widespread in local areas. Although they are assigned to support the helpless people through Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) and Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) cards, widow allowance and old age pension, the resources are

⁵⁴Pranab Bardhan and Dilip Mookherjee, "Corruption and Decentralization of Infrastructure Delivery in Developing Countries", *Economic Journal*, Vol. 116, No. 1, 2006, pp. 107-133.

⁵⁵Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), *Corruption in Bangladesh: A Household Survey*, Survey Report, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2005.

⁵⁶Nazrul Islam Chowdhury and M.M Khan, *Resource Mobilization and Urban Governance in Bangladesh*, Centre for Urban Studies, Dhaka, 1997.

⁵⁷Rene´ Ve´ron and Glyn Williams, "Decentralized Corruption or Corrupt Decentralization? Community Monitoring of Poverty-Alleviation Schemes in Eastern India", *World Development*, Vol. 34, No. 11, 2006, pp. 1922-1941.

⁵⁸Bangladesh Report, 2002, *op.cit.*

⁵⁹MD Shairul Mashreque, "Upazlia Election '09 in the Transitional Period", *The Independent*, available at <http://www.theindependent-bd.com/details.php?nid=114988>, accessed on 19 June 2012.

not properly disbursed among the villagers. As pointed out by Habib Zafarullah and MY. Akhter, people generally get involved in the unfair means because of political racism, undemocratic attitudes, lack of education and consciousness.⁶⁰

6.6 Constraint of Administrative Reform and Capacity

In case of increasing the accountability of local bodies, administrative reforms are one of the greatest challenges for Bangladesh government. Currently, among the four tiers of local government, only one tier is functional in local areas.⁶¹ However, since the country's independence in 1971, the consecutive administrations have been trying to utilise and operate the local government system preserving their own interests and benefits. As a consequence, the structure of local level body has become fragile. For this weak and deficient administrative structure, it has become difficult for the existing local bodies to perform efficiently to meet the demands of local people.

6.7 Crisis of Funding and Its Inadequate Mobilisation

Equally important factor is that local government cannot run properly due to regular crisis of funds at local level. The funding is generally collected from levy, tolls, government's grants, loans and profits accumulated from properties.⁶² Nevertheless, local bodies are not permitted to receive all the resources from the above sources and have to depend on the willingness of central body. The uncertainty about the scope of annual budget generally trims down the strengths of long term local planning process. This also generates poverty and increases economic inequality between urban and rural communities. Often, local bodies cannot mobilise the limited funds at the proper places due to lack of skilled personnel at the local level. As a consequence, the existing financial management system is not run properly by the concerned authorities in the local areas.

7. Initiatives Need to be Considered

Based on the above concerns and the existing limitations, it can be said that reform of decentralisation in Bangladesh is very essential. The following initiatives need to be considered to make the local body effective:

- Participation of rural people in every stage of local government should be ensured for enhancing local level planning and accomplishment. Because, it is the people who know better about their real needs, wants and demands. To

⁶⁰Habib Zafarullah and Muhammad Yeahia Akhter, "Military Rule, Civilianization and Electoral Corruption: Pakistan and Bangladesh in Perspective", *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2001, pp. 73-94.

⁶¹UNESCAP, 2000, *op.cit.*

⁶² Nazrul Islam Chowdhury and M.M Khan, 1997, *op.cit.*

prepare and implement the planning efficiently, central government could maintain good relations with the grass-root people through carrying out the monthly meetings. Also, to work and organise on behalf of the villagers, a core group of community leaders can be selected for each village.

- MPs should refrain themselves from local level activities and avoid conflicts with the local leaders. To make the democratic system more effective, vibrant, and participatory at the grass-root levels, educated persons with great leadership skill should be enhanced.
- To increase budgetary allocation, local government should be given authority to mobilise their own resources. In this regard, transparency and accountability of local authorities should be ensured to address the expenditure in every aspect of budget.
- According to R. Crook and C. Manor, accountability is a central issue to enhance greater participation.⁶³ To increase the accountability of local officials, a local institution comprised of greater participation of local people needs to be created for raising their voice.
- Local government through decentralisation should be autonomous to lessen the control of Ministry of Local Government. It also needs to be run by the Local Government Commission to make the local body more functional. In this regard, central government should support this Commission on regular basis.
- Women should be empowered so that they can participate in decision making process through development programme. To increase capacity building, some skill-based programmes and management training can be introduced to make the women aware of their rights and responsibilities. Besides, to increase greater participation in decision making process and enhance leadership capabilities, the role of women should be clearly specified. Moreover, equal participation of women can be ensured by distributing the activities between men and women.
- To reduce corruption at the local stage, monitoring and evaluation process should be strengthened. This can be done through formulating policies and procedures for the local level government officials so that they could accomplish this task with greater accountability.

⁶³R. Crook and C. Manor, "Democratic Decentralization and Institutional Performance: Four Asian and African Experiences", *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 1995, pp. 309-34.

8. Concluding Remarks

It is a matter of fact that central government is the steering wheel of a country. Though in practice, it is difficult for the central authority to ensure development impartially considering all of its citizens. Hence, decentralisation of power and ownership is the possible alternative to ensure overall development of a country. Indeed, for some developing countries, decentralisation is a good path to ensure efficient development process. By contrast, decentralisation is not working well in some countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America because of internal and external challenges. Observing the specific case study on Bangladesh, it can be said that there is no substitute of strong local government for ensuring good governance and peaceful democratic system as it has brought some positive impacts especially on socio-economic sectors. Equally important is that it also has entailed some challenges. However, the concept of decentralisation itself is not a problem. The problem lies how this system is operated by the government. Decentralisation can be a good path only when a country can overcome the challenges from its local context and run its administration properly. Otherwise, it will not work well for the country's overall development.