Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)
eISSN: 2664-8148 (online)
https://ideapublishers.org/index.php/lassij
Vol. 10, No. 1 (January-December), 2026, pp. 45-61
https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/10.1.3
Original Research Article

The role of local government in environmental governance and sustainable development: An assessment from rural Bangladesh

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Abstract:

Bangladesh has ranked among the most vulnerable in the world where the survival of millions of people and possibility of a sustainable development is intrinsically linked to the health of its environment. Focusing on Union Parishad as the sole unit of rural administration, the research attempts to analyze the role and power of the said institution, the systemic pressures limiting its performance using the mixed method approach. The findings suggest a profound conundrum. While there is near unanimity among the rural communities that environmental degradation, taking the forms of floods, river erosion and salinity, is a very threatening hazard, the fact is that the study also shows deep disillusionment with those institutions that are supposed to protect them. The study identifies a near-total lack of community engagement (81.5%) driven by chronic funding shortages, corruption, and political interference. To resolve this, a paradigm shift toward fiscal decentralization, through a dedicated 'Climate Resilience Fund' and mandatory 'Ward Shavas,' is required to restore public trust and localize the SDGs. The paper moves towards a conclusion that this is not because of lack of interest of the citizens, but a broken system of governance.

Article History

Received:
22-Oct-2025

Revised:
06-Nov-2025

Re-revised:
30-Mar-2026

Accepted:
31-Mar-2026

Published:
20-Apr-2026

Keywords: Climate resilience, Environmental governance, Local government, Citizen participation, Fiscal decentralization, Sustainable development.

How to Cite:
Faisal, M. Z. & Uddin, M. S. (2026). The role of local government in environmental governance and sustainable development: An assessment from rural Bangladesh. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ), 10*(1), 45-61. https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/10.1.3

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1. Introduction

Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable nations in the world who are extremely susceptible to climatic events because of their unique geographical position, hydro-geological characteristics, low level and high population density, and high levels of poverty, as well as excessive dependence on nature. Climate change and environmental destruction, which are triggered by economic development, urbanization and population growth, threaten the existence of planet (German watch, 2021). Bangladesh is facing many environmental crises like climate change, water pollution, air pollution and hazardous waste.

Recent 2024 assessment of Word Risk Index reveal that from 2000 to 2019, Bangladesh suffered economic losses worth $3.72 billion (The Climate reality Project, 2025), with heatwaves alone costing the economy $1.78 billion (0.4% of GDP) in 2024 due to lost productivity (World Bank, 2025). Furthermore, extreme weather disrupted the education of 35 million children in 2024 (UNICEF, 2025), while long-term projections indicate that 1 in every 7 people in Bangladesh will be displaced by 2050 as the country potentially loses 11% of its land to sea-level rise (The Climate reality Project, 2025). The increase in climate has become a major threat for achieving Sustainable Development Goals in the country. The government is trying to overcome these issues to build a sustainable environment-friendly Bangladesh for the current and future generation (Ahsan et al., 2014).

Effective environmental governance is critical. It encompasses all the stakeholders, state and non-state who consider the environmental concerns in their plans of development to mitigate the disasters and help the vulnerable population (Haque, et al., 2023). Local governments have a vital role to play in helping to manage the consequences of climate change, especially in the cities. For decades, the Government of Bangladesh has taken necessary steps to make institutional arrangements from the national to the union levels to deal with disasters effectively (Islam, et al., 2024). These mechanisms are guided by the Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD), where Disaster Management Committees are constituted from the National Disaster Management Council that is chaired by the Prime Minister down to the Union Disaster Management Committee (UDMC) that is chaired by the Chairman of the Union Parishad (UP) (DDM, 2012).

The 2030 Agenda places a focus on an inclusive and localized process; with the commitment "leave no one behind" placed at the core of local government (GIU, 2023; Islam, 2022). The international development community is starting to realize more than ever, that the local level of government is well positioned to mobilize local development stakeholders (Islam, 2020). However, participatory grassroots local government is still not established anywhere near in many developing nations like Bangladesh. Mechanisms such as the committee system or open budget discussions are not used to a great extent, thus local government is unable to increase access to basic services or create an effective platform for citizen engagement in the decision-making process (Islam, 2018; Islam, 2020). With more than 70 percent of its population still

living in rural areas, Bangladesh is faced with a number of environmental threats. The Union Parishad, as the representative body of the central government, is an important role player in making the environment safer in rural Bangladesh.

This research aims to analyze the competence of the Union Parishad in protecting environmental governance while achieving the SDGs in rural Bangladesh. The objectives of this study are:

- To analyze the nature and scope of environmental governance adopted by the government of Bangladesh to protect environmental sustainability in rural areas.
- To learn how local government designs appropriate programs for ensuring environmental sustainability.
- To perceive the role of local government in localizing SDGs by improving governance at the grassroots level.
- To undertake a case study on the role of the Union Parishad and determine whether donor support contributes positively towards protecting environmental governance.

The study is guided by a prevailing research question: To what extent is the local government able to move forward with inadequate resources and lack of delegated authority for localization of SDGs by improving governance in safeguarding environmental security at the grassroots level? Despite much research carried out on the theme of environmental issues no research work is carried out particularly to know about role of local government in the issue of environment in Bangladesh. This research tries to fill this gap by examining the current role of local government institutions and examining their effectiveness in ensuring environmental governance in Bangladesh.

2. Literature review

This paper is a synthesis of the available knowledge about the synergy of environment governance and sustainable development with a special focus on the role of local government in rural Bangladesh. It fixes a conceptual idea about environmental governance, explores the acute environmental vulnerabilities of Bangladesh, the policy evolution of the country, and the role has been narrowed down to the role mandated for local government organizations. Finally, it identifies the persistent problems, the challenges to effective local action, and highlights the research gap dealing with in this study.

2.1. Conceptualizing environmental governance

Environmental governance is derived from the larger paradigm of Human Governance that became predominant in 1994 and brought the focus of security away from the state and towards the individual. This is considered a people-centered view that is regarded as critical towards achieving stability within the nation, regionally and globally (Faisal & Ahmed, 2019; Islam,

2020d). This change was facilitated by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) which saw human security in the 1994 Human Development Report as the composite set of seven dimensions which interact in a circular way: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political. This structure is essentially designed for environmental security as a vital block of human well-being (UN, 2017).

Based on this, the concept of environmental governance deals with decision making and regulation of management of the environment and natural resources (Faisal, et al., 2026). It is defined as "the totality of organizations, policy instruments, financing mechanisms, rules, procedures and norms governing the processes of global environmental protection". Its key principles encompass the integration of environmental considerations into all decision-making processes, the conceptualization of human systems as recursively embedded within the environmental system, the importance of emphasizing the linkage between people and ecosystems, and the promotion of transitioning to sustainable, circular systems. However, global environmental governance remains impeded by numerous obstacles such as a lack of political will, ineffective regulations, inadequate financing and low coordination between stakeholders and lack of balance with powerful international trade and finance agenda (IPCC, 2012). The involvement of all concerned at all levels of participation is critical for success.

2.2. Environmental vulnerability in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has been known as one of the most vulnerable and ecologically fragile nations in the world. This vulnerability is based on a combination of its distinctive geographical and hydro-geological properties - a landscape dominated by floodplains with a very low elevation from the sea - and socio-economic factors - high population density, widespread poverty and an economy which is deep-rooted in nature (Ali et al., 2019). Over 70 percent of the population lives in rural areas, one of which is the area that faces numerous environmental threats. The effects of global warming and climate change are severely aggravating these susceptibilities (Faisal, 2025a); besides, frequent cyclones, tidal surges, salinity intrusion, water logging, erratic rainfall, river erosion, landslides, etc. are some of the vulnerabilities that are increasing the risks that will be faced in the near future, as well as adverse effects on agricultural production (Islam and Faisal, 2024). The government is cognizant of such challenges and is trying to rectify them in an effort to develop a healthy and sustainable Bangladesh (GEF Evaluation Office and MoFA, 2009).

2.3. Evolution of environmental policy in Bangladesh

The Government of Bangladesh has been incrementally developing a policy, legal and institutional framework over a number of decades. Its formal engagement started after the mandated by Stockholm in 1972, it resulted in the Water Pollution Control Ordinance in 1973 and the Environment Pollution Control Ordinance in 1977 (GED, 2012). Department of Pollution Control was formed in 1985 and was later renamed to Department of Environment

(DOE) (Panday, 2011). A significant milestone was the National Environmental Policy in 1992 (revised in 2018), which had among them the preservation of ecological balance in the nation and protect the nation from natural calamities, as well as controlling all the activities that pollute the environment (Saadat, 2022).

With climate change becoming a key issue, the Bangladesh policy agenda changed. There is an increasing realization that the adverse effects of climate change will cause extra pressure on the overall development of a vulnerable country like Bangladesh (Abed, 2021). A response by the government to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the National Adaptation Program of Action (NAPA) was prepared in 2005 in adherence with the goals of sustainable development (CDMP, 2014). This was followed by the landmark Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP) in 2009 which deals with the impacts of climate through both adaptation and mitigation. In support of this, the government set up the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF) utilizing its own resources and enunciated the Climate Change Trust Fund Act in 2010 (Islam, 2020). The government has also mainstreamed the SDGs in national level development planning, for instance, the Seventh Five Year Plan (2016-2020) (Faisal, 2025).

2.4. The union parishad as the key actor

While the national policies help to give the strategic direction, their implementation is dependent on the institutions within local governments and the most important one in rural Bangladesh is the Union Parishad. There is a general agreement that for the environmental governance of rural areas there is no alternative to local bodies such as the Union Parishad (Haque, et al., 2025). The UP is the key channel through which the government uses the resources for protection of the environment and are the central government representative at the local level (Local Government Division, 2009). The UP is responsible for countering too many local climate and disaster-related eventualities, ranging from natural resource management (tree plantation, protecting embankments), pollution control and public health (mitigation of arsenic, providing clean water & sanitation), to disaster management (distribution of early warning, maintained shelters) (Asaduzzaman, 2008; GoB, 2008). A key function is also in raising the level of social awareness whereby often local leaders are playing a bottom-up leadership role in the fight against climate change.

2.5. Challenges and research gap

Despite this extensive mandate, implementation of environmental governance is faced with serious obstacles. The most important barrier is the huge financial strain the UPs operate under; a lack of finance is regarded as the most significant problem facing them. Delays in the release of government grants hinder the onset of timely environmental programs by UPs (ILO, 2023). Compounding this is a lack of meaningful citizen participation; mechanisms such as committee systems and open budget discussion are not effectively used. This causes a serious disunity of

different stakeholders (UNICEF, 2020). These problems are rooted in more fundamental governance deficits, including patron-client relationships, unwarranted political influence and mismanagement and a lack of transparency (World Bank, 2022). The literature has clearly documented these challenges but according to available sources, no research has been done specifically on the role of local government in the environmental governance setting in Bangladesh. This research therefore attempts to address this critical gap by appraising the existing role, effectiveness, and impact of local government bodies in this domain.

3. Theoretical framework

This study uses Environmental Governance as its central theoretical framework in an attempt to link the actions of local institutions, community participation and achieving sustainable development outcomes. Environmental Governance is based on the larger paradigm of Human Governance which became more popular in academia in 1994 by questioning the state-centric notion of security and consequently arguing that the right and proper person is the individual. The more or less people-centered view is required for a stable reason with the aim of protecting human lives among critical threats (Asaduzzaman, 2008). The UNDP's 1994 Human Development Report operationalized this concept, introducing "human security" which had "environmental security" as one of its seven core components explicitly linking the quality of the environment to the fundamental security of individuals (Islam 2021, 2020). This article takes the same approach and looks at environmental degradation in rural Bangladesh as a direct cause of human security of diminishing the number of rural inhabitants (Ahmed and Islam, 2012).

The totality of organizations, policy tools, financing mechanisms, rules, and norms that govern environmental protection is known as Environmental Governance. In order to be more analytic, this general idea could be subdivided into four major principles of good governance (IPCC, 2013):

a) **Participation:** It involves where all the stakeholders take part in the decisions making, the implementation, and monitoring of the environmental programs.
b) **Responsibility:** This means that the actions and decisions of the public officials and institutions should be accountable.
c) **Transparency:** It is strongly connected with accountability, so that means that some decisions and processes are transparent and may be analyzed publicly.
d) **Predictability:** This can be described as the fair application of laws and policies.

This paper takes as analytical prism the four pillars in which the quality of environmental governance in the form of Union Parishad is gauged. This framework will be selected because it is directly related to the research aims as well as the context in the rural Bangladesh. The pillar of Participation allows for the analysis of the immense levels of community disengagement in the study amounting to a disastrous breakdown with principles of good

governance (Islam, 2020c). The pillars of Accountability and Transparency provide a good framework to analyze the problems of entrenched governance, including corruption, political interference, and present them as indicators of underlying deprivation. Lastly, the relation of framework and Sustainable Development establish the relation between the actions of solidarity at micro level like that of Union Parishad and macro-level targets in Agenda 2030, relevancy of a good quality of local governance is the prime factor in achieving such goals (Islam, 2020b).

4. Research methodology

In this study, mixed methods design was employed in order to gain a multifaceted and rich picture of the complicated interplay that exists between the local government activity and the perceptions of the local communities regarding the environmental governance. The structured community survey which was the quantitative part of the methodology, was used to define general patterns and trends, and the qualitative part of the approach which was Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) was aimed at identifying in-depth details and the logic behind the subject matter. A combination of data collected using both techniques increases the validity of the research.

To choose five districts to display the overall variety of initiatives in the issues with rural Bangladesh, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted with the aim of selecting five Union Parishads that represent five kinds of environmental vulnerabilities so that a larger scope of problems would be reflected:

- **Coastal Vulnerability (Cyclone):** Mongla Upazila, Khulna district.
- **Riverine Vulnerability (Flood):** Belkuchi Upazila, Sirajganj district.
- **Compound Vulnerability (Flood and River Erosion):** Islampur Upazila, Jamalpur district.
- **Haor Vulnerability (Flash Flood):** Mithamain Upazila, Kishoreganj district.
- **Peri-Urban Vulnerability (Urbanization):** Savar Upazila, Dhaka district.

Data collection was carried out with primary and secondary sources. Secondary data collection involved an intensive desk review of academic literature, government policies and legal documents, (e.g. Environment Policy, BCCSAP) grey literature, from NGO's and UN bodies, and media sources.

This Primary data was collected directly from the field. A community-level survey with a sample size of N=400 household was undertaken with a proportional quota of 80 respondents from each of the 5 study sites. A structured questionnaire was conducted by face-to-face interview. Qualitative data were collected using N=40 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) of policymakers, government officials, practitioners from NGOs and donor agencies as well as academics. A semi-structured interview guide was used for the KIIs, access also Focused

Group Discussions (FGDs) were also conducted in each study area in order to validate survey results and explore solutions together.

The research of the quantitative data was carried out with the help of a statistical program. The data were summarized by descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) and were explored by inferential statistics (Chi-square test of independence) to check possible relationships among important categorical variables. KIIs and FGDs provided qualitative data which were analyzed using a thematic approach whereby the data were familiarized with, coded and theme developed, reviewed and refined into overarching themes. Lastly, quantitative findings and qualitative findings have been synthesized to provide a more robust and in-depth insight into the research issue. The research strictly followed ethical rules including right to informed consent/anonymity/confidentiality, security of all raw data protection etc.

5. Findings and analysis

This section introduces the empirical findings of the survey conducted among 400 people in the community as well as qualitative insights found by key informants.

5.1. Demographic profile of participants

Out of those five targeted locations of the study, 400 participants were considered where 80 participants from each would gather under the boundary of Mongla, Belkuchi, Islampur, Mithamain, and Savar. The highest number of respondents (38.8%) was the group who fell in the range of 31-40, and 41-50 (30.5%) also show that it is mostly established adult views. The sample was mostly male (80.5%) and the females were approximately 19.5%. The professional background was varied, with students, farmers and small business owners being the most notable categories, in order to ensure a wide range of socio-economic perspectives were covered.

5.2. Environmental awareness and perception

A great lack of awareness against the formal terminology of governance was found; for instance, a considerable number of the population had either never heard of "environmental governance" or did not understand its meaning. This may form an obstacle to the engagement of the community. Despite the above, there was near consensus on the seriousness of the environmental situation with a shocking 54% of the respondents affirming that they consider environmental degradation to be problematic and a serious problem in their locality. This means there is a strong public mandate for decisive action. The major environmental issues as viewed by the respondents were consistent with the particular vulnerability of their locations and were comprised of flooding, water pollution, river erosion, air pollution, cyclones and deforestation.

5.3. Assessment of union parishad's role and effectiveness

When asked how they feel about the role of Union Parishad in tackling environmental problems, its role in water, it became clear that there is high unsatisfaction and lack of interest in community. The largest group of respondents (46%) were "Dissatisfied" followed by those who were "Neutral" (43.8%) with a small minority of those expressing their satisfaction. This raises the question of whether the UP's efforts are not visible or are not impactful or not sufficiently.

One of the most worrying findings is in relation to public participation. A staggering 81.5 per cent respondents said that they have never been associated in any kind of environmental protection or disaster management programmers facilitated by their Union Parishad. This points to a serious failure of participatory governance paradigm and decision-making process is taken from the top and the inhabitants are the passive receivers, rather than their active partner.

Respondents identified several key challenges hindering the UP’s effectiveness. The most frequently cited difficulties were:

- **Lack of Funding:** Overwhelmingly ranked as the single greatest obstacle.
- **Corruption:** The second most significant challenge, pointing to deep-seated mistrust.
- **Lack of Community Participation:** Residents themselves identified the lack of public involvement as a key problem.
- **Political Interference:** Ranked as a significant impediment to sound planning and implementation.
- **Lack of Technical Expertise:** A belief that the UP lacks the necessary knowledge and skills.

A Chi-square test revealed a statistically significant relationship (p-value = 0.0262) between the location of a respondent and his/her satisfaction with the role of the UP, i.e. the level of satisfaction varies significantly across the study sites. For example, there was visible dissatisfaction in types of flood and erosion prone areas of Belkuchi, Islampur etc than the coastal area of Mongla.

5.4. Community voices on improving governance

Qualitative analysis showed four major themes from community suggestions. First and foremost was the demand for ensuring transparency and accountability and fighting corruption. Respondents called for honesty and strict government monitoring again and again, including one respondent that said that "They are corrupted and they don't do any work without bribes". One farmer from the riverine Belkuchi site lamented, 'We see the water rising every year, but we never see the UP Chairman in our ward until the election—relief only reaches those with

political ties.' Another female respondent from the coastal Mongla region shared, 'The cyclone shelter is too far and poorly maintained; when we ask for repairs, the Parishad says there is no budget, yet we see new roads being built near the influential leaders' houses. The second theme was the need to step up funding and ensure proper allocation of resources, which is consistent with the quantitative findings. A third theme was to strengthen community awareness, involvement and training. As one participant suggested, "They should organize meetings with the local people and discuss the problems to find a better solution". Finally, respondents emphasized the importance of being action-oriented and infrastructure-oriented, including the construction of embankments, the need to improve drainage systems, and tree plantation and waste management activities.

5.5. Expert perspectives from key informant interviews

Key informants verified the main environmental problems confronting the country in rural Bangladesh, which they pictured climate change as a main threat multiplier. While appreciating important policy steps such as the Environmental Policy and BCCSAP, experts identified a very large disconnect between policy intent and ground reality. They underlined poor institutional capacity in implementing bodies such as the MoEFCC and DoE and blamed it on the lack of trained human resources and insufficient funding. A critical lack of coordination between the different government ministries, UN agencies, NGOs and the private sector was consistently cited as a hindrance to the smooth application of governance measures.

6. Discussion

The outcome of this study shows a rather difficult local environment context of environmental governance in rural Bangladesh. A central paradox emerges - the simultaneous occurrence of high levels of public concern with environmental degradation coupled with extremely low levels of civic engagement in dealing with it. This disconnects between signifies a basic breakdown in relation between the state and its citizens. The "top-down decision-making system" creates a vast chasm in which the citizens, having the perception that their local government is inefficient and corrupt, are withdrawn from participation. This makes the 2030 agenda's promise to "leave no one behind" fundamentally unachievable.

The results of the study are an illustration of a structural failure in the key principles of governance - accountability, participation, predictability, and transparency. The general perception of corruption and political interference implies a very severe deficit of accountability, and the social contract is broken. Perhaps the most shocking finding of the study is the near-total lack of participation (81.5%), which suggests that formal mechanisms to include the community in decision making are either sleeping or tokenistic. This redundant failure is the reason that national policy frameworks are not being translated to effective action at the local level.

While it is easy to blame the Union Parishad, the findings suggest that it is much more of a disempowered actor operating in a faulty system. The overwhelming consensus on "Lack of Funding" as the major challenge shows that the UPs are systematically under-resourced for monumental tasks that they face. They are expected to cope with disasters response and climate adaptation with little and erratic financial support. This financial precariousness, when coupled with political pressure and a lack of delegated authority, has made effective environmental planning almost impossible.

This 'implementation gap' mirrors challenges in other vulnerable nations, yet successful alternatives exist; for instance, Nepal's Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) demonstrate how legally empowering local bodies with resource rights—rather than just administrative tasks—can reverse environmental degradation. Similarly, the Philippines' 'People's Survival Fund' provides a model for the direct, transparent fiscal transfers to local governments that this study finds lacking in the Union Parishad system. Incorporating such bottom-up fiscal and legal autonomy is essential to transform the UP from a reactive recipient into a proactive governor of climate resilience. Reforming the way the inter-governmental system of fiscal and political institutions operates is therefore vital.

Finally, the statistically significant variation in levels of satisfaction across the five Upazilas (p-value = 0.0262) is strong empirical evidence that one-size-fits-all policies are insufficient. Local context is a premium and any national strategy should be an enabling framework to provide resources but with the flexibility and autonomy to tailor interventions to their own realities.

7. Recommendations

Based on the evidence presented in this study, the policy adjustments and action recommended include the following:

7.1. For The central government & national agencies

- Revitalizing Fiscal Support - The base line of Annual Development Programmed (ADP) grants given to UPs needs to be immediately increased to address the current challenges. Beyond the amount, there has to be an overhaul of the mechanism for the release of these funds, so that there are no operational delays. The government must also consider the establishment of a specific 'Climate Resilience Fund' that UPs can make competitive bids for.
- Making sure that it goes hand-in-hand with a zero-tolerance approach to increasing the funds is Financial Integrity. This can be operationalized by forms of public auditing and establishment of open access Website for the monitoring of the expenditure of the local governments. Monitoring bodies do need to be empowered to keep a close watch on UP-led initiatives on environmental health and procedures.

7.2. For union parishads and officials of local government

- Moving Beyond Tokenism in Participation: Local leaders must ensure that the ward and Union-level Disaster Management Committees are functioning as active standing bodies and not kept on paper. A real step in this direction would be to introduce a policy that at least two 'Ward Shavas' in a year are dedicated to discussing only environmental issues.
- Building Strategic Coalitions: UPs should not Braggadocio alone, they need to systematically exhibit their partnership with local NGOs who will use their technical expertise and ability to mobilize the community. Creating a "Green Volunteer" program is also one of the possible strategies to engage the local youth directly in activities such as planting of trees.

7.3. For future research

- Investigating Success Stories Since the data underscores large differences in the performance of different UPs, future work should concentrate on qualitative case studies of the high performing UPs. Identifying these "positive deviants" will help in understanding and scaling up the best practices.
- Evaluating Participation Models: We need to have a better idea of what seems to work best on the ground. Therefore, in future studies, different models of community participation within Bangladesh should be compared to identify which models produce the most effective results.

8. Conclusion

This study sought to report from the ground an appreciation of the role of local government in environmental governance in rural Bangladesh, a question of national survival in light of the extreme vulnerability of the country to climate change. The research concludes that the nature and extent of environmental governance in rural Bangladesh is characterized by a deep and continuous implementation gap. The system is characterized by well-meaning national policies but is crippled at the local level by a dysfunctional governance environment where institutions lack the funds, autonomy, and community trust to be effective. The Union Parishad is more of a reactive body, crippled by a triad of problems: crippling financial crunches, debilitating governance deficit, rampant corruption, and political inference, and deep dismemberment with its citizens. Consequently, the role of Union Parishad in localization of the SDGs is in a gamut of being compromised and seemingly unfulfilled.

This study affirms, ultimately, the strengthening of local environmental governance as the lynchpin to build a climate resilient Bangladesh. Achieving it is, however, dependent on a paradigm change from a top-down, administratively centered approach to a truly decentralized, sufficiently sourced, highly accountable, and fundamentally participatory approach.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest(s) concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. There is no conflict of interest, whether financial or non-financial. The researcher(s) do not have any personal bias or affiliation in the matter under study.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication.

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Publisher's Note

IDEA Publishers Group (LASSIJ IDEA-PG) stands neutral regarding the jurisdictional claims in the published maps and the institutional affiliations.

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