Administrative Reforms in South and Southeast Asia: Enhancing the Capacity for Public Service Delivery

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Abstract

The aim of administrative reform—a special public policy instrument of governments—is to improve the capacity of public service delivery systems. This study examines the reform-led service delivery situation of public institutions at the local level in South Asia. The study offers an in-depth qualitative study with gleaned data, focusing on primary education in the country in relation to MDGs basic education. Local administration in the country has been a ‘low modicum of self-governance to provide public services. Institutional capacity dealing with educational management has called into question. Primary education in the country is quantitatively discussed while qualitatively is in a state of disarray. As a thorough academic qualitative study with a country-specific case has by far not been explored yet, it fills the information gap. Little is known about the public service delivery capacity with primary education at the local level. This study implicates governments and development partners such as the UN SDGs for effective partnership in development in an era of post-COVID-19 crisis.

Keywords: Administrative Reform, Capacity Building, Service Delivery, SDGs, COVID-19, Primary Education, and Bangladesh.

Introduction: State of the Art

The service delivery capacity of public institutions has always been an issue of academic debates. The overarching goal of this study is to partake in academic debate in understanding the state of the service delivery capacity of public institutions in developing countries with reference to South Asia and southeast Asia. Empirically, it attempts to examine the reform-led capacity of public service institutions at the local level, offering an in-depth qualitative study with primary education service provision. The objective is to identify challenges and prospects of public service capacity of local administration of Upazila (Mukim in Malay; Tabi in Thai) in Bangladesh for primary education service delivery. Thus I seek to answer the question ‘do administrative reform initiatives make the local public institutions better equipped to deliver services? The paper has proceeded by

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determining the aim, objective, and research question, followed by a methodology to narrate the data sources and analytical techniques and the theoretical framework.

The administrative system in south Asia, especially in Bangladesh, carries the legacy of the past from ancient Bengal, imperial Mughal, and colonial British India via the post-colonial Pakistani era (Zafarullah, 1998). This legacy has challenged the contemporary government for proper functioning as an independent nation. To catch up with the time and space, service delivery, capacity building, and administrative reform have come to the forefront to the academics, policymakers and practitioners (UN, 1983; UNDP, 2008).

Bangladesh is a low-income economy and densely populated country that shares common characteristics with many other developing countries, such as high levels of poverty, economic dependence, colonial heritage, and traditional administrative inheritance (Azizuddin, 2018). The reform efforts so far have not been fully successful in bringing the desired outcome for effective public service delivery. This means the capacity of public institutions for service delivery has been deeply challenged (Ahmad and Ahmed, 1992; Azizuddin, 2018).

Methodology

Theoretical and methodological soundness provide the foundation of any research (Ullah et al., 2020). Field research in the context of public management and public service delivery merits systematic conceptualization of relevant terms and ideas (Yin, 2014). This particular study, of course, is dependent on qualitative research. At the conceptual level, methodology and the precise objectives of the study were determined in order to be able to remain focused in the field (Cohen et al., 2008:284). As the data source, this research used both primary and secondary data. A great deal of time was spent in the field (Bangladesh) to interview the respondents, both currently serving and retired. Primary data were collected from forty research participants in Bangladesh with an unstructured interview schedule, firstly in June – July 2017 and recollected in December 2019 - January 2020.

They comprised of people representative, academic and expert observer, administrator, and school teacher and management; were selected based on logistical convenience (Richard, 1996; Azizuddin, 2016). Secondary data collected from relevant documents such as books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and administrative reform commission reports. They were analyzed by applying case studies and content analysis techniques (Yin, 2014). In order to narrow down the literature, a systematic exclusion
process was adopted (Olsen, 1991). Table 1 shows the sample distribution of interviewees for this study.

Table 1: Sample Distribution of the Research Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Participant</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>Breakdown</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People’s Representative</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2 MP, 8 LC;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert Observer</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6 UT, 4 Res;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4 SLA, 2 MLA,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Teacher and Management</td>
<td></td>
<td>4 JLA;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 PST; 5 MSMC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: MP= Member of Parliament; LC= Local Councillor; UT= University Teacher; Res= Researcher; SLA= Senior Administrator; MLA= Middle Level Administrator; JLA= Junior Level Administrator; PST= Primary School Teacher; MSMC= Member of School Management Committee.

The paper advances with research context highlighting local administration and administrative reform and the public service provisions and primary education. The next section highlights the findings and discussion, and finally, the conclusion.

**Theoretical Framework**

It is well known that reform is a conscious effort to address changes in the environment and the resulting demands for corrections (Caiden 1969; Pollit & Bouckaert, 2011; Laitinen et al., 2018). Administrative reform streamlines the public administration system aimed at optimizing the capacity of public institutions for public management and development programme implementation (Ciprian, Gabriela & Dimbu, 2010; Levy & Kpundeh, 2004; Azizuddin, 2019). Ciprian and others have tagged administrative reform as a ‘special public policy’ (Ciprian et al., 2010:37) to facilitate the capacity for the reorganization of the institutions of governance aiming at rationalizing and building the capacity of the administrative machinery to adapt public management for changing environment (Flynn, 1998). Therefore, capacity building of public institutions through administrative reform for policy implementation is the offspring of the fields of public administration and governance (Heeks 2001).

Public service, service delivery, institutional capacity, and administrative reform are the key concepts in the theoretical constructions. The contemporary, traditional public service approaches with generic public management theories have been challenged with time and space relations. Osborne, Randor, and Nasi (2012) pointed out that ‘when the reality of
public services deliver inter-organizational, and it draws upon management theory from the experience of the manufacturing sector, they 'ignore the reality of public services as 'services' (Osborne et al., 2012:135). Consequently, as Osborne and others signify, ‘the public service delivery environment has become a challenging one for PSOs [Public Sector Organisations], with a range of survival strategies’ (Osborne et al., 2014:167). Thus, the functioning of ‘the increasingly fragmented and inter-organizational context of PSD (Haveri, 2006:31; Osborne et al. 2012) has necessitated new approaches to service delivery. Subsequently, a service-dominant approach has emerged. Depending on the strategic importance of service delivery, a transition to service-dominant logic (SDL) has been observed (Vargo & Akaka, 2009).

Public service is the entity of government with provisions of services to deliver to the citizen through its national and local administrations that determine the quality of life. It is a very general term used in government and “is perhaps the most acceptable in any international comparison of the personnel of governments or state administrations in which problems of semantics are closely intermingled with politico-administrative systems and their history” (Leemans & Dunsire, 1981:11). Leemans and Dunsire narrate, “[T]he separation of politics and administration advanced by Woodrow Wilson, Weber's impersonalized bureaucracy, the neutrality principle in the British Civil Service, and similar norms for the behaviour of public servants, imply that the public service plays a certain role within the political system” (Leemans & Dunsire, 1981:12). Typically, public service would include the essential areas of public management, for example, food, education, health, shelter, law and order, justice, agriculture, forestry, and the environment. More specifically, it is described as “an organized entity that is responsible for managing the resources of a nation on behalf of the people who are the owners of these resources; it is run by both elected and appointed officials” (Marshal & Murtala, 2015:61). In this respect, it is a subsystem of politics and the vital vehicle for public service delivery and governance, and its roles have been conceived in various ways within the political system.

Stenvall and others (2014) discuss the issue of public services and identify three generations of service sciences. The first generation focuses on single public services and service sectors, while the second generation emphasizes comprehensive operational integration minimizing service recipients’ issues. The third generation is based on open system thinking, where services are continually developing through human resource management interactions and reformations of a system aiming at integrating the professionals’ in the functioning of public service (Stenvall et al., 2014). They, in turn, require appropriate management for service delivery in an organization corresponding to services in changing environment.
Service delivery is the implementation of and rendering government services to the citizen through its institutions. It ensures that basic needs services reach the people and places for which they are intended (Azizuddin, 2018). In government and administration, it refers to rendering ‘the provision of basic needs in the form of goods/services to the people’ (Mbecke, 2014:270). Harber (2009) sees the use of the phrase as part of a ‘technocratic’ description of the relationship between citizens and the government. Thus, the government delivers, and citizens receive (Nleya, 2011). Waheed (1999) describes several criteria for effective service delivery:

‘improvement in the ability to identify problems for public actions, assess options for responding to these problems, formulate policies that constructively address these problems, implement activities required by the policies, and sustain such activities over sufficient time to have an impact on conditions for economic and social development.’ (914-916).

Harber (2009) Notes,
‘It contains a host of assumptions, policies, attitudes and promises – which are starting to haunt a government which has built its promise entirely on the notion of improving service delivery. They did not promise better opportunities, better access or better support in getting services, as these did not make ringing election slogans. They promised delivery, simple and straightforward.’ (Harber 2009 cited in Nleya, 2011, p.5).

It is evident in the wake of COVID-19 crisis management and development challenges for countries worldwide. COVID-19 emerged from China in late 2019 has turned into a pandemic making the countries vulnerable with unequal strewn (Ullah & Haque 2020), resulting in mass lockdown. It was discovered originally in 1964 by Almeida’s virology laboratory research (Combs 2020). The “lockdown has been strictly enforced since late March 2020, before which they seemed to have resorted to “wait and see” approach” (Ullah, Nawaz & Chattoraj 2021, p4). It has detrimentally affected public life, including basic education service delivery resulted from mass lockdown (Hutcheson 2020; WHO 2020). Almost all the primary schools in the world underwent closure.

The institutional capacity for public management is regarded as a fundamental issue of public service delivery (Brillantes & Fernandez 2008). However, capacity discourse on public administration remains ambiguous (Pazirandeh, 2010). Cuthill and Fien (2005) considered the capacity building as “the continuous process resulting in administrative reform for
effective and efficient responses to changing needs” (Cuthill & Fien, 2005, p.63). Stimulating institutional capacity building and improving service delivery also make public administration more responsive to the needs of citizens. There is a functional relationship between administrative reform, capacity building and service delivery, and they can be considered as complementary tools for sustainable public management (Azizuddin, 2018; 2019).

Local Administration and Administrative Reform

Local administration in Bangladesh is a part of public management that generally refers to the sub-national apparatus with the national government's subordinate offices as ‘field administration’ (Zafarullah, 1998). All the local authorities, including Zila (District) Parishad, Upazila Parishad, Union Parishad and City Corporation and municipality, fall within the jurisdiction of local administration.

In Bangladesh, the reform initiatives were introduced in 1973. Through the legislative measures (The Upazila Parishad Ordinance of 1982 and the Local Government (Upazila Parishad) Act 1998 and its subsequent amendments in 2009 and 2011, the changes in the inherited traditional system were made (Ahmed, Ahmed & Faizullah, 2011). The Committee for Administrative Reform and Reorganisation (CARR) in 1982 began the process of administrative reorganization and institutional capacity building at the local level. Among its findings, conversion of the then Thanas into Upazilas and aimed to make the field administration capable of public service delivery.

Upazila (sub-district/Kampong) is the middle-level field administration with a unique combination of state administration. It is a unit of local administrations with a functional local administration authority called the Upazila Parishad (Council), composed of a directly-elected chairperson, two Vice-Chairpersons and other functionaries of local representatives and administrative support staff.

There are 508 Upazila Parishads geographically located in Bangladesh. An employee with the rank of Senior Assistant Secretary (SAS) from the national government enjoys the status of ‘Upazila Nirbahi Officer’ (UNO) serves on deputation from central bureaucracy as the principal officer of the council.

Public Service Provisions and Primary Education

The local administration of Upazila is responsible for a wide range of public services, including regulatory and development functions: `retained
subjects’ and ‘transferred subjects’. Regulatory functions and major developmental activities at the national and regional level fall under the category of retained subjects and are controlled by the national government. All other development activities, which are considered local, are recognized as transferred subjects, and the local administration of Upazila is responsible for carrying them out. A total of 17 functional service provisions related to nation-building have their subordinate offices with functionaries deputed from the national bureaucracy to assist and work under each Upazila Parishad through the general supervision of the UNO (GPRB 2013). Figure 1 shows the list of local administration of Upazila public service provisions in Bangladesh.

Figure 1. List of Local Administration of Upazila Public Service Provisions

![Diagram of Local Administration of Upazila Public Service Provisions]


Primary education is one of the main public services of the local administration of Upazila in Bangladesh. Universal Primary Education has been enshrined in both the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs 2000-2015) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 2015-2030) (UN 2001; UN SDSN 2015). The Upazila administration discharges the responsibility of providing primary education service. The actors such as the Upazila Parishad (USP), the Standing Committee, the Upazila Education Office (SEO), the Upazila Education Committee (UEC), primary schools, and the Upazila Resource Centre (URC) interact to perform the duties in discharging responsibility. Figure 2 represents the functioning of primary education public service at the local administration of Upazila in Bangladesh.
Figure 2. Actors and interaction of Local Primary Education Service Delivery

Findings and Discussions

Primary education is an essential public service. This forms the basis for the future human resource development of a country. Children receive the basic education in primary school and step forward to secondary and tertiary levels of education. A good start at the primary schools paves the way for taking the challenges of other levels of education.

Local administration contexts in South Asia and South East Asia for public service delivery are diverse within a uniform framework (As-Saber & Rabbis, 2009). There are elected (and selected as well for some SEA countries) local councils geographically located throughout the country. Of course, the governance quality in local administrations varies from one area to another. While the local administration units function adequately, their performance is disputed. In Bangladesh, for example, in Gobindagonj, Upazila had Standing Committees on service delivery and were in operation, while Biswanath Upazila was yet to form the Standing Committees properly. Both Upazilas have been facing difficulties in providing quality public service in varying degrees (Azizuddin, 2018).
The research reveals that the scope and arrangement of service facilities in terms of structural, functional, and academic tasks are limited. The capacity of local administrations to deal with educational management for primary education service delivery is at stake in various ways (Sommers, 2011).

Administrative reform initiatives play a decisive role in bringing about systemic change at the local level. Local Upazila administrations have replaced a traditional ‘field administration’ at the then Thana level. The Upazila Ordinance, 1982, formally established the Upazila Parishad of local administration as a people’s committee with local decision-making power and authority to deliver public services. The respective committees and subcommittees on services poorly handle the service delivery of education, health, culture, disaster management, food, and agriculture needs of local people.

While the local administration of Upazila is officially recognized as decentralized authority, its power in exercising it has been limited. The local council Upazila Parishads depends on national financial allocations and approval of the line administrative Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives (MoLGRDC), and in case of primary education, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and their attached departments and directorates for decisions and implementation. Undesirable political interference from the national government and insufficient management supports has rendered capacity building difficult. Efforts for optimum output have gone futile.

Local administration in Bangladesh faces numerous challenges in public service delivery, especially in primary education provision. The administration has been following the traditional system without paying proper attention to the skill development of employees.

The system is centralized in the guise of decentralization at the local level. Table 2 represents a reflection of the research information on local administration public service delivery in Bangladesh.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Influence of national government over local</td>
<td>Undue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>administration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequateness of Service delivery</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning facilities in schools</td>
<td>Unsatisfactory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequacy of teaching and learning staff</td>
<td>Insufficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task environment</td>
<td>Incongenial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Like I mentioned that the local administration of Upazila is responsible for the delivery of primary education. But, undue national government influence and poorly equipped primary schools fail to deliver as it demands.

Administrative reform to improve service delivery by encouraging local involvement in governance and management has remained as rhetoric. The system maintains the traditional past administrative systems, including centralized, hierarchic bureaucratic practice, excessive control and supervision of the national government. As a result, the state of public service delivery, including primary education in the country, is unsatisfactory.

Decentralized local administrations always function better than centralized ones in any setting. A work environment conducive to effective programme implementation is a pre-requisite for capacity building in the public sector. There should not be undue interference from the national government in the affairs of local administration functionally. This practice undermines performance. Primary education, as the responsibility of local administration, should be focused and prioritize in the real sense. There should be less bureaucracy in the affairs of local administration management in the country. Local human resources should be well-trained to deliver public service decorously. The use and misuse of legal provisions have resulted in an increased dependence on the central government and managerial instability that stand the way of functional capacity building – particularly the provision of primary education service. National government interferences in local administration management affairs are more obvious in South Asian countries than in Southeast Asian countries as a whole.

**Concluding Remarks**

The study tried to answer the question as to whether the local administration in South Asia, especially in Bangladesh, is capable of public service delivery. It has examined the reform-led service delivery capacity of public institutions such as primary education in the sub-districts. The study demonstrates that a number of issues have been related to public management and local administration. Although various administrative reforms have attempted to accelerate the institutional capacity of local
administration for service delivery, they have been used and otherwise misused. Administrative reforms have not contributed as expected because of the lack of functional decentralized authority of local administration and unsophisticated management practices. The institutionalization of service delivery capacities of local administration, particularly those related to primary education and learning, is weak. The capacity has been a ‘low modicum of self-governance (Straussman, 2007:1104) for public services.

Although the study was only based on qualitative information with a small sample, the research contributes to the literature of public management, governance and local administration, discussing local administration service delivery situation with a micro-focus on South Asia. The research has broader implications for the governments in South and Southeast Asia. Future research with aims at delving deeper into the phenomenon may include these current surreal times (COVID-19). Depending on the logistical convenience, interviewing a representative sample would help infer to make better policy advice. Overall, the capacity of local administration for public service delivery requires improvement.

References


