

EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES OF SDGS LOCALISATION BY RURAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS IN BANGLADESH: A POLICY IMPLEMENTATION PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a master plan to achieve a sustainable future by 2030, and the government of Bangladesh has been working relentlessly to achieve its targets. Since each country is supposed to take ownership of the goals and tailor policies according to their needs, in the localisation process of the SDGs, the local government institutions play a significant role in implementation. Similarly, in Bangladesh, Rural Local Government Institutions (RLGIs) are likely to play an essential role in the localisation of the SDGs, since they remain close to the most marginalized and often vulnerable rural people and can impact them directly. However, the RLGIs have not made a notable contribution in the localisation of the SDGs so far, and the deadline is approaching. This paper aims to understand the limitation of localising the SDGs by the RLGIs in Bangladesh by exploring the challenges they face that lead to policy implementation failure. From qualitative data collected from six different RLGIs, the paper finds that RLGIs suffer from four broad challenges: financial, political and administrative, behavioural and planning challenges that are causing SDGs localisation implementation failure. The paper concludes that these issues are unlikely to be overcome in a short time, so the future of SDGs localisation within the given timeframe is questionable.

Keywords: SDGs, Public Policy, Policy implementation, Policy failure, Bangladesh

Introduction

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are often considered a roadmap to a sustainable and better future for all by 2030 through its 17 goals and 169 targets. One of the most important aspects of the SDGs is that there are no legal bindings to implement the goals; instead, each country is supposed to take ownership of

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the goals and formulate tailored policies. Therefore, there is a need to localise the SDGs (United Nations, 2021). Consequently, SDGs come out of the trap of Internationally driven top-down policies in developing countries that are often considered to dictate policy choices beyond the local policy actors' ability and diminish the nation-states' capacity (Hay, 2006; Garcia-Zamor, 2001). As the contexts and priorities of the different areas are unique, localisation of the SDGs enables to take locally significant policies that eventually contribute to the big picture of international development.

Since the Local Government Institutions (LGIs) in Bangladesh oversee local policy implementation and often small-scale policy formulation, the LGIs remain at the centre of localising the SDGs. Especially the Rural Local Government Institutions (RLGIs) such as Union, Upazila and Zila Parishad play an essential role since they remain closest to the most marginalised and often vulnerable rural people and can impact them directly. Moreover, the *de jure* functions of the RLGIs perfectly intersect with the SDGs, which makes the RLGIs a significant institution in the process of SDGs localisation by taking and implementing locally substantial policies. For example, the functions of the RLGIs can be clustered into 1. Planning and Implementation, 2. Infrastructure and Local Development, 3. Disaster Management, 4. Social Welfare, 5. Municipal Services, 6. Basic Service Delivery, 7. Regulatory Functions, 8. Registry and Administrative Functions and, 9. Maintenance of law and order (Ahmed et al., 2014). And these functions perfectly align with Sustainable Development Goals 1 (No Poverty), 2 (Zero Hunger), 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality), 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 13 (Climate Action) and 16 (Peace Justice and Strong Institutions).

To do so, the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has been working relentlessly since 2016 to localise and implement the SDGs. In the process-ministries and departments have been assigned based on prioritised targets, a web-based repository has been developed to track the progress of SDGs in Bangladesh and most importantly, SDGs have been integrated into the 7th and 8th Five Year Plans of the country (GED 2020, SDG Tracker, 2020). Furthermore, to localise the SDGs, the General Economic Division of the planning commission has developed a framework that suggests making five-year local plans at the Upazila level, and gradually in the union, district, and divisional levels for achieving the targets of the SDGs in a coordinated manner.

However, despite sincere planning effort at the national level, there has been no notable contribution made by the RLGs and the deadline to localise SDGs are coming closer (Monem & Zahid, 2021). Therefore, this paper aims to understand the failure of localising the SDGs by the RLGs in Bangladesh, which is predominantly a policy implementation failure. So, it tries to explore the challenges faced by the RLGs to localise the SDGs that lead to policy implementation failure. The article seeks to answer the question through data collected from six different RLGs following a qualitative approach and within a framework developed from the policy implementation literature.

The paper is based on five major sections- the first one constructs a conceptual framework based on public policy implementation literature, the second section describes the methods used to conduct the study, the third one illustrates the findings, and the next section tries to discuss the findings based on previous research and, the conceptual framework. And the last section concludes the paper.

Conceptual Framework: Understanding Policy Implementation Failure

A comprehensive theory or framework to understand policy implementation challenges is non-existent since combining all the variables in one framework from divergent policy environments is arduous. Therefore, different public policy scholars have analysed the limitations of policy implementation from different perspectives. Although many scholars have interpreted the challenges of policy implementation from a single perspective only, they are often analysed with the integration of different perspectives with greater emphasis on a specific one due to the complexity of the policy environment. Moreover, the theories of policy implementation have not been seen from a policy failure perspective so far; therefore, there is a necessity to construct a conceptual framework for this paper. Thus, this section evaluates the contribution of policy implementation scholars from a policy failure lens and combines their perspectives, which will be essential to understanding the challenges of policy implementation and explaining the crisis of SDGs localisation in Bangladesh.

Here, for the purpose of the study, the works of the policy implementation scholars have been divided into three major perspectives namely- the individual (both local policymakers' and implementors'), organisational (policy implementing agencies) and people's perspectives (policy target groups) and this classification have been used throughout the paper. In the context of RLGs in Bangladesh, elected RLG representative and administrative officials are individuals, RLGs

are organizations, and the beneficiaries of RLGIs consists of the group of people. Moreover, in terms of policy failure, this paper draws upon the concept developed by McConnell (2015), which refers to policy failure as a state where a specific policy does not achieve the goals it initially set out and the support for the policy is widely absent.

From an individual perspective, the concept of incrementalism (Lindblom, 1959) is essential in discussing policy implementation failure. And the concept of incrementalism is based on Simon's (1947) idea of bounded rationality. Simon (1947) argues that humans cannot be completely rational while making decisions due to cognitive and environmental limitations. To be specific, complete rationality requires knowledge of all the alternatives and their consequences. However, it is unattainable since the human mind cannot imagine all the possible options and the effects of those alternatives lie in the future, so they must be anticipated. Therefore, people become boundedly rational and make decisions based on the principle of 'satisficing', i.e., they choose the alternative that is good enough but not perfect. Similarly, Lindblom (1959) suggests that policymakers make policy decisions by making small and incremental changes to existing policies. Therefore, policymakers and local implementers follow a template and work by slightly tweaking them. This approach enables them to escape complexities and avert risks by keeping the status quo intact (Poocharoen, 2013). Consequently, highly ambitious policies fail to meet their objectives. Likewise, from the individual perspective, it is important to explore the level of risk aversion in small-scale rural policy formulation and implementation by the elected RLGIs representatives and local administrative officials to understand the SDGs localisation failure in rural Bangladesh.

On the contrary, Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) have taken an organisational approach to the limitations of policy implementation. They argue that policies might fail even if they are widely desirable due to the complexity of joint action. For instance, when different layers of the government are in charge of implementing a particular policy, their priorities and objectives might not align even though all the layers accept the policy. This prioritisation is also based on Simon's (1947) idea of bounded rationality discussed earlier. Nevertheless, the situation worsens if the interaction and coordination among the layers are time-consuming and complex. So policies either fail or implementation is delayed. Thus, from an organizational perspective, it is necessary to understand the RLGIs joint objectives, goals and quality of interaction to analyse SDGs implementation failure in Bangladesh. The strength of Pressman and Wildavsky's (1973) contribution to policy implementation literature is that they successfully addressed the complexity

of the policy environment from an organisational perspective. Still, they failed to integrate more than one perspective that may influence the policy implementation process in a complex policy environment.

Therefore, Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983) provided a comparatively comprehensive framework of policy implementation in an effort to integrate the centre, periphery, and target group's perspectives and address the complexities of policy implementation. Here in the context of Bangladesh and SDGs localisation, the centre is the national government that makes the initial policy and shifts the top-down implementation process to the local government, i.e., the periphery. And the target group is the people for whom the policy is being implemented. Integrating these perspectives, Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983) came up with three overarching independent variables that influence the independent variable of the policy implementation process. These variables include 'the tractability of the problem', 'the ability of the statute to structure implementation', and 'non-statutory variables that affect implementation.' Among them, 'the tractability of the problem' refers to the complexity of the problem, technical requirements to solve the problem, as well as the diversity within the target group and their behavioural shift needed for implementing the policy. On the other hand, the 'ability of the statute to structure implementation' refers to variables such as the transmission of clear and concise policy objectives, allocation of resources, recruiting the right set of implementation agencies, and coordination and control among them. Lastly, the 'non-statutory variables affecting implementation' include socioeconomic conditions and technology, public support and attitudes, the constituency groups' resources, and the implementing officials' commitment and leadership. Therefore, to understand the SDGs implementation failure by the RLGIs in Bangladesh, it is essential to analyse the capacity of the RLGIs and the nature of their internal relation (organizational perspective); preparedness and diversity among the beneficiaries (people's perspective) and the commitment and leadership of the LGI representatives and administrative officials (individual perspective) to formulate and implement policies along the line of the SDGs.

Despite being a comparatively comprehensive framework, Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983) put less emphasis on the politics of policy implementation. Bardach (1977), on the other hand, added a political spin to the policy implementation by seeing the policy implementation process as an extension of politics (Smith & Larimer, 2009). In his framework, Bardach (1977) has shown the implementation process through the metaphors of games since there are certain stakes, rules, tactics, and resources brought to the table by the actors involved in the implementation game.

A general typology of these implementation games includes- ‘the budget game’, ‘piling on’, ‘tokenism and tenacity.’ In general, from a policy failure perspective, the budget game gives the impression that something is being done along the line to meet the policy objectives, although nothing is clear about what is going on and how it will support the policy objectives in the end. However, the piling-on game is somewhere along the line of the findings by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), as discussed earlier. This game suggests taking up deceiving programs for the implementation of the policy, but that does not serve the policy objective, instead fulfil the objectives of the implementing agency. The tokenism game, similar to Incrementalism (Lindblom, 1959), refers to the taking up of token efforts to the policy objectives by the implementing agencies, with the intention to avoid control. Lastly, the tenacity game refers to the restriction progress of the policy objectives to push forward self-interested terms that might also be detrimental to policy objectives. Therefore, based on the contribution of Bardach (1977), it is necessary to understand the level of clarity by the elected RLGIs representatives and the administrative officials regarding SDGs localisation and examine the nature of their policies and why they are undertaking them to understand the politics of implementation failure.

Another limitation of Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983) is that they could not get out of the top-down perspective of the policy implementation process even though they included local and people’s perspectives. However, their emphasis on the centre can be challenging to understand the implementation of policies that require bottom-up implementation, such as SDGs localisation. Thus, Lipsky (1971) emphasised the peripheral perspective. According to Lipsky (1971), the most critical actors in policy implementation are the street-level bureaucrats, i.e., the local actors tasked with implementing the policy. Lipsky (1971) argues that street-level bureaucrats decode the centre’s ambiguous policy objectives and deal with the day-to-day complexities of implementation through quick decision-making. Therefore, street-level bureaucrats often require decision-making autonomy to tweak the objectives for better implementation of policies. However, the centre requires them to comply with the policy objectives, and it leads to a clash among them. This clash and the control can lead to poor coordination (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973) and incrementalism (Lindblom, 1959), piling up, and tokenism games at the peripheral level that hampers the implementation. However, total autonomy in the implementation might also be counterproductive and lead to a tenacity game at the individual and organisational levels (Bardach, 1977). Therefore, considering the work of Lipsky (1971), in the context of this study, it is essential to explore

the extent of national control over the local individuals to make sense of the SDGs localisation failure in rural Bangladesh by the RLGIs.

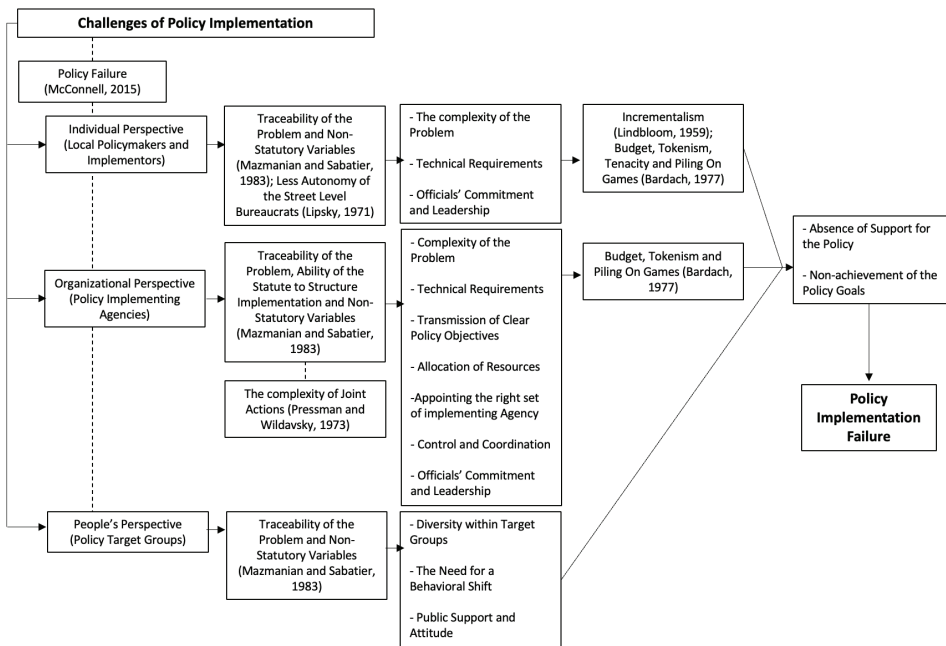


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Understanding Policy Implementation Failure (Source: Author)

In summary, the reasons behind not achieving the policy goals and support while implementing are complex and impossible to understand from a single perspective and to have a complete understanding of the issue, the integration of different perspectives is essential, which has been done in this section (See Figure 1) and will be used later to build a solid understanding of the failure of the localisation of the SDGs in Bangladesh.

Methods

This paper follows a qualitative approach and is written based on primary data sourced through Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focused Group Discussions (FGD) in the sampled RLGIs. Since all the rural local government tiers are connected, all of them (Union, Upazila and Zila Parishads) were included in the sample to make a complete sense of the challenges of SDGs localisation in rural Bangladesh. For the study, Magura and Tangail were selected as study areas, and

RLGI representatives of every rural local government tier were chosen from each area based on the nonprobability sampling method. In Magura, data were collected from Magura Zila Parishad, Sreepur Upazila, and Shobdolpur Union Parishad. And in Tangail, the data were collected from Tangail Zila Parishad, Tangail Sadar Upazila, and Mogra Union Parishad. The reason for selecting Magura and Tangail was due to their different nature. For instance, Magura is comparatively remote, and Tangail is an industrial base closer to the capital. Looking into two opposite contexts helped to analyse the difference in localisation challenges, if any. This nonprobability method of sampling helped the findings of the research to be more generalisable throughout Bangladesh. Furthermore, the FGDs were conducted with different homogeneous groups that directly benefitted from these institutions.

In both Tangail and Magura, the KIIs were done with Deputy Commissioners, Zila Parishad Chairs, Zila Parishad CEOs, Upazila Chairs, Upazila Vice Chairs (male and female), UNOs, Upazila level officials of the nation-building departments, Union Parishad Chairs, two male and female member of the Union Parishads, and Union Parishad Secretaries. In total, 25 KIIs were carried out to explore the individual and organizational challenges in locating the SDGs by the RLGIs. Semi-structured interviews with key informants focused on the knowledge of local RLGI representatives and administrative officials regarding SDGs; their readiness to localise the SDGs; the status of policy implementation if they have taken any aligning with the SDGs, and the nature of communication of RLGIs with the national government and the other RLGIs. On the other hand, four FGDs were conducted in two districts that included local journalists, school, and college teachers (male and female), members of civil society organisations (male and female), homemakers, freedom fighters, and retired local politicians. The groups included 8-10 members and were homogeneous based on the principle that all of them were the direct beneficiaries of the RLGIs. The participants were mainly asked and observed to understand their perception of the selected RLGIs to gain the people's perspective that contributed to policy implementation failure.

All the participants engaged in the study were clearly communicated the purpose of the study and most interviews were recorded upon participants' permission. Nevertheless, in a few instances, the data were recorded through filed notes where the Key Informants requested not to record the interviews. Later, the descriptive data from the KIIs and FGDs were transcribed and fractured into several open codes and organized into different themes using axial coding that identified the SDGs localisation challenges.

Findings

The application of the axial coding technique to the primary open codes has revealed financial, political-administrative, behavioural, and planning challenges contributing to the implementation failure of the SDGs by the RLGIs. The following section further unpacks them.

Financial Challenges

The KIIs with the local government elected representatives revealed that one of the major challenges to localising SDGs is the financial constraints of the RLGIs. All the Chairs of the sampled RLGIs emphasized that they do not have the capacity to collect taxes and the major tax bases are under the control of the national government, which makes their financial base significantly weak. Indicating the financial limitations of the Zila Parishad, a Chair mentioned, “Our hands and feet are tied, yet we are expected to swim in the river.” (Interview Data, 2021).

Therefore, the scarce own-source-revenue makes the RLGIs depend greatly on the national government and unable to take ambitious policies such as SDGs localisation. To be specific, the findings suggest that the RLGIs fail to fulfil the objectives of SDGs due to two reasons.

Firstly, since the RLGIs are entitled to provide public goods, they try to take projects that can benefit many people. Therefore, the RLGIs take up many small projects to serve as many people as possible within their purview. For instance, a review of the list of the projects taken by the sampled RLGIs in the fiscal year 2019-20 and 2020-21 showed that they were mainly small infrastructural projects, such as constructing roads and building mosques within a budget of 100-400 thousand taka. Therefore, it becomes difficult to take up and implement sustainable projects by the RLGIs, instead, they focus on the number of projects. It has also been validated by the participants of the FGDs and according to them, the quality of these infrastructure works has been of a poor standard and is not likely to sustain. Nevertheless, it was observed that the elected LGI representatives had a preconceived notion that conventional infrastructural development is their only duty and they seemed apathetic to take up innovative projects that align with the SDGs even if they had adequate funds. In quantitative terms, when asked about the SDGs and its localisation, 10 out of 14 (6 per cent) interviewed elected RLGI representatives had little or no idea.

Secondly, a significant amount gets wasted from this small amount of money allocated for each project due to transaction costs, which worsen the implementation of sustainable projects. For instance, a Zila Parishad Secretary mentioned:

Our hundred 1 lac taka (100 thousand) and the private 1 lac taka is not the same. We cannot use the whole 1 lac taka in the project, an amount gets lost from it due to transaction cost. (Interview Data, 2021).

Since finance works as a major driving force of the policy formulation and implementation of the LGIs, the financial challenges impact local development, disaster management, social welfare and service delivery functions of the RLGIs and subsequently receive less attention and non-achievement of the SDGs 1 (No Poverty), 2 (Zero Hunger), 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality), 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and 13 (Climate Action).

Political and Administrative Challenges

The in-depth interviews and the FGDs reported that there remains a clash between the locally elected representatives and the local administrative officials that causes significant challenges to policy implementation and, consequently, SDGs localisation. The data suggest that the difference in the skillset, duties, and power is responsible for the clash that causes less support for the localisation of the SDGs by the RLGIs and contributes to its failure of implementation.

As per the findings, only 38 per cent of the interviewed elected representatives had some idea about SDGs and their localisation while some did not even hear of it once. Especially the knowledge and information regarding the SDGs among the elected representatives of the Union Parishads were utterly absent. Close observation of RLGIs representatives while interviewing suggests that all were neither skilled nor motivated enough to understand and plan initiatives to localise the SDGs. Interview data suggest that the main reason for the scepticism of elected LGI representatives was their apathy to do anything new or ambitious. Instead, they stick to their routine activities to avert risks and follow a path dependence to get re-elected. Therefore, they were reluctant to collect taxes to improve local resource mobilisation that can improve policy implementation. This attitude was evident in one of the Upazila Vice Chair's statements,

Yes, I know what SDG is. We also did training on this, but I do not remember it well anymore...we do not need to practice it here. (Interview Data, 2021).

The apathy of the Chair in ambitious initiatives such as SDGs localisation and the reason for following path dependence was also echoed in one of the Upazila Vice Chair's observations regarding her Chair. She stated,

The Chairman is a big businessman with businesses in Dhaka. So, he seldom comes to the Upazila and mostly remains busy with his businesses in Dhaka. (Interview Data, 2021).

Another reason for the path dependence and subsequent apathy towards ambitious policies such as the localisation of the SDGs is found to be the patron-client relationship at the local level. To be specific, in this regard a Zila Parishad Chair mentioned:

We cannot work freely. There is not a single entity whose request I do not have to keep...be it my party members, political elites, MP or the DC (Deputy Commissioner) and the SP (Superintendent of Police). (Interview Data, 2021).

Moreover, the presence of clientelism was further evident in the interview with a UNO, who mentioned that the Test Reliefs and Food for Work Programs are predominantly distributed within the network of the Chair. As a result, poor people in need often get excluded from these benefits to whom these benefits are targeted. Which directly impacts the SDGs 1 (No Poverty), 2 (Zero Hunger), 3 (Good Health and Well-being), and 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

On the other hand, all the local government officials interviewed, mainly the UNOs, had a proper understanding of the SDGs and their localisation as they remained in close contact with the national government. Being cadre officials, they also possessed enough skills to plan and implement policies in line with the SDGs at the local level. However, their duty is primarily to provide executive support to elected local government representatives, and so they did not feel the need to force them to take up policies to localise SDGs. In contrast, the Chairs were also found not to be very welcoming about the intervention of the UNOs for the fear of losing their autonomy. Therefore, the discrepancy in the skillset, duties and functional principles among of the elected representatives and the administrative officials was found to be resulting in less support for policies such as SDGs localisation.

Furthermore, the findings identify the presence of a significant power imbalance in the local political environment which leads to a clash between the elected representatives and administrative officials that cause policy inaction. In the case

of the Upazila and Zila Parishad, the root of this clash was the Member of the Parliament (MP) who works as the advisor to the Parishad. One of the interviewed officials mentioned that since the MP works as the advisor to the Upazila Parishad and possesses greater power, making an informal coalition with the MP either make the local government representative or the field administration officials more powerful than other and such a power game and dominance over each other cause serious problem to policy implementation at the local level.

The tension between the Chair and the UNO can be understood from the following statement by a UNO:

If I force the Chairman too much, it will be impossible for me to remain at the same station for a long time and properly do my job. (Interview Data, 2021).

On the other hand, the following interview excerpt with an Upazila Chair also suggests the clash and imbalance of power between the Chair and UNO-

The UNO treats us terribly. We represent the local people, they have voted us to serve them for five years, but the UNOs will be in the cadre service for a long time around the country...We are not the same, our responsibilities are not the same. (Interview Data, 2021).

However, the data also find the dominance of the MP over the functions of the Zila Parishad as an impediment towards smooth policy implementation. For instance, a Chair mentioned:

If I send a project for approval to the ministry without consulting the MP, the MP can withhold it with a “DO letter” if it is conflicting with his interest...Also, the (Zila Parishad) Secretary is evil ((frustrated)); he often lingers to send the projects for approval for no reason. (Interview Data, 2021).

Therefore, the imbalance of power at the RLGIs causes further inaction and less support for policies and their implementation. Although there was little knowledge among the elected representatives regarding SDGs localisation, these anomalies are contributing to its implementation failure in rural Bangladesh. To be specific, due to the political and administrative challenges, the RLGIs are failing miserably in terms of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) which is having a cascading effect over all other SDGs that align with the functional clusters of the RLGIs which is contributing to its implementation failure.

Behavioural Challenges

The findings suggest that the behavioural aspects of local policymakers and implementors as well as the local people are threatening the localisation and implementation of the SDGs and are difficult to solve. For instance, any of the services provided by the LGIs are public good and like many public goods, they face the tragedy of commons. A Zila Parishad Chair mentioned a case where he has installed water filters in all hospitals in that district aligning with SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) and 3 (Good Health and Well-being), which cost him half a million taka. However, he discovered that the filters were either broken by users or jammed by iron due to lack of maintenance only after six months. The Chair stated, “People do not value the things they get for free”. (Interview Data, 2021).

However, the FGDs with different groups reveal that most locals do not trust RLGIs and do not care much about their work, which refers to their lack of ownership of the RLGIs’ services. Most members of the FGDs perceived that the RLGIs are corrupt, and their services lack quality, and so they do not feel the need to pay taxes. Moreover, one of the journalists in the FGDs mentioned that most of the local government representatives are businessmen who use their position as a shield to escape taxes, and so they often lose the authority over people and do not feel the necessity to force them to pay taxes. It was further triangulated by another Upazila Chair who said, “We cannot force people to pay taxes, that’s the job of the civil service.” (Interview Data, 2021).

However, such an alienating nature of the RLGIs from the people will make it difficult for the localisation of the SDGs to receive bottom-up acceptance and ensure better public participation in the sustainable development process, which ultimately leads to failure in the implementation of the policy.

Furthermore, it was found that there is still a serious power gap between the male and female representatives within the RLGIs, which could be caused by the prevalence of patriarchy in rural Bangladesh. The experience of the women members reveals that they are often barred from decision making that makes the SDG 5 (Gender Equality) impossible to achieve. Furthermore, a Upazila female Vice Chair mentioned that the Chair was a ‘misogynist’ and they were severely cornered at male-dominated Parishad meetings. In most of the interviews with the female representatives, they seem to have no contribution to local decision making and only seemed to comply with the power due to patriarchy. In such a scenario, not only the SDG 5 become difficult to achieve but also all other SDGs that are linked with gender equality and women issues such as SDG 3 (Good Health and

Wellbeing), 4 (Quality Education), Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities) become impossible to achieve and lead to policy implementation failure.

Planning Challenges

The findings suggest that there remains a lack of planning and implementation direction and a fear of uncertainty that hampers the localisation of the SDGs. To be specific, there is a significant overlap of functions within the RLGIs and there is no clear direction regarding how the horizontal or vertical coordination will take place in the case of policies such as SDGs localisation. Consequently, the planning and subsequent implementation of these policies suffer. The interview data reveal that the Zila Parishad is the worst sufferer of this poor coordination as their role over the Union and Upazila Parishad is extremely ambiguous.

However, both local government representatives and field administration officials agreed on the issue of fear of uncertainty. According to them, SDGs have long-term objectives, which are much longer than the local representatives' tenure, and so they do not feel the need to integrate these overambitious issues into planning. Furthermore, one of the local administrative officials mentioned that they are usually not overambitious in planning because uncertainties such as natural disasters or pandemics might fail the plans. Similarly, the DC mentioned that the losses incurred by the Covid-19 pandemic have been intense and covering that loss will divert the attention from planning and implementing nationally imposed policies like SDGs localisation. Therefore, along with many other factors, fear of uncertainty caused by the Covid-19 pandemic are preventing the RLGIs to plan long-term and ambitious policies like SDGs localisation and thus such policies are losing support which is slowly contributing to policy failure. This fear of uncertainty in planning is directly affecting the attainment of all the SDGs (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10 and 13) that align with the functional clusters of the RLGIs.

Discussion

The objective of the paper was to explore the challenges faced by the RLGIs in localising the SDGs that are leading to policy implementation failure. The findings suggest that RLGIs are suffering from four broad challenges that are causing SDGs localisation failure that are financial, political and administrative, behavioural and planning challenges. To be specific, The RLGIs serve a large population with limited financial resources and the overlapping roles of their different tiers make

planning more difficult. Moreover, elected RLG representative follow a path dependence due to inadequate skills and the presence of clientelism. Instead, they engaged in a complicated power game with the administrative officials, and the presence of such a strong power structure corners the women members of the RLGs. Above all, people lack trust in the activities of the RLGs and their capacity, and the RLGs suffer from the fear of uncertainty in long-term planning and implementation. And all of these four broad challenges lead to an absence of support for the SDGs and their localisation goals that ultimately leads to policy implementation failure.

The findings of the study are mostly in line with previous studies conducted on the RLGs of Bangladesh. For instance, Ahmed (2020) and Fox and Menon (2008) have found the financial inefficiency of the RLGs and considered them to be a major impediment towards decentralization. And Ahmed et al. (2014) confirmed the functional complexity and overlapping of the different levels of the RLGs. Moreover, Panday's (2017) work have identified the tension among the elected representatives, politicians, and bureaucrats at the Upazila Parishad that hampers the functioning of the Upazila Parishad and prevents decentralization. Also, Sarker (2008) reported that patron-client relations are prevalent in the rural local government structure of Bangladesh and found them to be an impediment to good governance and decentralization. Furthermore, similar to the findings of the paper, Ahmed and Mohiuddin (2022) and Islam and Islam (2012) have conducted studies on the Union Parishad and presented similar conclusions the women are ignored by their male colleagues at the Parishad due to sociocultural and religious factors, which exclude them from decision making.

The findings of the study also support the conceptual framework created at the outset of the research from the policy implementation literature, and it provides a comprehensive theoretical understanding of the failure of SDGs localisation by the RLGs. For instance, from an individual perspective, the scarcity of finance, elected representatives' skillset and patron-client relationship force the local elected representatives to follow path dependence which can be explained through the concept of incrementalism (Lindblom, 1959). In other words, the local elected representatives play the tokenism game (Bardach, 1977) by taking many small projects with a view to bringing the majority within the purview of services to get re-elected and provide benefits to their network. Consequently, their objective to serve a lot of people turns into a tenacity game (Bardach, 1977). This perspective also suggests that the potential of street-level bureaucrats such as the UNOs (Lipsky, 1971) is also not properly utilised in the implementation process due to the imbalance of power.

On the other hand, from an organizational perspective, as per the framework devised by Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983), the statute in Bangladesh is unable to properly structure implementation due to the failure to recruit the right set of implementing agencies and direct them to fulfil the objectives of SDGs localisation. Similarly, a non-statutory variable such as lack of commitment and leadership of the elected officials are confining them within incremental efforts, which are ultimately affecting the implementation. Also, following the concept of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), it is evident that the objectives and priorities of the national government regarding the SDGs do not align with the RLGIs and, considering their inefficient nature, they cannot be forced beyond a certain level, and therefore, SDGs localisation gets caught in uncertainty. Above all, the uncertainties in the post-covid-19 have made satisficing difficult (Simon, 1947), which is threatening the localisation of the SDGs.

Lastly, from the people's perspective, as per the framework devised by Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983), non-statutory variables such as public support and attitude are greatly missing in the local policy environment due to the inefficiency of the RLGIs' activities and services that arise from incrementalism (Lindblom, 1959), tokenism and tenacity games (Bardach, 1977). This lack of support from the beneficiaries of the RLGIs makes the major objective of bottom-up policymaking to SDGs localisation problematic. And as a result, the SDGs localisation lacks support and fails to fulfil its goals which leads to policy failure as per McConnell's (2015).

Altogether, the implication of the policy implementation failure of SDGs localisation will be alarming for Bangladesh. As identified in the findings, the challenges that cause the failure are wicked and hard to address, since some of them have been deeply ingrained in the political, administrative and social culture of Bangladesh since the British period. Therefore, Bangladesh is unlikely to achieve the SDGs by 2030. And since the SDGs are linked with the 8th Five Year Plan of Bangladesh, the objectives of the plan will also be hard to be achieved within the time.

It is interesting to observe that the previous research that supports the findings of this study was conducted using either decentralization or a good governance framework. In contrast, this study appears to be the first one to observe rural local government in Bangladesh from public policy implementation and policy failure frameworks in the context of a long-term, ambitious, and externally imposed yet, localised policy such as the SDGs. Thus, the paper contributes to the scarce public policy literature in the context of Bangladesh. Moreover, the framework created

to understand policy implementation failure can be used as a comprehensive framework to explore the causes of different policy failures and take corrective measures.

Conclusion

SDGs are different from other internationally driven top-down policies that come with legal bindings for implementation. Instead, it shifts the responsibility on each state to own and achieve them in a homegrown way. Therefore, localisation of the SDGs becomes essential and the LGIs become one of the vital actors in the process through policy implementation and often small-scale policy formulation. However, despite the perfect alignment of SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10 and 13 with the de facto functional assignment of the LGIs in Bangladesh, the localisation and achievement of the SDGs by the LGIs has not been notable. Therefore, as the deadline to achieve the SDGs is coming closer, this paper aimed to explore the challenges that are causing SDGs implementation failure. By creating a comprehensive framework to understand policy implementation failure from the policymakers' and implementors', organisations' and peoples' perspectives, the study collected data from six RLGIs both from Key Informants and the RLGIs' beneficiaries to integrate the three perspectives. The findings of the study suggest that the challenges can broadly be attributed to financial, political-administrative, behavioural, and planning that are resulting in less support for the SDGs and their achievement by the RLGIs are facing implementation failure. To be specific, the study has found that the poor financial status of the LGIs, the attitude and poor skills of the LGI representatives, the local patron-client relationship, local power structure, lack of public trust, patriarchy, ambiguous functional assignment and fear of uncertainty are the most significant factors towards the implementation failure of the SDGs by the RLGIs. Furthermore, these factors are hard to solve overnight and some of them have been deeply rooted in the administration and the culture, so localising and achieving the SDGs through the RLGIs is unlikely to be achieved by 2030.

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