

How Urban Local Self-Government Serves Poor People: Assessing the Relationship Between City Corporation Ward Centre and Urban Poor Communities.

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Received: 07 April 2025

Accepted: 10 May 2025

Published : 01 June 2025

Abstract

The government of Bangladesh (GoB) is working relentlessly to provide government services to the urban poor citizens of Bangladesh. This research focused on mixed-method approach and incorporated primary data from the poor residents of Chittagong City. Quantitative data comprised from structured questionnaire, and qualitative data was from FGDs, KII, and author experiences. The government has modernized the service delivery of the local government system through e-service delivery. City corporation ward offices provide this poor community with various civic facilities and services, to resolve their grievances and involve them in the process of digitalization. This study found that the ward office has a deep relationship with the people of the poverty-stricken community. This relationship exists between the service provider and the recipient. The people of the urban committee face various challenges while receiving services and these are resolved through the ward office. The ward office is the focal point for the delivery of public services in the city and from where the services are provided to the people of the poverty-stricken community.

Keywords: *Local Self-Government, Information, Urban Poor, Public Service Delivery, E-service Delivery and Civic Satisfaction.*

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Introduction

The main goal of any state is to provide proper services to its people or citizens (Paglayan, 2022). Since the birth of the state of Bangladesh, the main goal has been to ensure that all the citizens will adequately get the benefits of service delivery after the formation of the new state. As a result, the Local Government Ordinance 1976 was passed, and a structured local government system was introduced in Bangladesh (Saha et al., 2022). In the decentralization of the local government structure, in the devolution form of local government, power and responsibilities are vested in the authority of elected representatives (Panday, 2011). Local self-government is essential to effectively address the needs and concerns of urban populations—especially those who come from economically disadvantaged communities. In the context of urban governance, a city corporation's ward centre is an important hub connecting the local government with the populace (Chatterji, 2028). In urban settings, where differences in access to opportunities and resources are frequently pronounced, the ability of ward centres to meet the needs of the urban poor becomes a crucial indicator of the efficiency of local government (Siddiqui et al., 2021). The poor people in urban areas are confronted with a variety of issues like limited healthcare, basic education, and poor sanitation. These segments of people are socially vulnerable and economically weak to change their fate (Saaida and Saaidah, 2023). The urban poor people are not capable to get all the basic services from anywhere, and they desperately seek services from the city Corporation Ward office. The ward office is the place to provide basic services, grievance resolution, and an information hub.

Problem Statement:

Urban poverty remains a fundamental challenge in many developing cities, where communities are unable to receive essential public services owing to their condition. It is particularly local self-governance institutions such as ward offices that do deliver civic services, but not much knowledge is available on the methods and extent of their effectiveness in reaching marginalized urban populations or how far electronic public service delivery (EPSD) mechanisms have improved accessibility and level of satisfaction.

Although already captured through urban digital centers, other barriers to total utilization of these services for the urban poor would include digital illiteracy, affordability, and inefficiencies within the existing convoluted bureaucratic systems. Besides, the intensity of engagement of ward offices with residents of low income remains largely uncertain, raising questions about the quality of services, access to those services, and responsiveness to complaints and grievances.

Objectives of the Study

The proposed research aims to address the understanding of public service delivery delivered by local government bodies for the betterment of poor urban communities, especially ward offices from the city corporation. This study is important because it may help guide policy changes and service enhancements that decrease inequalities and raise the standard of living for poor urban people. The research objectives are

1. To identify which public services are provided by ward offices of city corporations.
2. Which services are easily accessed by the poor communities from the urban digital centre.
3. How do the urban poor communities connect with the ward offices and rate their service satisfaction.

This research correlates with urban poverty, poor communities, public service delivery, and local administration. The research question tries to answer the following question: How do urban poor communities receive civic services from the local self-government bodies? How do they assess e-service delivery mechanisms and their access to and relationship with the ward offices?

Literature Review

Local Self-Government

The decentralization of power and authority is a complex concept and is considered as important theme in most developing countries (Cheema and Rondinelli, 2007). The local government is a partner or agency of the central government whose main purpose is to fulfil its agenda, has little political attachment, represented by appointed officials, and its jurisdiction is not vastly practiced (Acharya, 2028). Local self-government can be defined as administrative bodies, represented by elected representatives, that have enough field for political power exercise and practice executive & judiciary functions in the given territory (Kamberi and Hashani. 2023). According to Pandey (2011), decentralization of local government power and authority can be characterized by deconcentration, delegation, devolution, and deregulation. Devolution process involves assigning government functions to local governments, which have the autonomy to elect their own council members and mayors, generate their own income, and decide what investments to undertake.

After the independence, the government of Bangladesh (GoB) initiated various local government amendments (Table 1).

Table 1: Local Government Act and Ordinances of Bangladesh

Sl No	Local Government Act/ Ordinances	Focused area	Component
1	<i>The Local Government Ordinances, 1976</i>	Union, Thana, Zilla Parishad	Rural Area
2	<i>The Paurashava Ordinance, 1977</i>	Paurashava	Urban Area
3	<i>The Local Government Union Parishad Ordinance, 1983</i>	Union Parishad	Rural Area
4	<i>The Local Government Zila Parishad Act, 1988</i>	Zila Parishad	Rural Area
5	<i>Chittagong Municipal Corporation Ordinance, 1982</i>	Chittagong Municipal Corporation	Urban Area
6	<i>The Local Government (Paurashava) Act, 2009</i>	Paurashava	Urban Area
7	<i>The Local Government (City Corporation) Act, 2009</i>	City Corporation	Urban Area
8	<i>The Upazila Parishad Act, 2009</i>	Upazila Parishad	Rural Area

Source: Hannan and Jubair (2023)

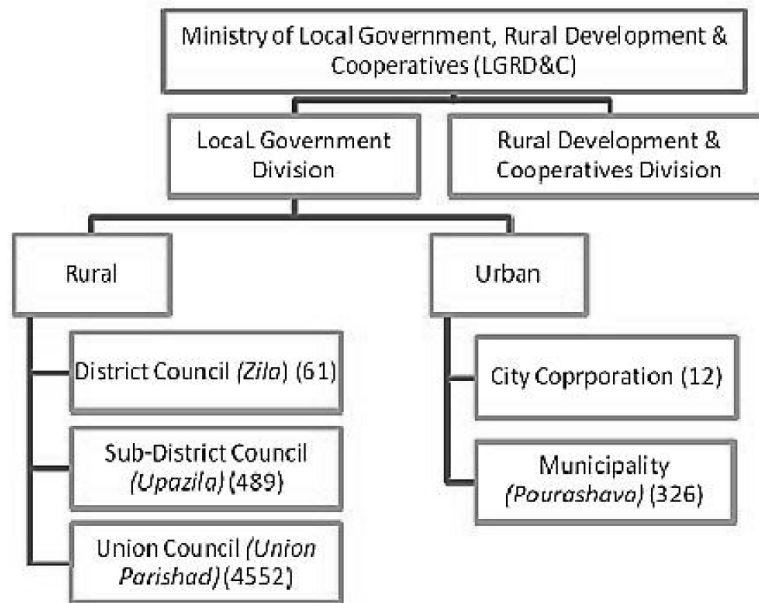


Figure 1: Local Government Layers of Bangladesh

Source: Kumar and kim (2022)

City Corporation and Paurashava are the local administrative bodies in the urban settlement. The elected representatives of these bodies were directly engaged with local politics and vested with executive, judiciary and legislative power. Along with various responsibilities, the elected representatives are accountable for providing civic services to local people and have to focus on the community's marginalized people.

Urban Poor

The global world is also experiencing the urbanization trend, and by 2050, two-thirds of the world's population will be urban (United Nations, 2018). After its independence, the population rate increased, and internally migrated people moved to the city area for better living and livelihood. The urban population constitute 40% of the total population of Bangladesh (The World Bank, 2022). The poor people are urbanizing faster than general people, and their migration rate is also high (Cuesta, 2021).

The reasons behind urban poverty are rural-urban migration, economic inequality, affected with various religious stigmas, skill deficiency of urban poor people, and high living costs (Khan et al., 2023). Poor urban people face challenges in maintaining their living standards and bear the miserable living conditions. The poor urban people have lack of basic services like proper food, sanitation facilities, drinking water and safety issues. The people are also deprived of education and primary health care services (Kashem et al., 2023).

Public Service Delivery

As a welfare state, the constitution of Bangladesh was framed to provide all the basic services to the citizens of Bangladesh. The main objective of an ideal welfare state is to identify the major challenges and problems of its people and backward poverty groups, work on them, and have a strong commitment to finding solutions to those problems. Delivering these solutions to the citizens' doorsteps is a government's main goal (Pandey and Chowdhury, 2023). In order to deliver these benefits and services to the citizens, the government has adopted the local government system through decentralization of power through its central administrative system so that the central agendas of the government can be delivered to the doorsteps of the people quickly and impartially. Urban local government plays a crucial role in providing necessary services to people. City Corporation is the local administration level in Bangladesh, and it performs its functions in urban municipalities.

Through the Ward Office, various works are being done to improve the standard of living of poor people by bringing them into a framework. For example, waste management, provision of food and water, and various types of registration such as birth registration, death registration, heir names & councillor

certificates are issued (Haque et al., 2023). Various types of allowances are also provided and verified under the Ward Councilor's direct supervision. For example, Widow Allowance, Disability Allowance, and Maternity Allowance.

E-service Delivery

In the past few years, digitally enabled public services have been set up in developed countries while developing countries like Bangladesh have been trying to identify this progress. To provide e-services to the people, the UNDP A2i project is building the capacity of local government systems in Bangladesh and connecting various technical facilities to these localities so that poor people from marginalized communities can access government services easily and affordably (Kumar and Kim, 2022). Each ward of Chittagong City Corporation currently has one digital center where an entrepreneur works and provides proper e-public services to the city's poor people.

From these digital centers, urban poor people can easily apply and pay fees for passports, apply and correct national identity cards, pay electricity bills, and get character and birth and death certificates and citizenship certificates. The main objective of this digital center is to bridge the digital divide among people belonging to poor communities and prepare them to achieve the goal of Smart Bangladesh by 2041 (Pal and Sarker, 2023).

Methodology

Method and Data Collection

This study used a systematic approach to achieve its goals, including primary and secondary data sources. The original data was collected using a basic quantitative and qualitative approach. We employed the interview approach along with a structured questionnaire to gather quantitative data. We gathered qualitative data through the use of the FGD and, KII. The secondary data was acquired from several reliable sources, statistics reports, and current research publications.

Study Area

Chittagong City is the second largest city in Bangladesh and the biggest port city. The city is geographically located near the Bay of Bengal and the Karnufuly River. The city also has hilly areas and the most densely populated sum settlements. This city is connected to the economic zone and has an export processing zone (EPZ). Because of the city's economic diversity, various poor

people migrated here for better livelihood and income opportunities. To conduct the research, we focused on four geographically diverse City corporation ward area (Table 2).

Table 2: Research Study Area

SI No	Area Name	Chittagong City Corporation Ward No	Chittagong City Corporation Ward Name	Geography
1	Chairman Ghata	41	South Potenga Ward	Seaside area
2	ExEn colony	13	Pahartoli Ward	Hilly area
3	Monohorkhali	34	Patherghata Ward	River Bank area
4	Rajakahali	35	Bakshirhut Ward	Densely populated area

Sampling

For the primary data collection process, respondents were purposively selected. This encompasses residents from the Chittagong city. Four focus group discussions (FGD) and ten KII were also conducted with the respondents to collect qualitative data. We conducted every FGD with ten respondents comprised of men and women (Table 3).

Table 3: Sample population

SI No	Method	Male (Aged 18 to onwards)	Female (Aged 18 to onwards)	Boys (Aged 14 to 17)	Girls (Aged 14 to 17)	Total Person
	Quantitative data					
1	Structured questionnaire	44	36	22	18	120
	Qualitative Data					
1	FGD (Total 4)	18	12	6	4	40
2	KII	8	2	No	No	10
	Total	70	50	28	22	170
	Percentage	41%	29%	16%	13%	

Data Collection

Both quantitative (interview questionnaire) and qualitative (FGD and KII) data were gathered using various techniques. In order to get comprehensive and in-depth data, we conducted personal interviews with the 120 household heads. When the household head was unavailable, we collected our data from the next most significant family member.

Data analysis

The gathered data was entered through a manual editing process to ensure correctness and clarity. After that, a computerized system was used to enter and process the data for additional coding and analysis. The material was presented well by using averages and percentages as important analytical tools.

Findings

The City Corporation, a vital component of urban local administration, plays a significant role in the development of Bangladesh's metropolitan region (Kamal and Al-Hossienie, 2018).

We conducted the research in the four demographic areas of the Chittagong City Corporation areas to collect diverse data (Figure 2). All the wards have specific ward offices, where all the administrative functions are lead by the elected ward councilor through the ward digital centre, where an entrepreneur provides all the e-services to the citizens.

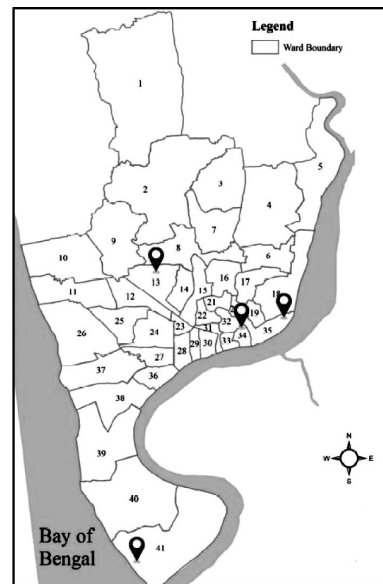


Figure 2: Chittagong City Corporation Ward Map
Source: CCC Waste Report, 2020

People from urban poverty groups have a higher level of involvement with ward offices as they have access to civic amenities from ward offices. We asked our respondents why they preferred to go to ward offices. In response, 42% answered for registration-related purposes, 18% for conflict and grievance reasons, and 15% for requests for assistance or personal need (Figure 3).

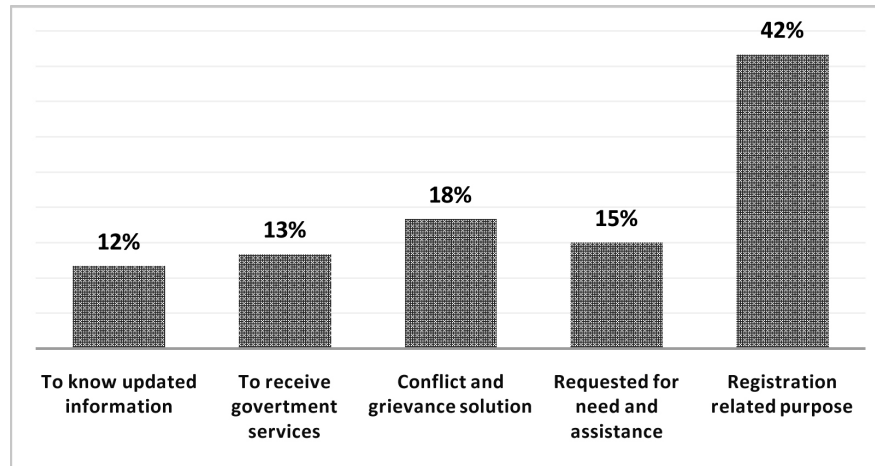


Figure 3: Reason to visit ward offices

Relationship of the Urban Ward Offices with the Poor Communities:

Developmental Assistance-Related:

The ward office is a centre where various developmental activities are conducted. All developmental activities in the area are coordinated through the Ward Office. All the NGOs working in a ward should regularly coordinate with the ward office and conduct development activities through the ward councilor (Rahman and Tasnim, 2023).

FGD respondent shared that,

“In our area, the activities of each NGO are managed through the ward office. The Ward Councillor finally selects the beneficiaries who will get benefit from the NGOs. Sometimes, those who don't need the grant and those who are financially well off also get these benefits. If this happens, we still have the space to contact our councilors directly if someone has been given an unethical benefit.”

All the services provided by various NGOs to the poor people are properly verified by the ward office, where the representative of the ward councilor verifies the lists and, if necessary, summons the beneficiaries to the ward office. We also experienced the politicization of development works at the ward level. The people from the poor community are the ward's voters, and their vote counts during the election. This is definitely one of the factors that cause any development fund from the ward office to be tried to be given to those who will serve as councilors later on.

Health-Related:

Every ward has an Urban Health Care Center (UHC), where people from poor communities get free medical care. All these health centers have midwifery services, vaccinations for children, regular checkups for pregnant mothers, and services for the elderly. Iron and zinc tablets are regularly provided to pregnant mothers from this health centre, and regular health check-ups are done to ensure the good health of the baby. Eye check-ups and dental check-ups are organized here once a week through various NGOs. However, these healthcare centres do not have access to other services like blood tests, ECG, and X-ray tests, for which people from poor communities are referred to Sadar Hospitals. All these services are costly to get in other private hospitals in Chittagong. Still, by providing these services considering the benefit of the poor people at the ward level, the people of the poor people are not deprived of proper health care and are covered by the health services.

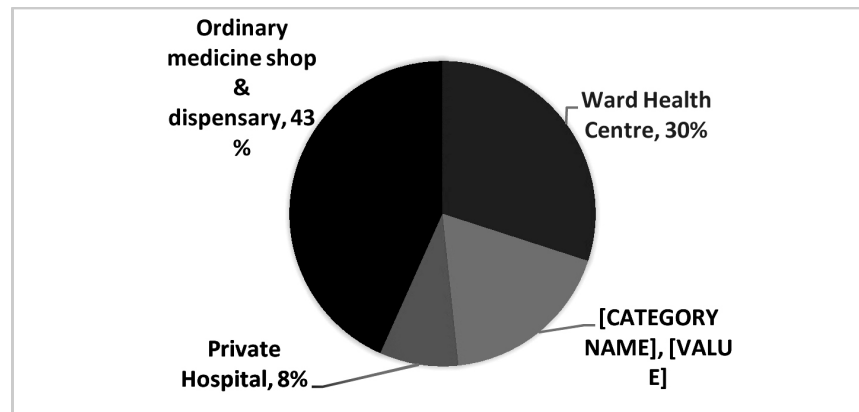


Figure 4: Preferable place to get basic health services

Our field survey states that, 43% of respondents prefer to go to ordinary medical shops, 30% of respondents go to ward health centres, and 18% prefer to go to Sadar Hospital to get basic health services (Figure 4). FGD respondents said while talking about urban healthcare issues,

“Naturally, when we are sick, we are comfortable going to our nearest health care facility as it takes less time and less money. However, we have an urban health centre nearby that is not open 24 hours, so we have to go to our nearest medicine shop when we have an emergency. From there, if the patient's condition is critical, we go to Sadar Hospital. Another reason for not taking services from Urban Health Care Centers is that all services are unavailable there, so we have to go elsewhere to seek those services.”

Education-Related:

Presently digital classrooms have been arranged in our primary schools and children from backward urban poverty groups have been brought under these digital classrooms to introduce them to smart classes. An interviewee gave his opinion that for admission to this primary school they have to get admission in the school with the certificate of the councilor from the ward office. Through this, their relationship with the councilor office is growing. In order to get these certificates, marginalized people need to contact the Ward Office and collect them.

Registration and Verification:

Marginal poverty people have to fill out forms from the office and do various registrations like birth registration, death registration and, inheritance certificates etc. The poor people register by paying a certain amount of fee and applying for a certificate. But sometimes it is seen that the ward office people demand extra money from poor people out of account. We have also seen that the citizen charter is located in some ward offices but the price list according to the Citizen Charter service is not posted on the board so that people do not understand the actual amount to be paid for the service. Another key observation is that people from the urban poor migrate from one ward to another within a short period of time for their work purpose. As a result, they have to live in one ward but need a councillor character certificate from the other ward. Councilors and ward office people do not want to issue character certificates and birth registrations to these people because they live in other wards or carry identity cards of other wards. FGD respondents argued that,

“When we go to get a character certificate, we face a lot of suffering because we are from another ward and when we go to our ward we are also hassled because we are not living in that ward. At that time, we faced challenges while verifying, and at the end of the day, we had to pay extra money to someone from the ward office to bring out the character certificate.”

Conflict and Grievance Resolution:

As the ward councillor is the area's representative, he has to redress various grievances. People from poor communities come to councilors for various grievances and redressal of problems. Such grievance redressal meetings are held regularly in the ward office, where various people have to come regularly to solve the problem by providing witnesses for any grievance. Figure 5 states that 43% of respondents trust the ward councilor to resolve any problem. Then 25% for household heads and 20% for community leaders.

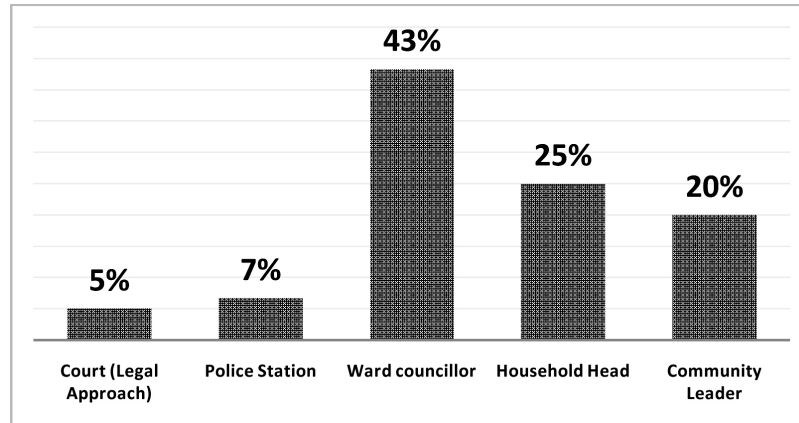


Figure 5: Grievances and redressal point

One Ward Councillor stated that,

“As the representative of the area, we have to perform another important responsibility besides other administrative work, which is to redress various problems and grievances of the poor people in my area. For this work, we have to work tirelessly, work impartially, and create a space of accountability for our work. Even if the office is closed, we have to solve all these problems by conducting meetings in our own homes.”

Community Engagement and Participation:

The ward office is the focal point for a ward where development plans and various problems are identified & efforts are made to resolve them. There are various committees, such as the school management committee, community hospital committee, waste management committee, security committee and market committee. In all these committees, the poverty population's representatives are also kept. The main purpose of keeping them here is to identify problems in poverty areas and convince everyone to work together in an effort to solve those problems. Regular meetings are held in this ward office with the representatives of the poor community, and agendas are prepared and planned for the development of the ward through joint efforts.

One development official stated that,

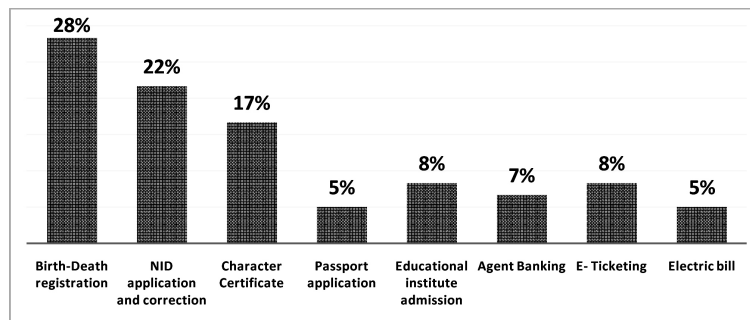
“Ward councilors and ward office staff are closely involved in the activities of our NGO, so we need to give regular updates to the ward office on what services we are providing. Councillors hold regular meetings with us to bring in various development funds for their wards and fully cooperate in implementing what kind of support is needed in which areas.”

Urban Digital Centre (UDC):

Urban Digital Centres (UDCs) emerged as a crucial centre for bringing e-services to more people in Bangladesh. People living in poverty in urban areas could save time and money while still receiving the needed services. In addition, it might alter the course of sustainable living by using digital services in health, education, and other socioeconomic metrics. In order to increase the sustainability of these Urban Digital Centers, the Government of Bangladesh is working in solidarity with various international organizations to improve the quality of services provided by these Urban Digital Centers (Kumar and Kim, 2022). With technical assistance from UNDP, access to information (a2i) Project and USAID, Bangladesh Government has tried to make various changes in the structure and policy of Urban Digital Center to involve the poor people of marginalized communities in this digital process and to reach a platform to build Smart Bangladesh in 2041. Through this a2i program, a digital centre has been established in each ward of the city corporations of Bangladesh, where an entrepreneur works and provides various digital services to the city population. This center is run under the direct supervision of the ward councillor, and the ward councillor looks after any problem related to this digital center. One Ward councillor stated that,

“We are working to implement the government's agenda. To achieve the government's promise of Smart Bangladesh by 2041, we are modernizing the Urban Digital Center and creating awareness among the area's poor people so that everyone is familiar with digital systems and use the system in their daily life.”

In the current digital age and globalization, the government is providing assistance to the citizens through traditional local government and digital services. The government provides various types of civic benefits to citizens 24 *7. From this Urban Digital Center, the poor people get various services such as birth registration, death registration, application for passports, application for



admission to various schools & colleges, and character certificates (Figure 6).

These Urban Development Centers provide computer training to young children from poverty-stricken areas and prepare them for future skill development. FGD respondents shared their views,

“We get various types of services from Urban Development Center, and we have to pay fixed government fees to get all these services. As the Urban Development Center is open from 9 am to 5 pm, if we need any emergency digital services after this time, we can take them from our local computer shop, where we have to spend more money.”

Figure 6: Digital service of urban digital centre

One UDC entrepreneur stated that,

“The poor people of our ward have been receiving various services from the Urban Development Center (UDC) regularly but the manpower is currently less than the needs of these people and as a result we are not able to provide services to all in a timely manner.”

After all this, we find that various forms of corruption and irregularities plague our local government system. Here, those who have different political ideologies are harassed to get various services from the ward office; moreover, various ward office staff are providing various

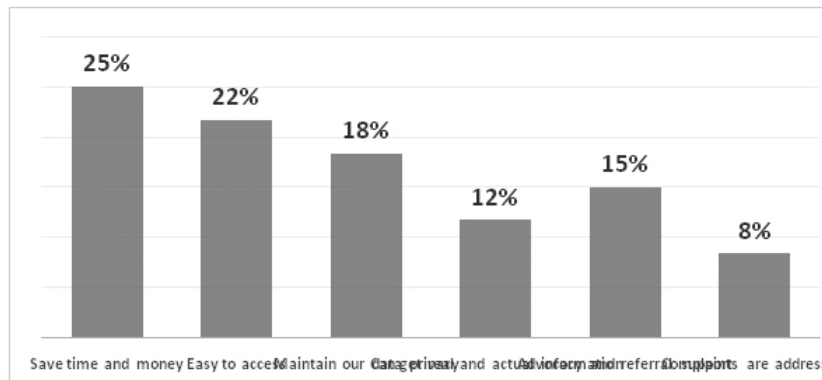


Figure 7: Impact of public services

Registrations.

All these services provided by the ward offices impact the lives of the poor marginalized population. Because these government services are not available from any other place, private services, which are available from Urban Digital Center, have to be paid a lot of money to get them from other places. Respondents believe that these ward-level public services save time & money (25%), are easy to access (22%), and the ward office maintains data privacy (18%).

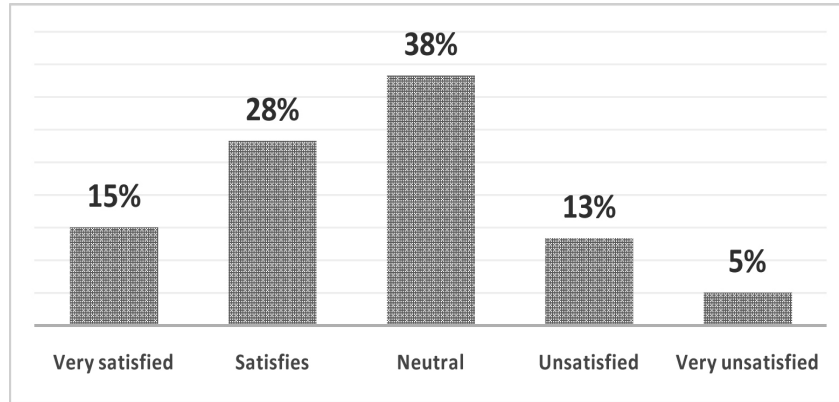


Figure 8: Satisfaction level on service delivery

Figure 8, represents the satisfaction level of urban poor communities, where 38% of respondents are neutrally satisfied, and 28% are satisfied with the public service delivery of urban local government authorities.

Contribution and Implications

People's needs are changing day by day and increasing gradually. No matter how many benefits the government provides to the citizens, it becomes very challenging to satisfy all the people together. It is possible to achieve the satisfaction of the citizens by providing quality service. The government of Bangladesh identifies the needs of people through administrative machinery and works to fulfill them. Since its independence, the Bangladesh government has introduced various reforms to the local government system. Different types of local government systems are being implemented in the two administrative tiers of Bangladesh, urban and rural, with the main objective of providing specialist services to urban and rural areas based on their characteristics. As urban areas undergo a lot of internal and external migration, the number of people living in poverty is quite significant (Awasthi, 2021).

As many projects as are going on in the Chittagong City Corporation come to work at the ward level, the ward councilor president serves as the head of the project implementation committee for those projects. These involve representatives of the poor, the general public, ward office staff and councilors are directly involved in planning the implementation of the projects. The poor community representatives and Ward Councilors identify the vulnerable areas in need of development in the ward and provide project support through due process

of budgeting and processing. We have seen that the Ward Councilors are biased while identifying the beneficiaries and identifying which areas need development work. Sometimes, a ward office staff member is directly connected with the project's procurement committee to try to commit financial corruption during the procurement process.

Another important function of the Ward Office is to deal with and redress the grievances of the poor people. Ward office and councillors have to spend considerable time doing this work. Regarding this grievance redressal, we find that the ward office is always in touch with the poor people, and various problems in the poor areas are constantly shared and discussed with the ward office. Ward offices have inclusive engagement and participation with people from poor communities (Hussain et al., 2013). People from poverty groups are represented in various committees such as school committee, waste management committee, disaster committee, health committee and women's development committee. There are constant discussions and conversations with the councillors and poor people to decide what the demands of these committees are and how to plan and implement them properly. Also, if there is a disaster in the area, then the people of the area can directly contact the ward for any necessary goods immediately. In this case, we do not see any distance between the ward office and the poor people.

Local self-government is intimately involved in politics and the citizens of the ward directly elect the ward councilor and he is directly involved in politics. He provides less support to those who do not agree with his political ideology and take time to provide various services. In this case, the ward office shows less support to those who bear with different political ideologies, and these people have to suffer in order to get various services. Ward offices provide various public services such as birth registration, death registration, passport applications and character certificates. But now as a result of A2I project, an Urban Digital Center has been established with the aim of digitizing every ward (Monem and Ferdous, 2023).

Table 4: Logical Framework of Public Service Delivery to urban poor community

Input	Process	Output	Outcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ward office service infrastructure • Establishment of Citizen Charter • Service fees list develop 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative procedure • Coordination with government offices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better service provide to poor urban communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good relations and satisfaction increase • Government agenda fulfils • Living standard change
Provide funds for development activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single Beneficiary Grant • Health infrastructure improvement fund • Education grant • Site development grant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning and verification with the ward office • Development project implementation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successful service delivery to vulnerable poor communities and people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living standard change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lodge grievance/ complaint 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting with ward councillor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complaint solve • Close grievance rate • Service delivery • Communication and coordination skills increase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social peace • Increase trust in elected representative
A2i project initiatives : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrepreneur recruitment • Provide ICT equipment • Develop urban development centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training provide • Receive service application • Problem/request identify • Follow the process of service provide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better service provide to urban poor community • Knowledge increase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase trust in the government • Living standard change • Decrease digital divide

Source: Based on field findings

Conclusion

Through this study, we have found that urban poverty populations have a variety of relationships with the delivery of public services through the local government system. The urban poor's living conditions have improved dramatically as a result of using these public services; we can say that this is because their knowledge of how government projects are carried out has grown, their coordination with ward councilors has enhanced, and the living standard has improved. Public service delivery is effective only when the poor population in the ward are satisfied with the service and give positive feedback. More customer-oriented programs result in more advantages and satisfaction. The shift from traditional public services to virtual offices allows citizens to access services at their convenience through online settings and changes (Karim, 2015). In this setting, people from poor communities are receiving services through a digital system that measures their level of satisfaction also.

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