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*Review article*

Grassroots Disaster Governance in Bangladesh: The Roles of Union Parishads and Disaster Management Committees

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh's disaster management discourse is often framed through the celebrated resilience and industrious spirit of its people, a lived heroism deeply embedded in their relationship with nature. However, national disaster management policies frequently fail to translate these narratives into substantive and practical local action. This study explores how participatory governance through Union Parishads (UPs) and Union Disaster Management Committees (UDMCs) can address this persistent policy–practice divide. Adopting a qualitative research design, twenty-seven in-depth interviews were conducted with UDMC members, local power actors, and disaster-affected residents across selected unions. The findings reveal critical structural gaps in disaster response, including the absence of temporary shelters, inadequate post-disaster rehabilitation support, and systemic inefficiencies in local governance. Weak institutional capacity, limited resources, and constrained community participation further undermine the effectiveness of UDMCs. The study argues for inclusive, bottom-up strategies that empower local communities, enhance participatory decision-making, and strengthen coordination between national frameworks and grassroots needs. Reinforcing participatory governance at the union level emerges as vital for fostering resilience and advancing sustainable disaster management in Bangladesh.

KEYWORDS

Disaster governance; participatory approaches; union parishad; union disaster management committees; community resilience; sustainable disaster management; Bangladesh.



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“We do not get any relief assistance – who would give it to us?”

Poverty is our constant companion and it defines our reality.”

- Participant from the field interview

1. Introduction

Disaster management in Bangladesh is shaped by the country’s geographical vulnerability and recurring exposure to floods, cyclones, and riverbank erosion (Paul & Routray, 2011; Alam & Collins, 2010). While national frameworks such as the Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD) provide detailed guidance (Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, 2019), their translation into effective local action remains inconsistent (Ahmed, 2019). Over the decades, successive reforms have gradually shifted the focus from centralised relief distribution to more decentralised and participatory models of governance (*Table 1: Key Milestones in Disaster Governance in Bangladesh*). Within this evolving framework, Union Parishads (UPs) and Union Disaster Management Committees (UDMCs) are positioned as frontline institutions to bridge the gap between policy and practice, yet their effectiveness continues to be hindered by structural weaknesses, resource limitations, and political interference (Siddiqui, 2020; Rahman, 2021).

Globally, disaster governance scholarship underscores the importance of participatory and community-based approaches that integrate formal policy frameworks with the lived realities of affected populations (Ahrens & Rudolph, 2006; Tierney, 2012). Such approaches are argued to enhance resilience by fostering inclusivity, trust, and shared responsibility between state institutions and local communities (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015; Shaw, 2012). In the Bangladeshi context, however, existing research tends to focus either on household-level vulnerabilities to hazards such as floods and cyclones (Paul & Routray, 2011; Mallick & Vogt, 2012) or on broader policy and institutional challenges in disaster risk reduction (Alam & Collins, 2010; Haque et al., 2012). Far less attention has been devoted to examining how Union Parishads (UPs) and Union Disaster Management Committees (UDMCs) jointly shape grassroots resilience and mediate the translation of national frameworks into local action (Rahman, 2021). Strengthening these frontline institutions is therefore crucial for fostering disaster governance that is not only sustainable but also inclusive, transparent, and accountable (Siddiqui, 2020; MoDMR, 2019).

Against this backdrop, this study investigates how participatory engagement between Union Parishads (UPs) and Union Disaster Management Committees (UDMCs) can strengthen grassroots disaster governance in Bangladesh. It examines explicitly three interrelated dimensions: the institutional challenges that constrain effective disaster response, the opportunities for community participation in disaster governance, and the degree to which local governance practices align with national policy directives such as the Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD). To address these objectives, the article is structured as follows: the next section reviews the relevant literature on disaster governance and local institutional roles, followed by an outline of the methodological approach. The subsequent sections present the empirical findings and discuss their implications in light of participatory governance debates. The article concludes by highlighting key policy recommendations for fostering inclusive, transparent, and sustainable disaster management at the grassroots level in Bangladesh.

Table 1. Key Milestones in Disaster Governance in Bangladesh

Year	Event	Significance
1970	Bhola Cyclone	One of the deadliest cyclones in history; exposed the absence of disaster preparedness and triggered global attention.
1972	Establishment of Cyclone Preparedness Programme (CPP)	Introduced systematic early warning and volunteer-based preparedness, marking the first institutional response.
1970s–1980s	Recurrent cyclones and floods	Government response remained largely relief-oriented, with limited emphasis on preparedness and risk reduction.

Year	Event	Significance
1997	First Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD)	Provided a formal national framework for disaster management; institutionalised coordination across government tiers.
2000s	Expansion of local disaster management structures	Union Parishads (UPs) and Union Disaster Management Committees (UDMCs) recognised as frontline actors.
2010	Major revision of SOD	Emphasised decentralisation, coordination, and participatory disaster risk reduction at the local level.
2019	Latest revision of SOD	Integrated climate change adaptation, gender responsiveness, and stronger community participation into governance frameworks.

(Source: BDRCS, 2019)

Research Objectives

1. To assess the roles of Union Parishads and UDMCs in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.
2. To explore how community participation influences the effectiveness of local disaster management.
3. To identify institutional, political, and resource-related challenges that hinder grassroots disaster resilience.

Research Questions

1. How do Union Parishads and UDMCs contribute to sustainable disaster governance at the local level?
2. What opportunities and constraints shape community participation in these processes?
3. In what ways do governance practices at the union level align or diverge from national policy frameworks?
4. Literature on Disaster Risk Management and Governance in Bangladesh

Disaster Preparedness and Local Vulnerabilities

Research in Bangladesh demonstrates that disaster preparedness behaviour is strongly shaped by socioeconomic conditions such as income, education, and prior hazard experience (Tohan et al., 2024). However, while these household-level insights highlight individual vulnerabilities, they often neglect the institutional arrangements that enable or constrain preparedness. Similar patterns are observed globally, where demographic factors intersect with institutional capacities in shaping resilience (Cvetković & Šišović, 2024).

Decentralisation and Governance

Decentralisation is widely regarded as a pathway for strengthening disaster governance at the local level. In Bangladesh, studies highlight the role of UDMCs and the Cyclone Preparedness Programme in enhancing coordination, but they also reveal overreliance on NGOs and limited institutional autonomy (Quader et al., 2023). Comparative findings from Serbia further demonstrate that decentralised governance, when combined with inclusive participation, enhances long-term resilience (Cvetković, 2020). These insights suggest that local institutional empowerment is indispensable, yet remains under-realised in Bangladesh.

Institutional Effectiveness and Policy Gaps

Despite clear national frameworks such as the *Standing Orders on Disaster*, implementation gaps persist at the grassroots. Studies identify weaknesses including insufficient training, inadequate resources, and political interference (Ahmed et al., 2016; Uddin et al., 2020). In coastal contexts, bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption further erode institutional credibility (Barua et al., 2021).

These findings echo international evidence that systemic vulnerabilities in emergency response often undermine disaster preparedness (Cvetković et al., 2024).

Community Participation and Social Capital

Participatory approaches are critical for embedding disaster governance within community realities. Research on community volunteers shows their potential to enhance early warning dissemination, though their integration into formal structures remains limited (Al-Mueed et al., 2021). In rural Bangladesh, mechanisms such as courtyard meetings (*Uthan Boithak*) have increased local awareness, but participation is often shaped by gender, class, and political hierarchies (Rabbani et al., 2015). Similar trends are evident elsewhere, where social networks and knowledge-sharing platforms such as social media during earthquakes have proven vital for preparedness (Mano, Kirshcenbaum, & Rapaport, 2019).

Emerging Perspectives: Youth and Education

Recent studies highlight the importance of embedding disaster awareness within educational institutions. Research in Assam, India, shows that students' perceptions and preparedness significantly influence household-level resilience (Barik, Bhuyan, & Hodam, 2025). In Bangladesh, however, school-based disaster risk reduction remains underdeveloped and poorly institutionalised, limiting its potential as a sustainable preparedness strategy.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature highlights that disaster resilience depends not only on household preparedness but also on institutional effectiveness, participatory governance, and systemic coordination. Yet, gaps remain in understanding how **Union Parishads and UDMCs jointly operationalise disaster management in practice**, and how their interaction with communities can bridge the persistent policy practice divide. This study addresses this gap by investigating grassroots disaster governance through a participatory lens, contributing both to local policy debates in Bangladesh and to broader discussions on sustainable disaster resilience.

2. Theoretical Framework

Disaster governance is best understood as the interplay of structural vulnerabilities and institutional systems. To analyse these dynamics, this study employs Social Vulnerability Theory and Systems Theory, which together provide a multidimensional lens. Social Vulnerability Theory emphasises how structural inequalities poverty, marginalisation, limited access to services exacerbate the impact of disasters (Cutter, 1996). In the Bangladeshi context, these vulnerabilities are visible in the exclusion of women, the poor, and minority groups from UDMC decision-making, as well as in unequal access to relief and recovery assistance. By applying this framework, the study explains why disaster impacts are unevenly distributed and why governance interventions must prioritise inclusivity and equity.

Systems Theory, by contrast, conceptualises disaster management as a network of interdependent components, including institutions, communities, policies, and feedback mechanisms (von Bertalanffy, 1968). The theory highlights how effective disaster governance requires coordination between these elements. In this study, Systems Theory illuminates how Union Parishads and UDMCs function as nodes within a broader governance system, where breakdowns in communication, resource mobilisation, or leadership disrupt the entire disaster management cycle.

This study explores how Union Parishads (UPs) and Union Disaster Management Committees (UDMCs) can work together to strengthen disaster governance at the grassroots in Bangladesh. Using an integrated framework (*Figure 1: Systemic Interaction in Disaster Management*), it highlights the lived realities behind institutional structures. The findings reveal how systemic failures such as po-

litical interference and corruption intersect with social vulnerabilities like community marginalisation to weaken participation. Yet, they also show that inclusive leadership and genuine community engagement can transform these challenges into opportunities for resilience. By linking structural processes with human experiences, the study underscores that reducing vulnerability and improving systemic efficiency must go hand in hand to build disaster governance that is not only effective but also just and humane.

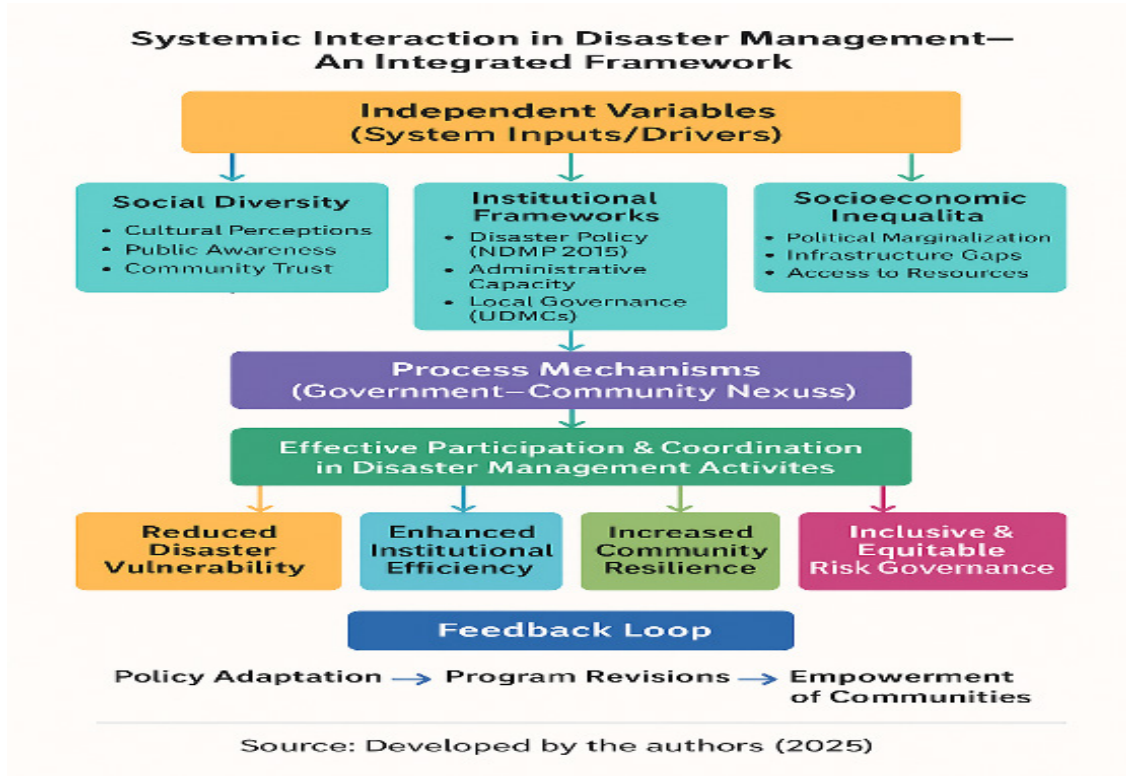


Figure 1. Systemic Interaction in Disaster Management

3. Materials and methods

This study employed a **qualitative research design** to investigate how Union Parishads (UPs) and Union Disaster Management Committees (UDMCs) contribute to sustainable disaster governance in Bangladesh. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of institutional practices, community participation, and the lived experiences of disaster-affected populations.

3.1. Study Area and Case Selection

The research was conducted in six Union Parishads located in two disaster-prone Upazila: Sylhet Sadar (Tukerbazar, Kandigaon, and Hatkhula) and Tahirpur (Tahirpur Sadar and South Badaghat). These unions were purposively selected because of their high vulnerability to floods and storms, their institutional exposure to disaster management interventions, and their diverse community profiles. Focusing on these areas enabled the study to capture both geographical and institutional variations in grassroots governance.

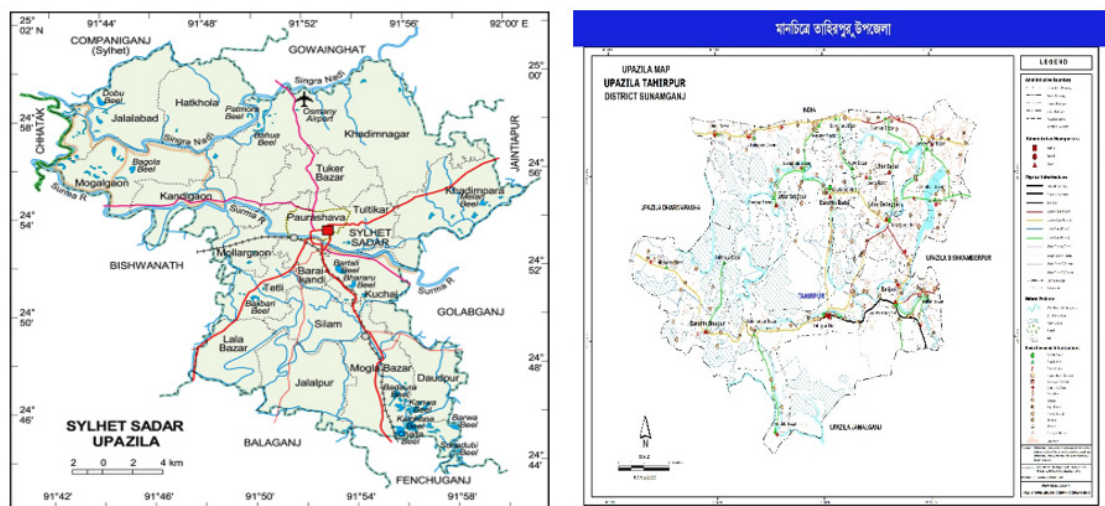


Figure 2. Map of study area (Sylhet Sadar and Tahirpur Upazila)

3.2. Sampling Strategy and Participants

A total of twenty-seven participants were selected through purposive sampling. The sample included nine UDMC members (two of whom were Union Parishad Chairmen) and 18 local residents, community leaders, and disaster-affected individuals. This composition ensured the inclusion of both institutional perspectives and community voices. The sample size aligns with established recommendations for qualitative depth (Green & Thorogood, 2004; Charmaz, 2004), where 20–30 participants are considered adequate to achieve data saturation in exploratory studies.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between (April-July, 2025). Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent. Field observations and document reviews (including policy papers, NGO reports, and local government documents) were also used to triangulate findings.

3.4. Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step process of coding, categorising, and identifying themes. Triangulation across respondent categories and secondary documents enhanced the validity and reliability of findings. By combining institutional perspectives with community narratives, this methodology ensured a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of grassroots disaster governance in Bangladesh.

4. Results and discussion

Roles of Union Parishads in Disaster Governance

Union Parishads (UPs) occupy a frontline role in disaster management, particularly in coordinating shelters, relief distribution, and infrastructure maintenance. While the *Local Government Act* (2009) empowers UPs to manage local needs, findings reveal persistent gaps: inadequate shelters, politicised relief distribution, and weak infrastructure maintenance. These shortcomings echo earlier research highlighting corruption, elite capture, and resource constraints as systemic obstacles (Saha & Ballard, 2021; Quader et al., 2023). From a **systems theory** perspective, these gaps reflect

breakdowns in institutional inputs and outputs, where insufficient funding and poor coordination limit effective disaster response.

Effectiveness of Union Disaster Management Committees (UDMCs)

UDMCs are mandated to ensure participatory disaster governance. Evidence, however, shows that committee membership is often politicised, dominated by local elites, and rarely inclusive of women or marginalised groups. Many community members remain unaware of their formal role in disaster planning. This confirms prior studies that note symbolic rather than substantive participation in local committees (Uddin et al., 2020). Here, **social vulnerability theory** is especially useful: exclusion of vulnerable populations (e.g., women, minorities, the poor) amplifies risks and undermines equitable disaster resilience.

Community Participation and Social Capital

Despite institutional weaknesses, grassroots participation through *uthan boithak* (courtyard meetings), awareness campaigns, and volunteerism has proven valuable. Respondents reported increased awareness in disaster preparedness when meetings were interactive and inclusive. Yet, patriarchal norms and political affiliations often constrain participation, reinforcing unequal power dynamics (Rabbani et al., 2015). This finding underscores the importance of **combining formal institutional frameworks with informal community practices**, aligning with international evidence that local social networks are critical in shaping effective disaster risk reduction (Mano et al., 2019).

Policy–Practice Gaps and Systemic Barriers

The study also reveals systemic barriers, including inadequate funding, corruption, poor infrastructure, and weak communication networks. These issues mirror global patterns where systemic vulnerabilities in emergency systems hinder resilience (Cvetković et al., 2024). In Bangladesh, however, such challenges are compounded by political patronage, which distorts equitable aid delivery and reduces public trust. Thus, disaster resilience requires both **institutional reforms (to ensure accountability)** and **community empowerment (to enhance participation and trust)**.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

This study examined the dynamics of community participation in wetland management in Tangar Haor, Bangladesh, through a mixed-methods approach grounded in Political Ecology, Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM), and Environmental Justice perspectives. The findings reveal that institutional opportunities for engagement, perceptions of inclusivity in governance, and the persistent influence of political interference are critical determinants of participation. While the presence of management committees and project-based interventions reflects incremental progress toward procedural justice, the realities of elite capture and partisan manipulation continue to undermine distributive and recognition justice. These systemic constraints not only limit the scope of meaningful participation but also erode community trust in governance structures designed to empower them.

The study underscores the need to move beyond rhetorical inclusion by embedding genuine accountability and transparency into wetland governance. Recognizing community knowledge, especially that of marginalized groups such as fishers and landless households, is essential for bridging the gap between policy and practice. From a theoretical standpoint, the findings enrich political ecology scholarship by demonstrating how structural inequalities intersect with local governance mechanisms, shaping patterns of resource access and exclusion. For practitioners and policymakers, the evidence highlights the importance of aligning institutional design with community realities, ensuring that decentralization translates into empowerment rather than symbolic participation.

To strengthen resilience and justice in wetland governance, several recommendations emerge. First, participatory spaces must be insulated from partisan capture through stricter oversight, rotating leadership, and mechanisms to guarantee representation of women and marginalized groups. Second, policy frameworks such as the Standing Orders on Disaster (2019) and the National Disaster Management Policy (2015) should be more explicitly integrated into local wetland management to enhance coherence across governance levels. Third, capacity-building programs for local institutions and community members should prioritize deliberative skills, conflict resolution, and environmental stewardship. Finally, future interventions should adopt a people-centred approach that values indigenous knowledge and fosters co-production of management strategies. Such efforts would not only strengthen procedural fairness but also ensure that wetland governance contributes to broader goals of environmental justice and sustainable livelihoods.

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