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TOWARDS INCLUSIVE URBAN GOVERNANCE: STAKEHOLDER DYNAMICS AND POLICY PATHWAYS IN RAJSHAHI, BANGLADESH

Md. Al-Amin AKONDO¹, Md. Sultan MAHMUD^{1*} and Rahmat ULLAH²

1 Department of Political Science, University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh;
smahmud@ru.ac.bd (M. M.) (Corresponding Author)

2 Department of Political Science and International Relations, Istanbul Gelisim
University, Turkey

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Abstract

This study critically examines the complex dynamics of stakeholder participation in urban development projects in Rajshahi City (RC), Bangladesh, to inform strategies for more inclusive and effective outcomes. Specifically, it analyzes the extent of stakeholder involvement across project phases—from decision-making to evaluation—to identify key bureaucratic and socio-political barriers to effective participation and proposes strategies to enhance inclusivity, transparency, and capacity-building among diverse groups. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were gathered from a purposive sample of 50 respondents, encompassing residents, NGO representatives, and project personnel involved in ongoing development initiatives in RC. The findings indicate that while robust stakeholder involvement generally correlates with positive project implementation, its overall effectiveness is substantially undermined by critical barriers, including limited public awareness, pervasive political interference, weak inter-agency coordination, systemic corruption, and entrenched socio-economic disparities. This research highlights a significant gap between policy intentions and practical realities in participatory development contexts, contributing to the South Asian literature on urban governance. It offers critical policy insights for designing robust, transparent, and equitable urban development strategies, underscoring the imperative for institutional reforms and enhanced civic engagement to achieve sustainable urban governance.

Keywords: Stakeholder Participation, Urban Governance, Inclusive Development, Rajshahi City, Bangladesh

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Introduction

Urban development initiatives play a significant role in determining the social, economic, and infrastructure landscape of cities. These development projects are crucial for improving urban infrastructure, promoting sustainable growth, and raising living conditions, particularly in places like Rajshahi, one of the biggest cities in Bangladesh. Rajshahi, a major divisional city in northwestern Bangladesh, is characterized by its strategic location on the Padma River, a growing population, and its role as an administrative, educational, and economic hub. However, the city faces significant urban challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, traffic congestion, service delivery gaps, and socio-economic disparities among its diverse population (Tabassum et al., 2025). In response, Rajshahi City Corporation (RCC) has embarked on numerous development projects, including road expansions, flyover construction, and cultural site rejuvenation, to promote economic growth and improve livability. The success of these development projects is critically dependent on the active involvement of numerous stakeholders, including governmental bodies, local communities, the commercial sector, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). By encouraging inclusiveness, ownership, and long-term sustainability, effective stakeholder participation ensures that development programs align with the interests and goals of the populace (Arnstein, 1969). However, in Rajshahi, stakeholder participation often remains limited due to unawareness, weak institutional mechanisms, socio-political interference, coordination gaps, and socio-economic inequalities. These challenges not only delay project implementation but also undermine quality and sustainability, ultimately failing to meet community needs (The World Bank, 2021).

The successful implementation of development projects in urban areas, such as Rajshahi City (RC), is significantly influenced by the active participation of diverse stakeholders. Stakeholders, including government agencies, local communities, private sectors, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), play a pivotal role in ensuring that development initiatives align with the needs and aspirations of the population. However, in practice, stakeholder participation in RC's development projects is often limited or ineffective, which cannot lead to optimal project outcomes.

Several challenges hinder effective stakeholder involvement in RC. These include a lack of awareness and capacity among community members, inadequate institutional frameworks for participatory planning, weak coordination between stakeholders, and political interference (Mahmud, 2023). Additionally, socio-economic disparities and power imbalances often marginalize certain groups, such as women, people with low incomes, and minority communities, from decision-making processes. As a result, many development projects face delays and cost overruns, and fail to address residents' actual needs, ultimately undermining the sustainability of these initiatives. Addressing these challenges requires identifying and implementing effective strategies to enhance stakeholder participation in RC's development projects. This study aims to explore the barriers to stakeholder involvement, analyze their implications for project outcomes, and propose strategies to foster inclusive and effective participation in urban development. By focusing on RC, the study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on participatory urban governance in developing cities.

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative perspectives, to examine stakeholder participation in Rajshahi City's development projects. It focuses on the challenges to participation and explores strategies to improve effectiveness and inclusiveness by analyzing the current level and nature of stakeholder participation, identifying key bureaucratic and socio-political barriers, and proposing measures to enhance transparency, inclusivity, and participation. This research aims to offer useful suggestions for enhancing involvement by examining stakeholder roles, participation gaps, and the obstacles they encounter. This research aims to examine the dynamics, challenges, and gaps in stakeholder participation in Rajshahi City's development projects, and to propose strategies to enhance

inclusiveness, strengthen participatory urban governance, and support sustainable urban development in similar cities.

Literature Review

In the discourse of urban development, establishing a clear understanding of key concepts such as "stakeholder," "development," and "stakeholder participation" is paramount. There is a broad consensus regarding who qualifies as a potential or actual stakeholder, generally encompassing individuals, neighborhoods, institutions, groups, organizations, and the environment. A foundational definition, provided by Freeman (1984), characterizes a stakeholder in an organization as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives." Building on this, other scholars have offered nuanced perspectives. Alkhafaji (1989) identifies stakeholders as "groups to whom a corporation is responsible," while Thomson et al. (1991) define them as groups "in relationship with an organization." Clarkson (1995) further elaborates, describing stakeholders as "persons or groups that have, or claim, ownership, rights, or interests in a corporation and its activities, past, present, or future," emphasizing that these claims often stem from dealings with the firm or organization, allowing for the grouping of stakeholders with similar interests. However, Mitchell et al. (1997) critically argue that definitions relying solely on relationships, contracts, or transactions may lack the crucial element of reciprocal effect, which they find partially absent in Freeman's (1984) "can affect or is affected by" concept. They assert that those who have no reciprocal effect on the firm or are not affected by it effectively have no stake. Another perspective, from Rhenman (1964), describes stakeholders as individuals and groups who depend on the firm to achieve their personal goals and upon whom the firm, in turn, depends for its existence. For this study, we primarily adopt Freeman's (1984) definition of stakeholders as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives."

Moving beyond the definition of stakeholders, "development" is broadly understood as "an improvement, qualitative, quantitative, or both, in the use of available resources." Within this context, a "project" is a temporary process characterized by a clearly defined start and end time, a specific set of tasks, and a budget, all designed to accomplish a well-defined goal or objective. Ultimately, the overarching goal of all development projects is to improve social, economic, environmental, and infrastructure conditions, thereby enhancing people's lives through programs such as skills training and other livelihood initiatives.

Central to the success of such projects is "stakeholder participation," which Akter et al. (2025) define as a process where stakeholders (e.g., individuals, groups, and organizations) actively choose to take a significant role in making decisions about matters that directly affect them. Typically, the implementation of development projects involves two main categories of stakeholders: internal and external. Internal stakeholders are those formally connected to the project, such as owners, customers, and employees. In contrast, external stakeholders are those who, while not formally connected, are nevertheless affected by the project in some discernible way.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of potential stakeholders in a development project, categorizing them into internal and external groups. This research specifically considers both categories of stakeholders.

Stakeholders in development projects play a crucial role in shaping project outcomes. Stakeholder engagement activities begin before or at the start of the project and continue throughout the project. Their activities typically vary by role, level of involvement, and the project's specific phase. Their activities are shown in Figure 2 below.



Figure 1 Potential Stakeholders for Construction Projects
Source: Adapted from Olander (2006)

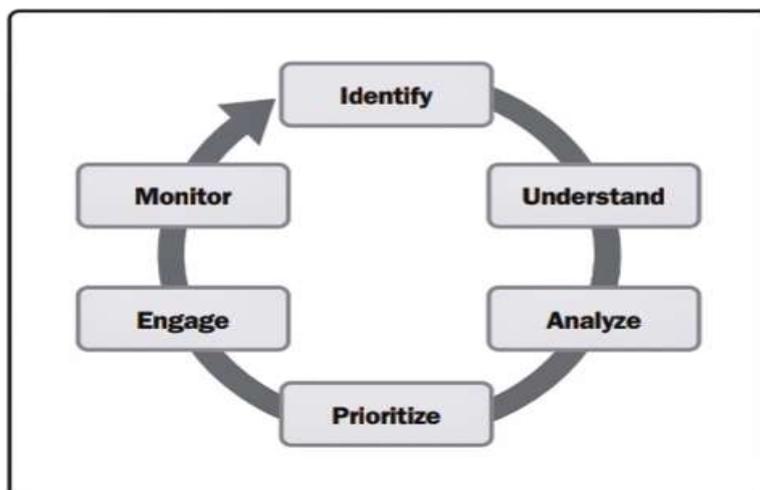


Figure 2 Stakeholder Engagement Cycle in Development Projects
Source: Project Management Institute (2021)

Stakeholders in development programs are commonly classified based on their distinct roles, which include: a) Policy creators, acting as decision-makers and policy determinants; b) Coordinators, responsible for integrating various stakeholders; c) Facilitators, addressing the target group's needs; d) Implementers, executing policy; and e) Accelerators, expediting program progress (Hendriawan et al., 2023).

The development projects undertaken by the Rajshahi City reflect a concerted effort to improve urban infrastructure, enhance connectivity, and promote cultural and religious sites. Notably, the Bilsimla Railway crossing has been elevated to a four-lane road to ensure smoother, faster movement of both vehicles and pedestrians, addressing the area's growing traffic demands. Similarly, the construction of a flyover at the Mohanpur railway crossing, costing approximately Taka 40.80 crore, has not only eased traffic flow but also transformed the area into a tourist attraction, generating significant income for locals. Furthermore, the east-west connecting road, constructed at a cost of Taka 189.35 crore, bridges key areas, such as Alif Lam Meem Bhata and Choddopaya crossings, enhancing regional connectivity and supporting local commerce. In addition, the elevation of a 2.5-kilometer stretch from Kalpana Cinema Hall to Talaimary crossing, upgraded to a four-lane road at a cost of Taka 131.36 crore, exemplifies efforts to modernize transportation infrastructure with pedestrian-friendly footpaths and decorative lighting, thereby improving the overall aesthetic and accessibility.

Lastly, the Hazrat Shah Makhdum Dargah Sharif Development Project, valued at Taka 24.84 crore, focuses on enhancing the religious and cultural significance of the shrine complex by constructing a boundary wall, a mosque, and an entry gate. These initiatives underscore the city's commitment to fostering economic growth, improving the quality of life, and preserving its cultural heritage.

Stakeholder involvement is widely acknowledged as essential for effective community-based water initiatives. Promoting social inclusion and active participation encourages communities to take ownership of their water resources and ensures equitable distribution of benefits. While existing research emphasizes the value of participation, significant gaps remain. Notably, little attention has been paid to the power dynamics that can influence stakeholder interactions and project outcomes. Furthermore, insufficient consideration has been given to the potential for contradictions and alternative viewpoints within communities, which can hinder effective decision-making and project sustainability. Future studies should investigate the barriers to socio-economic benefits in water projects and develop effective techniques to boost stakeholder engagement while addressing these crucial gaps (Machuma et al., 2024).

The suggested framework, which places strong emphasis on stakeholder involvement in Bangladeshi project implementation, is consistent with previous research highlighting the vital role of various stakeholders in the successful completion of development projects. Effective stakeholder participation has been linked to better decision-making, greater project ownership, increased sustainability, and lower risks, according to studies. Effective involvement, however, can be hindered by power imbalances, competing interests, and poor communication. To validate the suggested paradigm and evaluate its efficacy in the Bangladeshi setting, future research should focus on collecting empirical data. Research should also examine ways to balance stakeholder participation with the project's requirements and schedules, ensuring that engagement efforts are effective and significantly advance project goals (Sooli, 2022).

Stakeholder participation, particularly from local communities, is critical for long-term urban property development, but research identifies persistent hurdles. Developers frequently view communities as hurdles, leading to tokenistic interactions that ignore their demands and produce mismatched outcomes. Scholars emphasize the need for early involvement, trust-building, and networks to achieve inclusiveness. The lack of institutional frameworks and procedures is a persistent problem, resulting in ad hoc participation and poor collaboration. Addressing these gaps through practical tactics and organizational reforms is critical to connecting development objectives with community priorities. (Martinez-Avila & Olander, 2024).

To empower citizens, stakeholder participation in smart sustainable city (SSC) projects is essential. Stakeholder management measures (SMM) and citizen participation levels (CPL) are examined in the study "The Impact of Stakeholders' Management Measures on Citizens' Participation Level in Implementing Smart Sustainable Cities." It highlights how these factors influence public involvement in SSC development by identifying regulation, cooperation, legitimacy, and control as important determinants of participation. Stakeholder Participation not only increases project results and citizen engagement but also promotes control, legitimacy, regulation, and cooperation. However, research frequently ignores the specific ways in which participation empowers citizens. The literature reveals critical gaps, including limited evaluations of how such measures contribute to citizen empowerment and insufficient empirical studies directly linking SMM to CPL. The relationship between social media monitoring (SMM) and levels of citizen participation (CPL) is also not well explored. Future studies should measure the impact of empowerment by conducting nationwide evaluations following the full implementation of the FSCP (Full Stakeholder Participation Framework) to address these gaps. Scholars further suggest in-depth qualitative analyses to capture diverse

citizen perspectives and better understand the subtleties of citizen participation in SSC projects. (Alamoudi et al., 2022).

The study “Stakeholder Engagement and Influence: Strategies for Successful Energy Projects” highlights the critical role of effective stakeholder engagement in ensuring project sustainability and community support. Key strategies identified include proactive communication, collaboration, transparency, and conflict resolution, which enhance trust and alignment between project developers and stakeholders. The literature also emphasizes the use of developing technologies to increase communication and participation. Despite these findings, gaps remain in understanding the measurable impact of engagement techniques on project success, indicating the need for empirical research to assess how different engagement approaches influence sustainability outcomes and stakeholder satisfaction in energy projects (Ezeh et al., 2024).

Methodology

This research has employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide both measurable evidence of participation patterns and contextual insights into the experiences and perceptions of diverse stakeholders. The study is conducted in Rajshahi City, with an emphasis on both finished and ongoing major development projects.

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure the inclusion of respondents with direct knowledge or experience of development activities. This strategy was acceptable because not all stakeholders had equal opportunities to provide significant input. The sample consisted of 50 respondents, including residents, contractors, city corporation employees, and NGO representatives, ensuring balanced and diverse representation.

Primary data were collected using a well-structured questionnaire that included both open-ended and closed-ended questions, covering demographic information and participation measures to capture detailed perspectives. Secondary data collection includes evaluating project documentation, RC development plans, and relevant literature on stakeholder participation frameworks.

Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using SPSS, with descriptive statistics and frequency tests employed to summarize survey responses, identify participation patterns, and examine the relationships between stakeholder engagement and project outcomes. Qualitative responses were subjected to thematic analysis, which highlighted recurring challenges, political influences, and opportunities for strengthening participation.

Validity and reliability were ensured through pre-testing the questionnaire, triangulating data sources, and applying standardized coding procedures. The study focuses on ethics, including obtaining consent, keeping information confidential, and following approval procedures, while carefully avoiding sensitive questions to minimize potential harm. This thorough approach ensures accurate and detailed insights into stakeholder participation in urban development projects.

Results

Figure 3 presents the gender distribution of a sample population. The results indicate a significant male predominance, with 86% of the sample being male (N = 43) and 14% being female (N = 7). Thus, the majority of respondents are male.

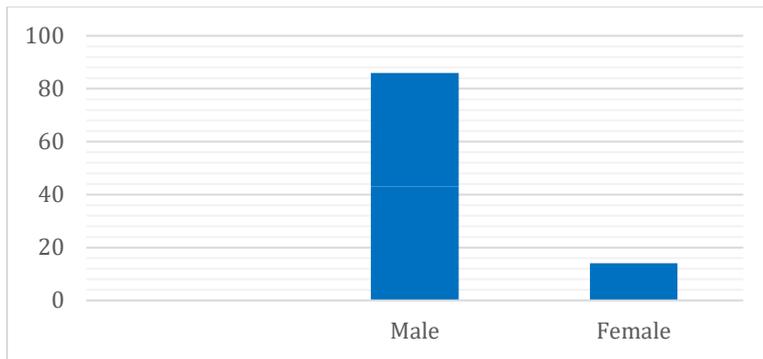


Figure 3 Gender of the Respondents

Figure 4 shows the age distribution of research respondents, with the majority (42%) in the 26-35 age group. This is followed by those aged 36-45 (28%), those under 25 (20%), and lastly, those aged 45 and above (10%). This distribution suggests that a relatively young, working-age population is actively engaged in the research.

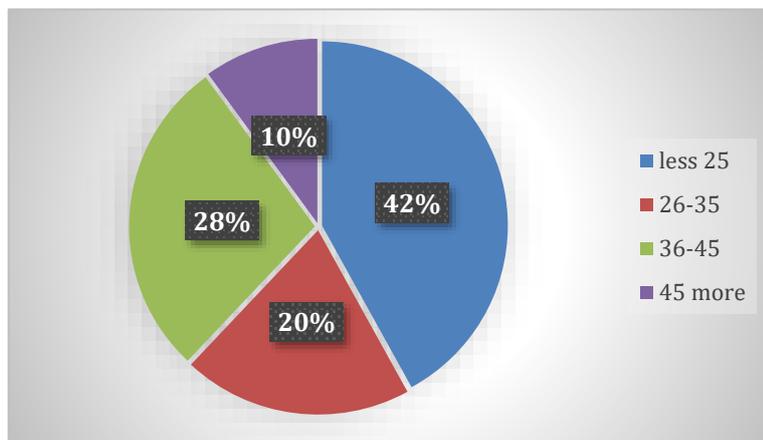


Figure 4 Age of the Respondents

Figure 5 illustrates the distribution of respondents across different categories. The largest segment, comprising 64% of respondents, consists of residents. Following residents, contractors for development projects (14%) and Rajshahi City employees (14%) constitute the next-largest groups. Lastly, local NGO representatives represent a smaller segment, accounting for 8% of the total respondents. This breakdown indicates a diverse range of stakeholders involved in the research, providing insights from various perspectives within the community.

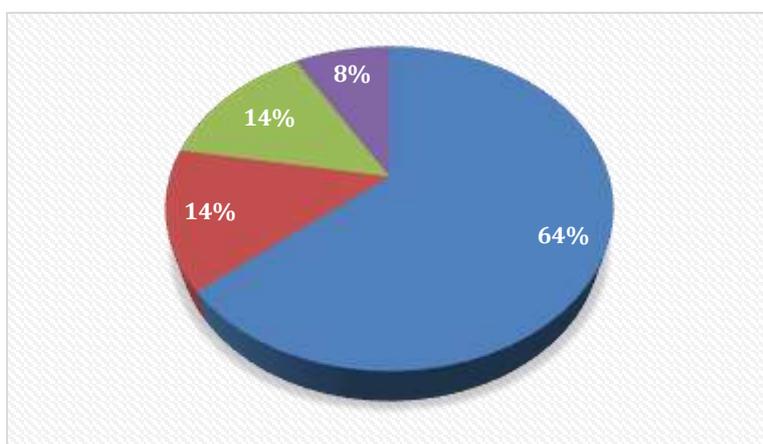


Figure 5 Categories of the Stakeholders

Figure 6 shows that 64% of respondents are aware of the development projects undertaken by the Rajshahi City, while 36% are not. The data suggests that a significant portion of the population is aware of the development projects undertaken by the RC.

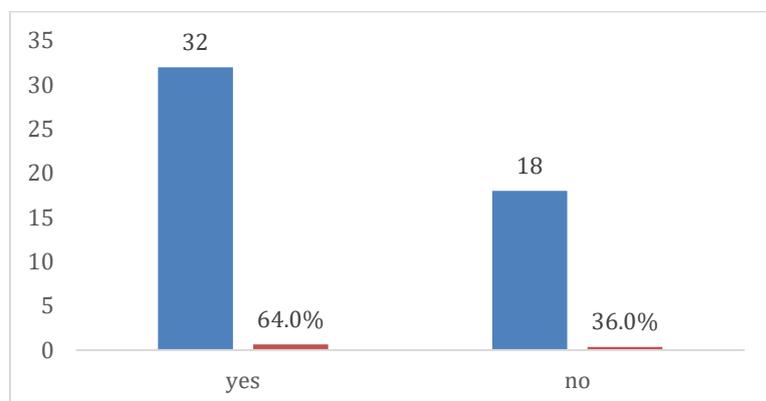


Figure 6 Stakeholder Awareness of Development Projects in Rajshahi City

Figure 7 illustrates the primary sources through which respondents learned about RC development projects. The data reveals that social media emerged as the most prominent channel, accounting for 33% of responses. This suggests that social media platforms have become a significant avenue for disseminating information about development initiatives. Following closely behind, media (TV, radio, and newspapers) played a crucial role in informing individuals, with 30% of respondents citing it as their primary source. Community meetings were the third most influential source, with 27% of participants reporting that they learned about projects there. Lastly, RC notifications were the least prominent source, with only 10% of respondents indicating they received information through this channel. This analysis highlights the evolving landscape of information dissemination within communities.

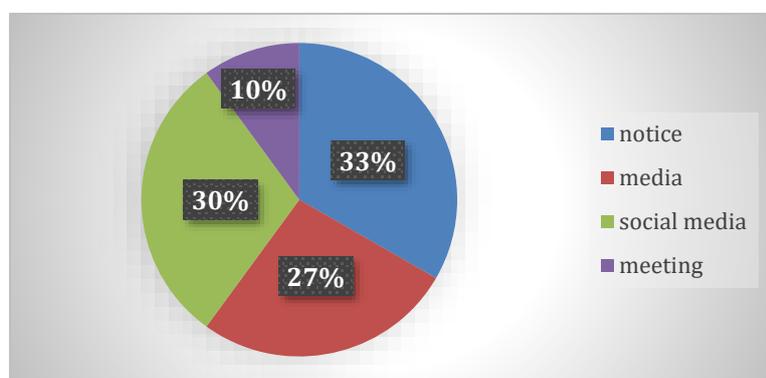


Figure 7 Primary Sources of Information on Development Projects for Stakeholders

In this regard, Table 1 illustrates that 38% of respondents answered "Yes" and 62% answering "No". This suggests that a majority of the population surveyed has not been involved in RC development projects. The numerical breakdown further emphasizes this point, with 19 individuals affirming participation and 31 individuals denying it.

Table 1 Participation in the Implementation of Development Projects in RC

	N	%
YES	19	38.00%
NO	31	62.00%

Figure 8 shows that public participation in RC development projects is notably low, with 56.0% of respondents reporting no involvement. Among participants, attending public meetings (22.0%) was the most common form of engagement, reflecting a preference for passive involvement over active decision-making roles (8.0%), implementation (8.0%), or evaluation (4.0%). This lack of direct participation risks misaligned projects that fail to meet community needs, leading to ineffective outcomes. Additionally, only 2.0% engaged in land ownership issues, highlighting a disconnect between development initiatives and local land rights. Addressing these gaps is essential for fostering community ownership and ensuring inclusive, effective development.

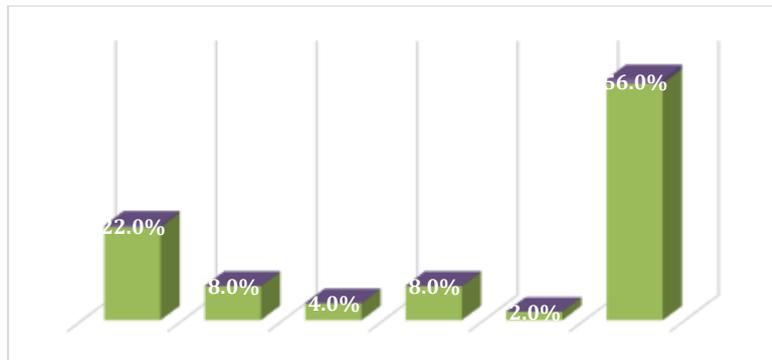


Figure 8 Modes of Stakeholder Involvement in Development Projects in Rajshahi City

Figure 9 presents the results of a survey on stakeholder participation and its impact on project outcomes. A significant majority (76%) of respondents believe that stakeholder participation positively influences project outcomes. Only a small minority (4%) disagree, while 20% remain unsure. This strong positive sentiment towards stakeholder participation suggests that it is widely perceived as a valuable approach for enhancing project success.

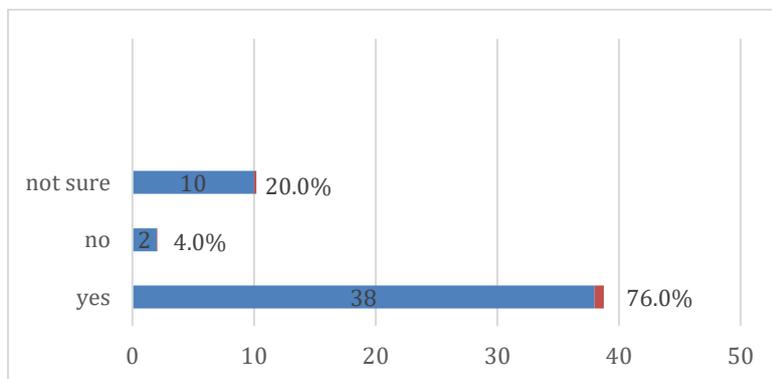


Figure 9 Stakeholder Participation Impact on Project Outcomes

Figure 10 and accompanying data illustrate the key benefits of involving stakeholders in projects. Increased Transparency is the most significant advantage, cited by 28% of respondents, underscoring the value of open communication and information sharing. This is followed by improved resource allocation (22%) and enhanced project quality (24%), highlighting stakeholders' contributions in optimizing resource utilization and ensuring project outcomes meet expectations. Finally, increased trust and cooperation (26%) underscore the positive impact of stakeholder engagement in fostering collaborative relationships and building consensus.

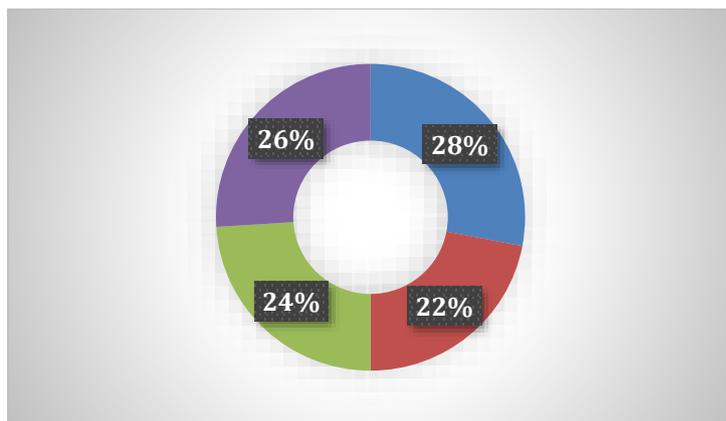


Figure 10 Benefits of Stakeholder Participation in Projects

Figure 11 illustrates the primary obstacles hindering effective stakeholder participation in development initiatives. The most significant challenge is the lack of awareness among stakeholders, accounting for 49% of the overall issues. Following closely is corruption, representing 29% of the challenges. This indicates that corrupt practices and a lack of transparency can significantly deter stakeholders from actively engaging in the development process. Limited decision-making power is another significant hurdle, comprising 16% of the challenges. Finally, due to account maintenance, 6% of challenges indicate that bureaucratic procedures and cumbersome processes can discourage participation.

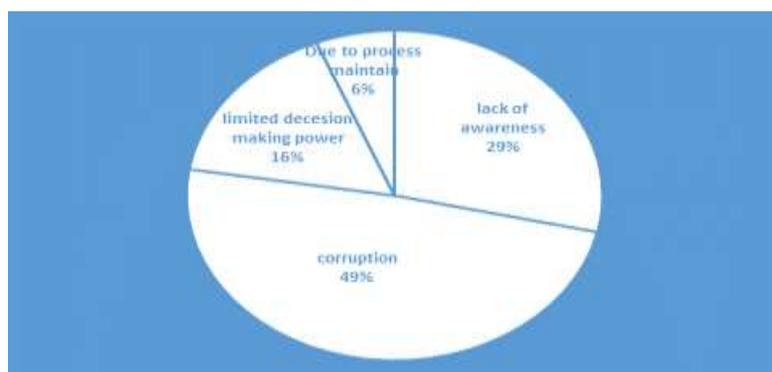


Figure 11 Main Challenges of Stakeholder Participation

Table 2 unequivocally demonstrates that a substantial majority of respondents perceive political interference and bureaucratic obstacles as significant challenges to effective stakeholder participation in development projects. A staggering 94.0% of respondents affirmed this viewpoint, while only 6.0% disagreed. These findings underscore the critical role that political and bureaucratic factors play in hindering inclusive and participatory development initiatives.

Table 2 Perceived Significance of Political and Bureaucratic Interference as a Challenge to Stakeholder Participation

	N	%
Yes	47	94.0%
No	3	6.0%

Table 3 reveals that mismanagement of stakeholder participation significantly impedes project implementation. A substantial 56% of respondents deemed this issue as "significant," indicating a considerable negative impact. Furthermore, 24% considered it "most significant,"

underscoring the problem's critical nature. Only 20% perceived it as "moderate," suggesting that most stakeholders faced significant challenges due to mismanagement.

Table 3 Perceived Significance of Mismanagement as a Challenge to Stakeholder Participation in RC Development Projects

	N	%
Most Significant	12	24.0%
Significant	28	56.0%
Moderate	10	20.0%
Negligible	0	0.0%

Table 4 suggests that communication gaps between authorities and stakeholders are very significant. The table data visually represent the distribution of responses, with 46% of respondents indicating a "very significant" lack of communication. This is followed by 30% indicating "significant" gaps, 18% perceiving them as "moderate," and only 6% viewing them as insignificant, indicating that a substantial portion of the respondents perceive the communication gaps as a major concern.

Table 4 Perceived Significance of Communication Gaps Between RC Authorities and Stakeholders as a Challenge to Stakeholder Participation

	N	%
1	15	30.0%
2	23	46.0%
3	9	18.0%
4	3	6.0%

Figure 12 shows that several strategies can enhance stakeholder participation in development projects. The most significant strategy is training and capacity building, with 30% of respondents advocating it. This suggests that equipping stakeholders with the necessary knowledge and skills to engage in the project process effectively is crucial. Closely following this is raising awareness, with 22% of respondents emphasizing its importance. Furthermore, 20% of respondents consider improving communication between the implementing agency (RC) and stakeholders essential, highlighting the need for clear, consistent, and timely communication channels. Decision-making transparency and open discussion are also seen as important strategies, with 20% and 14% of respondents, respectively, emphasizing their significance.

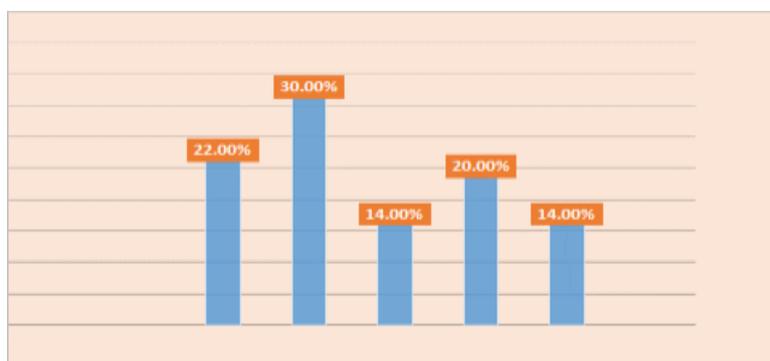


Figure 12 Strategies Enhance Stakeholder Participation in Development Projects

Figure 13 presents data on perceptions of whether freeing up political influence will increase stakeholder participation in development projects. A significant majority, 88%, believe that it will. Only 4% disagree, and 8% are unsure. This suggests a strong consensus that reducing political interference could lead to greater stakeholder involvement in development initiatives.

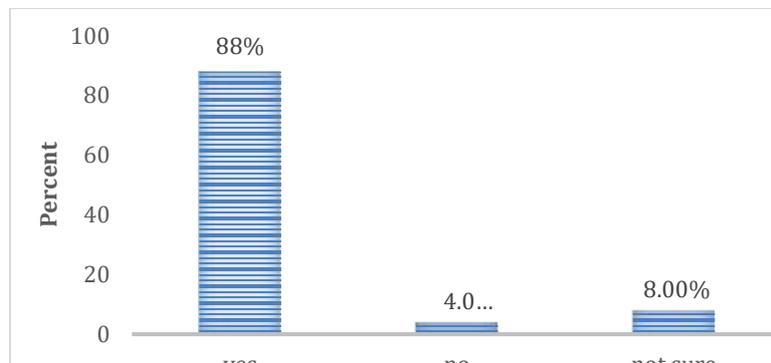


Figure 13 Perceived Impact of Reducing Political Influence on Stakeholder Participation

Figure 14 illustrates respondents' views on the most effective strategies to mitigate political influence. The most frequently cited approach is 'fair organization and involvement' (38.0%), followed by 'equal participation' (32.0%) and 'law enforcement' (24.0%). A minority (6.0%) identified 'system in place' as an effective method. In comparison, another 6.0% indicated 'missing information,' suggesting that further exploration and development of mechanisms are needed to ensure equitable, political-interference-free stakeholder participation. This highlights that stakeholders prioritize a system ensuring equal representation and active involvement in decision-making.

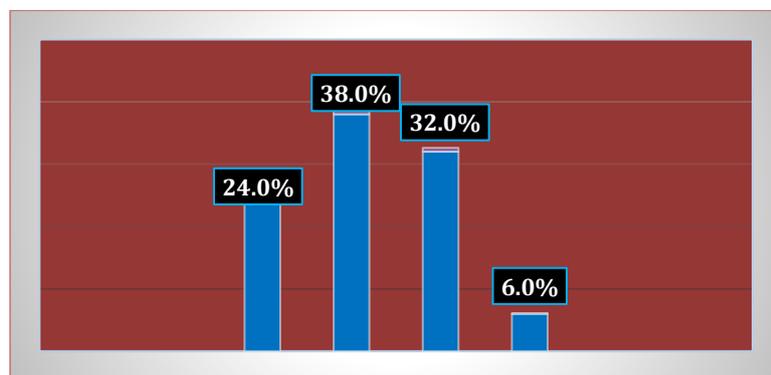


Figure 14 Perceived Effective Strategies to Mitigate Political Influence

Figure 15 indicates that public meetings and consultations are generally considered effective in involving stakeholders. A significant majority of respondents (62%) rated them as "effective," suggesting that these methods are valuable for engaging stakeholders in decision-making processes. While a smaller proportion (32%) found them "most effective," this still represents a positive outcome. Only a small minority (6%) viewed them as "neutral," indicating that most stakeholders find these methods to be at least somewhat useful.

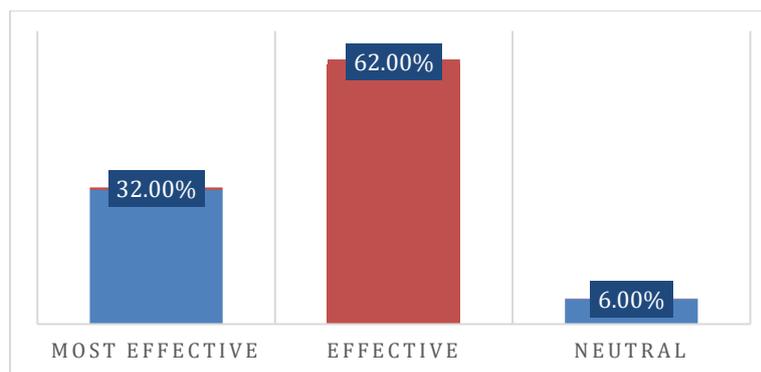


Figure 15 Perceived Effectiveness of Public Meetings and Consultations for Stakeholder Involvement

Figure 16 suggests a strong correlation among efforts to prevent corruption, increase transparency, and increase stakeholder participation. Out of 50 respondents, a significant 98% (49 individuals) believe that these measures would indeed lead to greater involvement. Conversely, only 2% (1 individual) disagrees with this notion. These findings strongly indicate that stakeholders view transparency and accountability as crucial factors in fostering their participation in development projects.

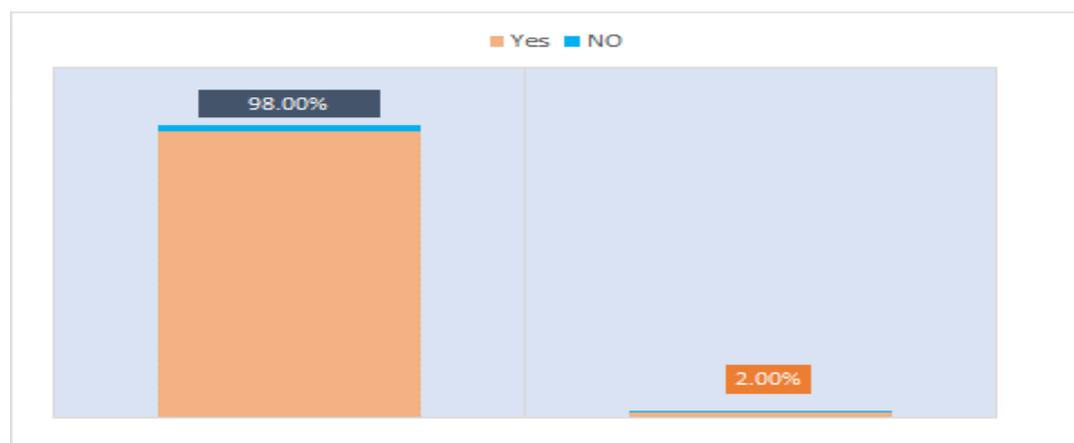


Figure 16 Perceived Impact of Anti-Corruption Measures and Increased Transparency on Stakeholder Participation

Conclusion and Discussion

The study emphasizes that stakeholder participation is crucial to the success of development projects. It ensures that initiatives align with community needs and promote long-term sustainable development. The survey revealed that the majority of respondents were male (86%), and most were in the 26-35 age group (42%), indicating a relatively young, working-age population. Stakeholders primarily included residents (64%), followed by contractors (14%), RC employees (14%), and NGO representatives (8%), reflecting a diverse set of perspectives. Regarding information sources, stakeholders reported relying on social media (33%), traditional media (30%), and community meetings (27%) to stay informed about development initiatives. Qualitative data showed younger people follow projects on social media, while older people rely on traditional media and community events. This pattern aligns with regional trends: in Jakarta, Indonesia, younger people rely on digital platforms, while older residents rely on traditional media such as television, radio, and community meetings (Mossberger et al., 2008). Hence, adopting multi-channel communication is essential to ensure inclusivity and effective stakeholder participation. A strong majority (76%) agrees that

stakeholder participation positively impacts projects, reflecting global stakeholder theory. In Surabaya, Indonesia, the “solid waste bank” succeeded through collaboration among communities, the private sector, and government, while in Lalitpur, Nepal, the “Sithi” festival maintains its water management through joint efforts by local authorities, communities, and cultural custodians (Rana & Aadisukma, 2024). Specifically, stakeholders emphasized benefits such as increased transparency (28%), improved resource allocation (22%), enhanced project quality (24%), and increased trust and cooperation (26%). Similarly, these factors directly support Freeman’s (1984) stakeholder theory, which emphasizes the essential role of stakeholder participation in project success. Some major challenge highlighted is the communication gap between authorities and stakeholders, with 46% of respondents indicating a “very significant” lack of communication. This gap hinders effective participation and project implementation. Feedback expressed strong frustration with one-way communication from authorities who make decisions without consulting the community, leaving residents feeling their needs are ignored. The study found that mismanagement of stakeholder participation is a significant barrier, with 56% of respondents reporting it as a significant barrier. The majority of respondents, 94.0%, agree that political interference and bureaucratic obstacles are among the main challenges to effective stakeholder participation in development projects. Respondents noted that political interference, bureaucratic delays, and favoritism undermine participation trust, as officials often prioritize influential stakeholders while ordinary residents have little say. NGO representatives stated that their recommendations are rarely carried out, making their participation essentially symbolic. To enhance participation, respondents suggested strategies such as training and capacity building (30%), raising awareness (22%), improving communication (20%), ensuring decision-making transparency (20%), and promoting open discussion (14%). Stakeholders recommended workshops for capacity building and improving communication, along with regular updates via WhatsApp or social media to keep the community engaged. At the same time, a contractor representative noted that transparency in proposals and budgets empowers citizens as informed partners. A majority of respondents (88%) believe that reducing political influence will increase stakeholder participation, and 62% consider public meetings and consultations are effective. Residents noted that such meetings help them voice concerns and better understand projects, especially when political interference is minimized, and facilitation is fair and inclusive. Out of 50 respondents, a significant 98% (49 individuals) believe that preventing corruption and increasing transparency would indeed lead to greater involvement. Conversely, only 2% (1 individual) disagrees with this notion. Respondents highlighted that, if officials are honest, stakeholders like us will actively participate because we can trust the system. These strategies are vital for empowering stakeholders and facilitating their active participation in the project process. Addressing these challenges can lead to more sustainable and equitable outcomes in the implementation of RC development projects. The city can strengthen its participatory procedures by learning from comparable situations throughout Asia. This ensures that development projects are transparent, inclusive, and able to promote resilience and long-term community well-being.

This research underscores the pivotal role of stakeholder participation in the success and sustainability of development projects within the Rajshahi City. Active stakeholder participation enhances transparency, optimizes resource utilization, and fosters a sense of ownership, thereby ensuring more effective and equitable project outcomes. The findings show that while some stakeholders actively engage, overall participation remains limited. However, challenges such as political interference, bureaucratic hurdles, corruption, communication gaps, and lack of awareness significantly hinder stakeholder participation. In Rajshahi’s case, external stakeholders (such as NGOs and residents) are often less empowered than internal stakeholders (such as government officials and contractors), creating imbalances in project

governance. These issues indicate that institutional weaknesses and cultural perceptions of development as a “top-down” process continue to marginalize local voices. Addressing this imbalance is critical to achieving equitable development outcomes. Moreover, the study emphasizes that stakeholder participation is not merely a supplementary activity but a critical element for ensuring equity, inclusiveness, and accountability in urban governance. Strategies to overcome these challenges include raising awareness, capacity building, promoting transparent decision-making, and reducing political interference. The study emphasizes the need for a robust framework to institutionalize stakeholder participation in RC’s development processes. Such a framework should prioritize inclusivity, foster equal representation, and establish clear communication channels to bridge gaps between authorities and stakeholders. In conclusion, stakeholder participation is a powerful driver of sustainable urban development, but in Rajshahi City, it remains constrained by structural, institutional, and cultural barriers. Future research should explore comparative models from other Bangladeshi cities or South Asian contexts to design scalable frameworks for inclusive governance. Only through broad-based, systematic participation can Rajshahi achieve its developmental aspirations and serve as a model for participatory urban governance in Bangladesh.

In light of the research findings, the following recommendations can be put forward for increasing the Participation of Stakeholders in the Implementation of Development Projects so that they can play a very positive role in Rajshahi City development projects:

- 1) Develop and implement specific legal policies and rules for removing project corruption to ensure meaningful stakeholder participation in all development projects in RC.
- 2) Authorities should also create an independent regulatory body responsible for monitoring compliance with participation laws, ensuring that public consultation is not symbolic but binding in project approval.
- 3) Training programs should be organized for both government officials and community leaders to develop the skills necessary for inclusive participation. Furthermore, international organizations could provide technical support and exchange programs to help Rajshahi City stakeholders learn from global best practices.
- 4) Prior to the implementation of each development project, organize a seminar with potential stakeholders to inform them about the project details and encourage voluntary participation.
- 5) Conduct public awareness meetings led by the RC to educate the public on the significance, roles, goals, and objectives of stakeholder involvement in development projects. Additionally, universities and local institutions can integrate civic participation and urban governance training into academic and community programs to build long-term capacity.
- 6) Established communication channels between development authorities and stakeholders can increase stakeholder participation in development projects. Beyond this, digital platforms (e-governance apps, SMS services, and social media dashboards) should be institutionalized to enable continuous citizen feedback.

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