Administrative reform for public administration capacity in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT—This paper aims to understand the reform-led administrative capacity for service delivery in Bangladesh. It also explores the links between administrative reform and service delivery capacity in the context of local administration relating to MDGs universal primary education. It represents a qualitative empirical study with gleaned data and seeks to answer the question of whether the Bangladeshi administration is sufficiently capable of delivering public services. Findings show that the capacity is limited and not up to the standard of a contemporary public service ethos. In addition, the management of local administration is conservative in their approach. The research implies an information gap for the governments of developing countries and SDGs for further actions in partnership.

Keywords: Administrative reform, capacity building, local administration, MDGs, SDGs, developing country, Bangladesh

Aim, objective, method and theory

The capacity of public institutions to deliver services is a crucial issue for governments worldwide. Public administration as "government in action" (Richardson and Baldwin 1976) functions as an agent of public management with a formal organizational setting and functional stability as well as legislative guarantees. With the increase in state functions, as Vartola describes, "public administration is increasingly seen as taking care of matters of common concern, as a provider of social services and is, in general, a positive phenomenon" (Vartola

1984, 124). However, there has been a quality gap in public service delivery capacity. Administrative reforms are generally meant to reduce this gap by facilitating the capacity building opportunities (Ciprian, Gabriela and Dimbu 2010) of public institutions. Though administrative reform has been a regular phenomenon, the issue of capacity remains a central theme in academic as well as rational debates (Farazmand 2009).

This qualitative study aims to understand the administrative capacity for public service delivery in developing countries, linking national administrative reform programmes and their implementation at the local level in Bangladesh. It refers to development programme efforts with capacity dimensions making specific reference to the universal primary education of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the country. The study has investigated whether the Bangladeshi administration is sufficiently capable of delivering public services. Thus, discovering the plight of public service delivery in Bangladesh, fills the literature gap in administrative science, governance and development and has implications for Bangladeshi and developing countries' government and their Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The theoretical perspective of this study was based on the literature of organization, management and capacity discourses in the area of administrative science. A couple of concepts such as capacity, administrative reform and local administration were typically emphasized in the theoretical construction of institutional capacity and service delivery. Field research in the context of public administration and policy implementation merits systematic conceptualization of relevant concepts (Yin 2009). This qualitative study used both primary and secondary data to substantiate its findings. Keeping the objectives of the study in mind this study used an unstructured interview schedule to collect non-statistical data and achieve in-depth responses from forty respondents in Bangladesh (Quarantelli 1994; Harrell and Bradley 2009) and included Members of Parliament (MPs) and local Councillors, academics and expert observers, civil servants and service recipients. Administrative reform commission reports, books and peer-reviewed journal articles were used as a secondary data source. To sort out the relevant pieces of literature, the study adopted a systematic exclusion process (Olsen 1991) and the data was analysed by applying case study and content analysis techniques (Yin 2009). This section

of the paper follows the link between the capacity building of public administration and administrative reform. A contextual narrative of local administration, public service delivery and MDGs in Bangladesh is discussed afterwards. The conclusion follows the constructive discussion of the research results and findings.

Capacity building and administrative reform

The institutional capacity for public management is regarded as a fundamental issue of public administration (Brillantes and Fernandez 2008). However, capacity discourse on public administration remains ambiguous and vague (Pazirandeh 2010). Roheetarachoon and Hossain (2012) argue that "scepticism exists in the literature as to whether public administrations are capable of effective service delivery" and "whether their capacity can genuinely be built in such PSR [Public Sector Reform] scenarios." With a "diverse understanding and attitudes, and a wide array of opinions for conceptualizing" (Roheetarachoon and Hossain 2012) the notion can be understood as the enhancement of administrative workability at different levels featuring an individual or organization capable of effective and efficient service delivery (Teskey, Schnell and Poole 2012). It is well known that reforms are a conscious effort to address changes in the environment and the resulting demands for correction (Laitinen et al. 2015; Caiden 1969; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004; Pollit and Bouckaert 2009). It has been opined that administrative reform streamlines the public administration system aiming at optimizing the capacity of public institutions for public management and development programme implementation (Ciprian, Gabriela and Dimbu 2010; Levy and Kpundeh 2004). Ciprian and others have tagged administrative reform as a "special public policy" (Ciprian et al. 2010) to facilitate the reorganization of the institutions of governance aiming at rationalizing and building the capacity of administrative machinery to adopt public administration in changing the environment (Flynn 1998). Therefore, capacity building of public institutions through administrative reform for policy implementation is the offspring of the fields of public administration and governance (Heeks 2001).

Caiden, Sundaram and Jooste have added that administrative reform initiatives also try to "head off crises in the capacity to govern"

(Caiden and Sundaram 2004, 373, cf Dror 2001) and "can aid in the capacity building process" (Jooste 2008, 18). Cuthill and Fien (2005) argued that it could be considered as the "means to the end" of building the institutional capacity of public administration for public management. They considered capacity building further as "the continuous process resulting in administrative reform for effective and efficient responses to changing needs" (Cuthill and Fien 2005, 63). Stimulating institutional capacity building and improving service delivery also makes public administration more responsive to the needs of citizens. There is a functional relationship between administrative reform, capacity building and service delivery and they can be considered as complementary tools for sustainable governance.

The context of local administration, public service delivery, MDGs and primary education in Bangladesh

Public institutions in countries, especially developing ones, have long experimented with administrative reform as a means of improving institutional capacity. Such reforms are embodied by governments' intention for better public service delivery for their citizens. A Bangladeshi political slogan "*Administration for Services to the People*" is a case in point. The country, having gained independence from Pakistan following a bloody war in 1971, is characterized by high levels of poverty, economic dependence, a colonial legacy and traditional administrative practices. The traditions have related to ancient Bengal, imperial Mughal and colonial British India (1757-1947) via postcolonial Pakistan (1947-1971) with bureaucratic phenomena. This legacy has complicated government efforts to meet the desires of the nation (Zafarullah 1998). Despite numerous reform initiatives, development policy implementation capacity for public service delivery in the Bangladeshi public sector remains low (Azizuddin 2014).

Local governance in Bangladesh consists of a three-tier hierarchical organizational structure. It comprises Districts (64), Upazilas (508) and Union Parishads (4546). Upazilas are middle-level local governance public institutions and fully decentralized administrative arrangements designed to provide services on Bangladesh's periphery. The system was initiated in the early 1980s on the recommendation of the Committee for Administrative Reform and Reorganization

(CARR), 1982 (GoB 1982). The main objective of this organizational change was to enable more efficient resource mobilization at the local level and less dependence on national government. It is entitled to some public service delivery to the citizen. The main service provisions include, primary and mass education, health, family and youth welfare, law and order, communication and infrastructure development, agriculture and irrigation, fisheries and Veterinary. Public administration and management at the Upazila level have been characterised by spells of progress and periods of stagnation (Khan 1999). The system was introduced in 1983 but abolished in 1991. It was revived again in 1998 via the Local Government (Upazila Parishad) Act of 1998 (GoB 1998) and formally established a decade later with an elected authority entering office in 2009 (As-Saber and Rabbi 2009).

The poor social and economic plight of developing countries is widely known. The lack of institutional capacity for public management is a significant obstacle to social and economic development. The United Nations introduced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 to confront developmental issues head-on, intending to eradicate poverty by 2015. The Organisation has extended the programme with some additional goals and targets in the name of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and fixed a new deadline of 2030. The MDGs constitute an assemblage of narrowly focused sector-specific development ideas and campaigns. The goals are broad, providing targets related to most aspects of development: poverty, education, health, gender, environment and international partnership. They have extensively influenced development agendas and human capital investment, having eight goals related to different socio-economic development domains including poverty, education, health, the environment and development cooperation. (Azizuddin 2014: 95-97) Given the processes and influences from which they originated and developed, the goals are coherent. They "could stimulate a change in national priorities if donor funding for MDGs causes governments to change their strategies to take advantage of opportunities for external investment" (LIDC 2010, 24). They recognize the need for solidarity with the poor and the need to address issues of extreme poverty (Azizuddin 2014, 109).

The UN considers primary education, "Universal Primary Education," as the second goal of MDGs and an effective way of alleviating

poverty through MDGs programmes with due emphasis on primary school completion and adult literacy rates. Primary education in Bangladesh, as in other countries, has been a principal concern as the cornerstone for national human resource development. It is the foundation for learning and the entry point for young children to experience further levels of education. It constitutes the beginning of the formal education process with eight years of academic schooling. Indeed, making primary education universally available by 2015 remains a key goal for the UN's MDGs. The Government of Bangladesh duly responded to the UN MDGs in reference to its primary education. It adopted various demand-side intervention programmes to aid in achieving the primary education targets linked to the MDGs. These include the Food for Education Programme, the Primary Education Stipend Programme (PESP) and the Primary Education Development Programme (Azizuddin 2014, 106-107).

Findings and discussion

Mismatch between administrative reform and public management

Although administrative reform initiatives pave the way to improving public institution capacity at the local level, the process has not proceeded smoothly. Upazila governance in Bangladesh, for example, replaced the traditional "field administration" with a democratically elected local authority (Rahman, 2010). They are, in this regard, a unique combination of state administration and local self-governance. The reform sought to ensure that local administrations could deliver services effectively.

Upazilas have the status of an executive agency and are responsible for most public services. They have considerable authority to plan and implement projects of local importance and interest. However, institutional weakness has hampered the process of capacity building at this level in the Bangladeshi governance edifice.

Local administration in Bangladesh is officially recognized as decentralized authorities (Gob 1998; GoB 2013; Azizuddin 2014). However, the power to exercise authority independently at the Upazila level is limited. Upazila Parishads (Upazila Councils) depend on national financial allocations and administrative approval of the

national administration. In the case of primary education, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MOPME), along with its attached departments and directorates, plays a prominent role in local governance. Undesirable political interference from the national government and insufficient administrative support has affected the capacity of the Upazilas to provide public services.

Support staff from the national bureaucracy work on deputations at the local administration level to facilitate faster decision making and implementation. Primary education staff and teachers work under the administrative control of the local Upazila Parishad (council). However, traditional administrative structures, financial dependence, shortages of appropriately skilled staff, partisan politics and the bureaucratic status-quo stand in the way of improving service delivery.

Local Upazila administration is unable to function effectively as an institution of local self-governance. Key functionaries in the local administration of Upazila Parishad lack both political and administrative knowledge and the appropriate skills for service delivery. Furthermore, service recipients are frequently unaware of the role of public services and national and international developmental goals. Organizationally, support staff are less able to develop or manage the systems. They have so far maintained the "status quo" and neither has learnt from its actions nor public feedback. Local administrations are consequently not responsive to local needs. The implementation status of local administration regarding primary education is unclear and significant achievement of the MDGs' targets seems unlikely.

Capacity building efforts so far have not been effective. Administrative reforms have been designed in a piecemeal manner and poorly implemented. Collective vision, participatory governance, rational review of powers and functions, allied legal and statutory reforms and the development of necessary infrastructure and human resources remain underdeveloped. The government of Bangladesh has struggled to address these issues and efforts to improve local administrative capacity have also fallen short. Without the incorporation of indigenous social values, national development policies and international development programmes such as the MDGs are unlikely to be successful.

Administrative capacity in disarray

Administrative reform is an essential tool for institutional capacity building. However, administrative reform initiatives are frequently politically motivated. Moreover, the bureaucracy has resisted the implementation of reforms. Empirical research confirms that administrative reforms in Bangladesh have been mostly superficial (Azizuddin 2018; 2008).

Local Upazila administrations, in spite of their formal independence from central authorities, are incapable of effective service delivery. This is particularly true in the area of primary education. A substantial number of young children, especially in economically depressed rural areas, do not complete their primary education (GoB 2013). Achieving universal primary education, therefore, remains a challenge.

Bangladesh has a complicated institutional legacy. This has had a profound influence on public administration, local institutions and the provision of primary education service delivery in the country. Moreover, this legacy has remained mostly unchallenged owing to a lack of political will and bureaucratic resistance to change (Zafarullah, 1998). Long-term reform initiatives have not addressed local needs and reform proposals have been overly ambitious and poorly implemented (Azizuddin 2008).

Furthermore, they did not reflect local norms, values and culture. The "contextual governance philosophy" (Vartola 2011) has been either intentionally or subconsciously disregarded or merely overlooked. Local administration in Bangladesh remains in a state of disorder and has a "low modicum of self-governance" (Starussman 2007, 1104).

Primary education is the foundation for further education of human capital. It is essential because it provides the foundation for future human resource development. An appropriate, well-supported primary education policy has far-reaching effects on human resource development. Improving primary education should, therefore, be at the core of Bangladesh's poverty alleviation strategies (Njero 2013, 728).

Administrative reform initiatives with local government for public service delivery and the achievement of national and international developmental targets can only be successful with active civic

involvement. Local knowledge of national and international development programmes like PRSP (Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper) and MDGs is therefore essential. Local administration in the country must be well organised and adequately equipped to manage and administer public services and goods. Local stakeholders such as the Primary School Management Committee (SMC) need to be engaged more forcefully in civic life.

Although the colonial and post-colonial legacy in Bangladesh looms large, its progress over the last decade in implementing the MDGs has been commendable. However, local administrative capacity remains weak. As a result, the quality of primary education generally falls below expectations. While there is an evident lack of resources at all levels of the system, education at the local level will only improve if administrative structures are more responsive to local needs.

Conclusion

This study provides a qualitative answer to the research question, examining the reform-led capacity of public institutions for service delivery, concerning primary education in Bangladesh in the matter of MDGs universal primary education. It bears out that the administrative capacity of the public institutions like the local administration of Upazila in Bangladesh experiences inefficiencies. It has been realised that the local administrative reform initiatives so far seem to be mainly the reflections of imported and instructed rather than "tradition based modernity" (Chowdhury 1987; 2013). Thus the overall status of local administration service delivery capacity in the country remains inadequate and the significant achievement of the MDGs target with universal education seems unlikely. To that end, genuine political commitment and full-hearted bureaucratic support and active involvement of the citizens are crucial. The combination of the familiarity of the local context with the "public governance" approach involving all the local actors and factors is crucial to success.

Although the study was only based on qualitative information, the research is able to contribute to the literature of public administration and development, providing an understanding of local administration and development and the institutional capacity for public management with a micro-focus on Bangladesh. The research has broader implica-

tions in public administration capacity building for the governments in Bangladesh and countries with a similar socio-economic situation in the world, providing information on local administration service delivery. It also has implications for SDGs for further interaction with countries in implementing development programmes and the achievement of development targets. Future studies could include a large sample size by following a systematic sampling process to infer results for further improvements in public service delivery in Bangladesh.

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