

PROMOTING SELF-EMPLOYMENT IN RURAL AREA THROUGH LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BANGLADESH: TOWARDS AN ENCOMPASSING APPROACH FOR POVERTY MITIGATION

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh is one of the developing countries having a huge number of populations living below the poverty line. Bangladesh has long been struggling to reduce the incidence of poverty and to improve the living standards of its millions of impoverished citizens. Although in the last decades, Bangladesh achieved a remarkable progress in reducing poverty with numerous internal and external constraints. Bangladesh is still in the quagmire of poverty. Centralized and pervasive poor standard of governance and top-down inconsistent policy implementation is considered as the main obstacle in dwindling poverty and developing socio-economic scenario. Due to weak and ineffective governance system, lack of coordination, absence of rule of law, non-participatory, non-transparent and non-accountable decision making process, government-run self-employment programs and donors supported initiatives failed to achieve optimum result. Moreover, such bad governance has adverse impact on local government. Although, Union Parishad (UP), the most grass-root local government institute in Bangladesh, has vast scope to deal directly with the poverty reduction strategies of the government but the potentialities of this local government body remained unutilized. A survey has been conducted on three Upazila under three districts to find out the problems and weaknesses of self-employment programs, and the role of UP thereto. Based on the overall study findings, a conceptual model has been drawn focusing on present self-employment program implementation system and governance and local governance drawbacks of this system. The model has also suggested a way to overcome these problems by inputting the essences and practices of effective model of local governance system. This study has tried to prove the effectiveness of this model, identifying relevant learning points from the experiences of the research and relevant literature review for promoting self-employment in rural area through local government in Bangladesh to accelerate poverty reduction for the local poor.

Keywords: Local Government, Self-employment, Union Parishad, Poverty reduction, Participatory Development

1. Introduction

Bangladesh is a developing country: per capita income of the country is only 1314 US\$/year in 2015 and about 31.5 percent of the total populations are living below the poverty line (Bangladesh Economic Review, 2015). Moreover, the dismal condition is exacerbated by economic disparity and menacing unemployment problem. Over population, constraint of resources, low literacy rate, lack of infrastructural facilities, low income, low direct foreign investment, lay-off existing industries, natural disaster, political deadlock, lack of proper management and organizational support have aggravated the problem. Yet, Bangladesh could not develop a sustainable strategy to solve the problem, especially in the rural area (Razzak, 2011). So, it is almost impossible for the government of Bangladesh to employ all the unemployed people. Thus, it requires promoting self-employment in rural areas to solve the problem in a sustainable manner.

Although, the government of Bangladesh is implementing many self-employment and social safety net programs to reduce poverty since independence, still the country is facing mass poverty. The government's policies and programs could not achieve optimum output despite allocating huge amount of money for this purpose. The governance system in Bangladesh is very centralized (Reyes & Valencia, 2003). But, it is obvious that without the active support from local government, it is impossible to reduce poverty and improve the socio-economic development, because local government (LG) bodies are the closest institutions to the local people. Local government ensures active participation of the local people with accountable and transparent manner to solve their own problems and needs. The potentialities of local government of Bangladesh have remained unutilized though it has a long history. It is natural that local government will understand the local context of problems better. But, unfortunately, they had not been effectively involved with those problems. It is strongly emphasized that promoting self-employment ensures good vision and pragmatic direction for the economy, guarantees rational allocation of resources and their proper use in accelerating poverty reduction and economic development. The study has been carried out to provide an analytical basis for generation of self-employment in the rural area through local government, especially Union Parishad (UP) to accelerate poverty reduction strategies and to develop the socio-economic condition of the local poor in Bangladesh.

2. Methodology

The study based on primary data and it includes a survey on Dhanbari, Jamalpur Sadar, and Kaliakair upazila under Tangail, Jamalpur, and Gazipur districts respectively. 24 government and 10 NGO officials, 10 UP chairman, and 30 general people were questioned. Both structured questionnaire and informal discussion have been followed with the key respondents. Moreover, In-depth interview with local government specialists has been followed for primary data. The study also uses secondary data from books, newspapers, reports, statutes, enactments, project documents, annual reports, social statistics, official regulation documents, grey literature and journal articles. Data have been integrated in the study mostly by descriptive way and have also been coded, presented and analyzed.

2.1 The Conceptual Labyrinth:

2.1.1 Poverty

“Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not having access to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job,

is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty is losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water. Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom” (World Bank, 2010). Haughton and others (2009) also define Poverty on the same way, “Poverty is the deprivation of food, shelter, money and clothing that occurs when people cannot satisfy their basic needs. Poverty can be understood simply as a lack of money, or more broadly in terms of barriers to everyday life.”

2.1.2 Employment

“Employment means those who work as a paid employee, work in their own business, or work as an unpaid workers in a family member’s business. It also includes those who are not working but who have jobs from which they are temporarily absent because of, for example, vacation, illness, or bad weather” (Mankiw, 2007. p. 35). In Bangladesh, the number of economically active population above 15 years is 56.7 million. Out of this, 54.1 million people (male 37.9 million and female 16.2 million) are engaged in a number of professions. Among of the different number of professions, the highest 47 percent are engaged in agriculture sector followed by 35.35 percent in service and 17.52 percent in industry sector. But, in the rural area people engaged in agriculture is more, the highest 54.5 percent were engaged in agriculture sector. For the female, the highest 68.84 percent were engaged in agriculture sector. It is also mentionable that, of the total employed population only 12.5 percent are in the formal sector and 87.5 percent are in the informal sector. Among the males 14.5 percent is engaged in the formal sector and 85.5 percent is in the informal sector. On the other hand, for females 7.7 percent is in the formal sector and 92.3 percent is in the informal sector (Labor Force Survey, 2010).

2.1.3 Unemployment

“This category includes those who are not employed, are available for work, and have been trying to find employment. It also includes those waiting to be recalled to a job from which they had been laid off” (Mankiw, 2007 P. 35). According to the ILO guidelines, a person is unemployed if the person is (a) not working, (b) currently available for work and (c) seeking work (as cited by Byrne & Strobl, 2002). Unemployment is one of the major and the most consistent problem which is facing by almost all the countries of the world—industrially advanced as well as poor countries. Theoretically, a positive relationship exists among growth and employment and negative with unemployment (“Determinants of Unemployment in Bangladesh: A Case Study by Mohammad Shafiur Rahman Chowdhury, Md. Tanjil Hossain: SSRN,” n.d.). The rate of unemployment grows faster than the employment potential in Bangladesh. According to Labor Force Survey (2010), in Bangladesh, the unemployment rate is 4.5 percent.

2.1.4 Self-employment

“Self-employment means a situation in which an individual works for himself or herself instead of working for an employer that pays a salary or a wage. A self-employed individual earns their income through conducting profitable operations from a trade or business that they operate directly”(Mankiw, 2007 P. 35). It is often said, rightly, that the main asset of the poor is their labor. Like other developing countries in the world, most of the workers of Bangladesh are self-employed because they have no choice. In Bangladesh, 40.7 percent (25.5 percent in agriculture and 15.2 percent in others) of labor forces are engaged in self-employment. The survey indicated that 19.6 percent of the labor force was daily laborers and 21.8 percent unpaid family workers. The latest survey also indicated that 14.6 percent of the labor force was engaged as full time employees (Labor Force Survey, 2010)

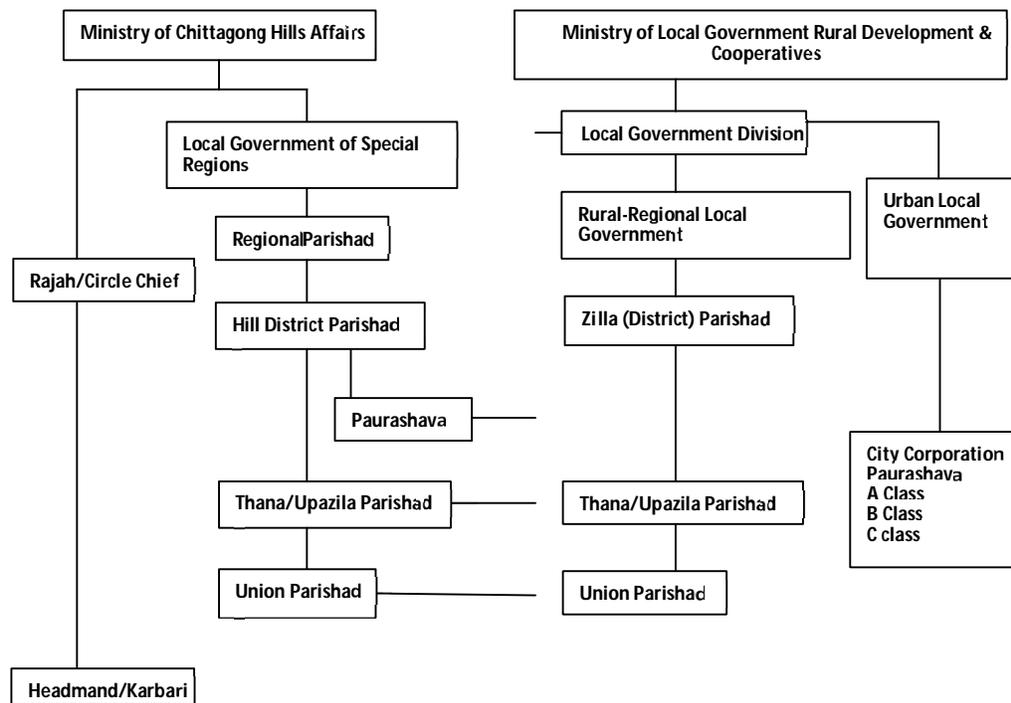
2.1.5 Local Government

Local Government system is a century-old practice in Bangladesh (Amin, 1989). Local government is basically an organized social entity with a feeling of oneness. By definition, local government means an intra-sovereign governmental unit within the sovereign state dealing mainly with local affairs, administered by local authorities and subordinate to the state government (Jahan and Momtaz, 1997:92). In political terms, it is concerned with the governance of a specific local area, constituting a political sub-division of a nation, state or other major political unit. According to the article 59(1) of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, "Local Government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies, composed of persons elected in accordance with law (GOB, 1993:43)."

3. Local Government(LG) Structure in Bangladesh

There are two distinct kinds of local government institution in Bangladesh: one for the rural areas and another for urban areas. The LG in the rural area has a three-tier system: Zila Parishad, Upazila Parishad and Union Parishad. Parallel to these, the urban local government consists of City Corporation for metropolitan area and Pourashava for the municipalities. At present, Union Parishad—the most grass-root local government bodies—is composed of one elected chairman, nine elected members, and three elected women members. The existing local government system of Bangladesh is still under profound control of the central government. The central government closely supervises and controls finance, and can exercise power by reducing or enhancing grant-in-aid to local bodies. Moreover, central government holds the authority to dissolve local government body under charges of criminal activities, abuse of power, gross inefficiency, or inability to meet financial obligations (UNESCAP, 2013). Local government bodies are entrusted with a large number of functions relating to small-scale public works, local civic and community welfare and local poverty reduction activities under different social safety net programs although areas of these functions are limited in nature. Large-scale public works are done by the central government or through central government offices set up in the locality. In reality, local government has a large quantity of jobs and responsibilities with less or no authority. The responsibilities also vary from urban to rural local government institutions as well as in different tiers of local government bodies. Moreover, executive as well as legislative control over local governments' functions is very strong in Bangladesh.

Figure 1 : Local Government System in Bangladesh



Source: <http://www.unescap.org/huset/lqstudy/newcountrypaper/Bangladesh/Bangladesh.pdf>

4. Role of Local Government in poverty reduction

4.1 Poverty and Unemployment Situation in Bangladesh

In 1971, when Bangladesh became a newly independent nation, almost its 70 percent people were under the poverty line. After more than 4 decades, still Bangladesh is one of the least developed countries with the highest density of population. The country has about 160 million people; more than one-third of them are living below the national poverty line (Anita Paul, 2012). According to Household Income & Expenditure Survey (HIES) report-2010 [Based on Cost of Basic Needs (CBN) Method], the national poverty rate is 31.5%; in rural area is 35.2% and in urban area is 21.3%. The incidence and intensity of poverty, linked to unemployment, is mostly concentrated in the rural areas thereby creating an economic gulf between urban and rural areas despite urban poverty are also a problem in Bangladesh. Needless to say, unemployment is one of the vital factors that spur incidence of poverty, which has become a great concern all over the world. But, nowhere in the world is this problem as acute as in Bangladesh. As per Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), a formal sector employment opportunity is limited in Bangladesh. About 80 percent workers are employed in the informal sector. A report of the World Bank (2012) reveals that Bangladesh is the only country in South Asia where growth in labor force outpaced growth in employment during the last decade. However, unemployment rate remained remarkably low in Bangladesh, only at 4.5 percent (Labor Force Survey, 2010). Unemployment rates amongst the youth are very high. Many employed workers lose their jobs increasing the poverty as well due to privatization and closing down of mills and factories.

4.2 Reasons of Poverty and Unemployment in Bangladesh

There are many direct or indirect reasons of poverty and unemployment. Over population and the rapid growth of population is the main reason of poverty and unemployment in Bangladesh. The present job facilities cannot keep pace with the over and fast growing population. Most of the poor people in rural area live marginally on low-paying wages or other income generating activities—basically agriculture related. But, the cultivable land is very limited, and it is decreasing due to urbanization and accommodation of increasing number of people. According to Labor Force Survey-2010, in Bangladesh, 9% households are landless: they have no land at all though it was 6.8% in the year 2002-03. On the other hand, the percentage of households having land less than 0.50 acre was 53.2% in 2002-03, which increased to 55.7% in 2005-06, and 57.9% in 2010 respectively. Bangladesh is a low-lying and disaster prone country that is visited frequently by flood and cyclones destroying crops and fisheries that leads to poverty and unemployment. In addition, Bangladesh is not developed enough in industries- they can absorb only a limited number of employment. Defective traditional system of education in Bangladesh does not help students in the work field and making self-reliant. Still, technical education has not been prioritized. Besides, resource constraint, low income, lack of infrastructural facilities, political deadlock, low foreign direct investment, unequal development over the country, improper management of the existing resources, inefficient and ineffective program implementation, inequitable distribution of land, income and productive assets, chronic irregularity of work, and incapability of chief wage-earner through accident, illness or old-age are the important causes of poverty and unemployment as a great concern of Bangladesh for socio-economic development.

4.3 Self-employment Program in Bangladesh

Most of the SSNPs in Bangladesh are designed to protect the poor from extreme poverty and to provide households immediate support during seasonal unemployment period. Apart from the social protection program, the government of Bangladesh has launched various programs to promote self-employment and entrepreneurship. Such programs mainly include the provision of credit, training in different skills, and some tools and equipment, etc. These programs are also conducted in the rural area addressing specific target group—landless agricultural workers, marginal farmers, women, unemployment youth etc. as a sustainable income generating source to reduce poverty and to increase socio-economic condition. Some important field of self-employment for the rural poor in Bangladesh are: homestead agriculture, livestock and poultry rearing, fish farming, nursery and tree plantation, handicrafts, food processing, handloom, tailoring, sole proprietorship business, ICT and so forth.

4.4 Social Safety Net Programs and the Role of Union Parishad

Since independence Bangladesh has been pursuing the agenda of poverty reduction as an overriding priority. To support the poor and vulnerable one, the government of Bangladesh is operating a number of public social safety net programs (SSNPs). The fundamental reason of SSNPs in Bangladesh is to reduce poverty and vulnerability. The main focus of SSNPs in Bangladesh is on the basic need of the people, which are food, health, education and shelter. The following are some key SSNPs concerned with social protection, these are: Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), Food for Work (FFW), Cash for Work (CFW), Test Relief (TR), Employment Generation Programs for the Poor (EGPP), Old-age Allowance, Maternity Allowance Programs for the Poor Lactating Mothers, Honorarium for Freedom Fighters, Allowances for the Financially Insolvent Disabled, Allowance Program for Widowed, Deserted and Destitute Women and so forth. These programs are basically to support the hard-core poor to cope with the extreme poverty and social hardship for a short period

of time. According to the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act-2009 and other concerning rules and regulations, UP only implement these programs with strong control and direction of central government. Virtually, UP has no control over it, they just implement the programs as per central direction.

4.5 Self-employment Programs and the Role of Union Parishad

Besides the social protection programs, the government is also implementing many self-employment programs. Some important self-employment programs are : One House One Firm; Self-employment Program for the Poor Freedom Fighters; Micro-credit Activities for Self-employment of the Poor and Distressed Women; Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), Milk giving cow husbandry; Poultry, Small Trade, Tailoring, Cattle fattening, Micro-credit project, Ensuring Co-operative Based Milk Production; Micro-credit for the women empowerment; Micro-credit program for fisheries, Comprehensive Village Development Program etc. What is important to note here is that all the self-employment programs are formulated by the central government and channeled through different government agencies to the poor people. But UP do not have any role to play in these programs except merely getting informed in the Upazila meeting although the programs are being carried out in the UP level.

4.6 Issues and Challenges of Present Social Security and Self-employment System

The current social security and self-employment system is complex, comprising a large number of programs managed by many ministries or division (General Economics Division, Planning Commission, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2015). According to Ministry of Finance, 145 programs—36 for social protection and 109 for social empowerment —under social security schemes (SSS) currently have been financed through the budget. In fiscal year 2014-15 budget for SSS are shown in the table below:

Table 1: Budget allocation for social security schemes

Items	Social Protection	Social Empowerment	Total
Number of Programs	36	109	145
Budget	226.17 billion (TK.)	81.33 billion (TK.)	307.5 billion (TK.)
Percentage to Budget	9.03%	3.25%	12.28%
Percentage to GDP	1.69%	0.61%	2.30%

(Source: Ministry of Finance)

At least 23 line ministries or division administer SSN and self-employment programs and there is no formal mechanism for sharing information among the implementing ministries or agencies. 64 percent of the poor do not have access to any social security programs. Moreover, existing safety net programs bypass a large portion of the extreme poor in Bangladesh. 65 percent of the social security programs are seeking to address life cycle related risk (General Economics Division, Planning Commission, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2015). In Bangladesh, poverty reduction activities have been carried out under different SSS and self-employment programs, where local government institutions have a vast scope to play a very important role. Nonetheless, the potentialities of local government are left unutilized in poverty reduction for the following reasons:

- i. Lack of appropriate legal framework of local governance
- ii. Financial dependency
- iii. Centralized governance
- iv. Lack of coordination
- v. Political interference
- vi. Absence of separate local government service

5. Findings and Analysis of the study

The research was conducted to ascertain the present implementing system of various kinds of self-employment programs of government and Non Government Organizations (NGOs), and the functions or role of UP. 24 government officials were asked question on 9 different aspects of self-employment activities, and the role and responsibilities of UP regarding those activities; 10 NGOs officials were also asked on 8, UP chairman on 11, and public respondents on 8 questions respectively regarding self-employment activities. In some cases, same questions were asked to all of four group respondents.

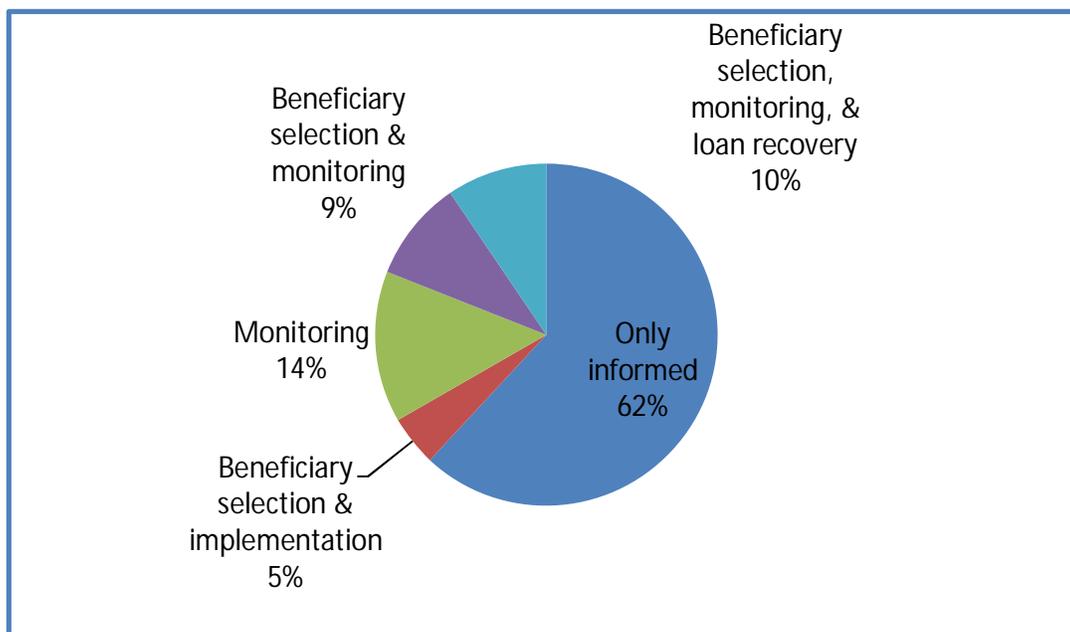


Figure 1: Role or Status of UP in Self-employment Program

In the research area, 21 self-employment programs are being carried out as a poverty reduction strategy by the central government under different government agencies with the help and cooperation of UP. Out of 21 employment-generating programs, the UP is only informed by 62% of programs. On the other hand, UP is involved with the function both of beneficiary selection and monitoring by 9%; with beneficiary selection and implementation by 5%, and with only monitoring by 14%. The UP also engaged with all three—beneficiary selection, monitoring, and loan recovery—by 10%. Most important thing is that 62% of self-employment programs are being carried out in the union level but UP has no active role with these activities except only informed.

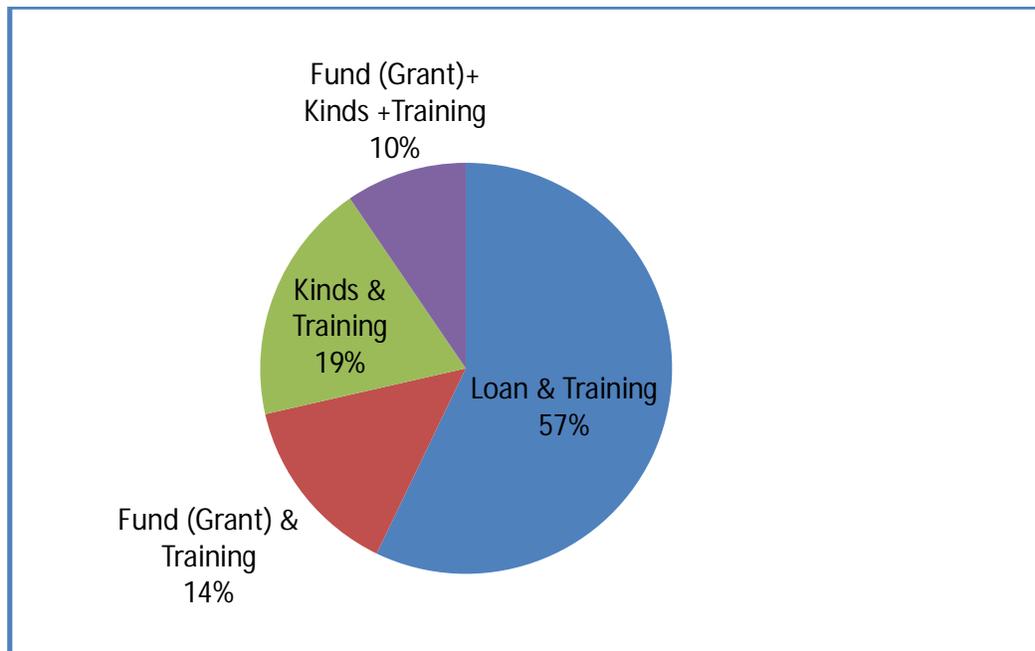


Figure 2: Role or Status of UP in Self-employment Program

For self-employment of the rural poor, 57% projects are being implemented with providing both loan and training. On the other hand, targeted poor people have been supported with both fund (grant) & training by 14% projects; with kinds & training by 19%; and with all together i.e. fund (grant), kinds and training by 10% projects.

81% self-employment projects—taken by the central government for poverty reduction—have been implemented through individual-based. On the other hand, only 19% projects have been done through cooperative-based.

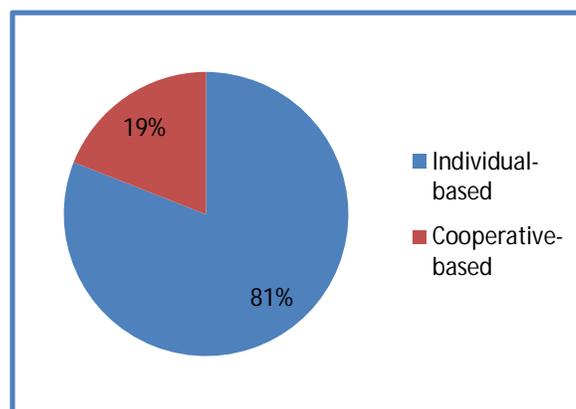


Figure 3: Project Implementation System

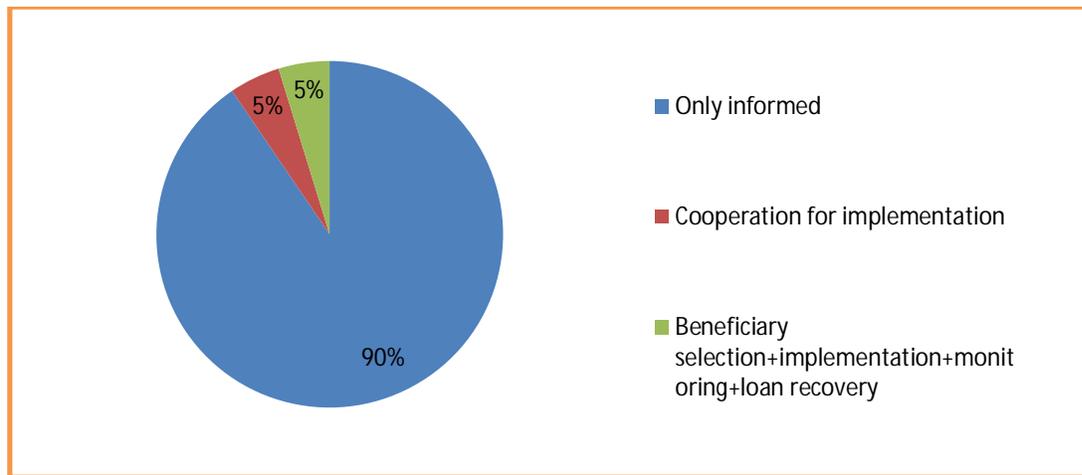


Figure 4: Co-ordination between Government Agencies and NGOs

Regarding self-employment programs—implemented through government agencies—NGOs are only informed by 90% projects; involved with all—beneficiary selection, implementation, monitoring, and loan recovery— by 5% projects. They are also involved with cooperation for implementing programs by 5%.

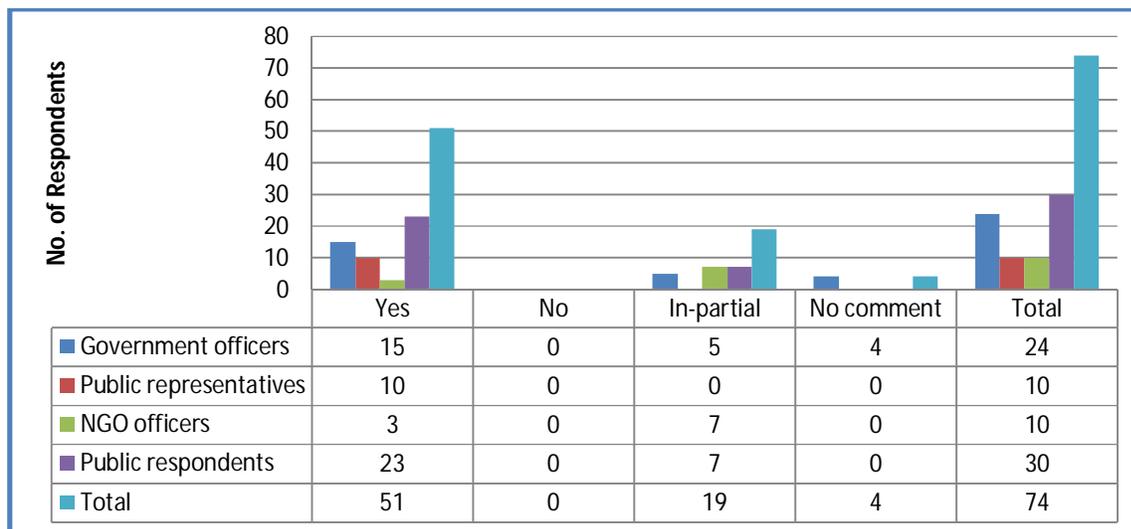


Figure 2: How self-employment programs should be implemented

15 government officials, 10 UP chairman, 3 NGO representatives, and 23 public respondents out of 24, 10, 10, and 30 respectively said that self-employment programs for poverty mitigation should be implemented through local government in the rural area. On the other hand, 5 government officials, 7 NGO representatives, and 7 public respondents mentioned that self-employment programs should be carried out in partial through local government. 4 out of 24 government officials made “no comment”. More importantly, none among the four categories of respondents choose “No” option.

In response to the question, all 74 respondents of four categories said that there should have been a strong co-ordination among government agencies, LG institutions, and NGOs in implementing the self-employment programs to alleviate poverty for the rural poor. All the 74 respondents of each category mentioned that every program for generating self-employment opportunity for the rural poor

have been taken and formulated centrally. All the 10 UP chairman replied that they have not taken any self-employment programs in their union for the poor to eradicate poverty due to fund constraints.

70% UP chairman replied that they have no specific information of the poor who need self-employment or SSN supports for poverty reduction. Only 30% said that they have partial information. More surprisingly, no UP has specific information regarding this.

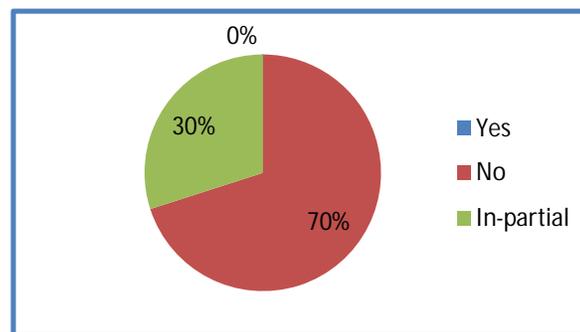


Figure 3: Information of Unemployed Poor People

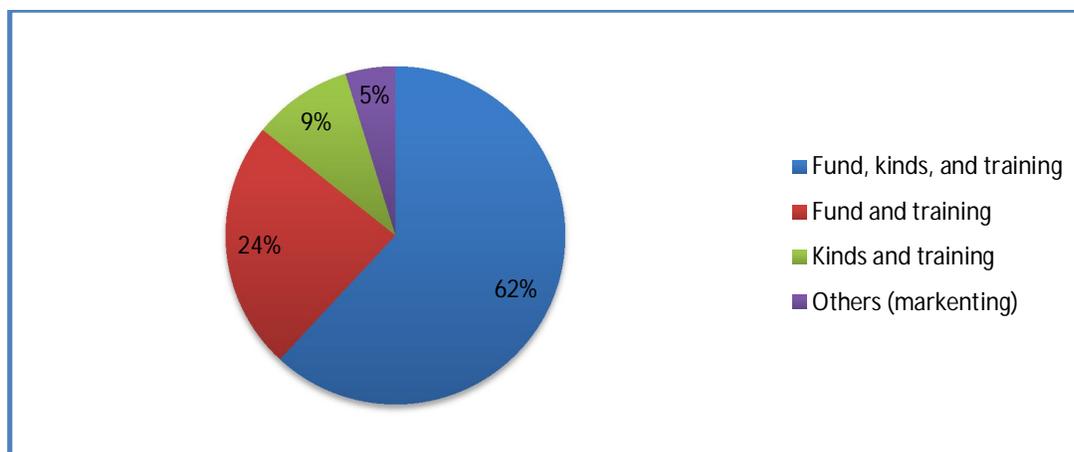


Figure 4: Types of Supports Needed for Self-employment

62% respondents said that fund including kinds and need-based training are needed for generation of self-employment for the rural poor. On the other hand, 24% respondents mentioned that both fund and training are needed; and another 9% said that both kinds and training together are needed for self-employed whereas rest other 5% said they need marketing facilities.

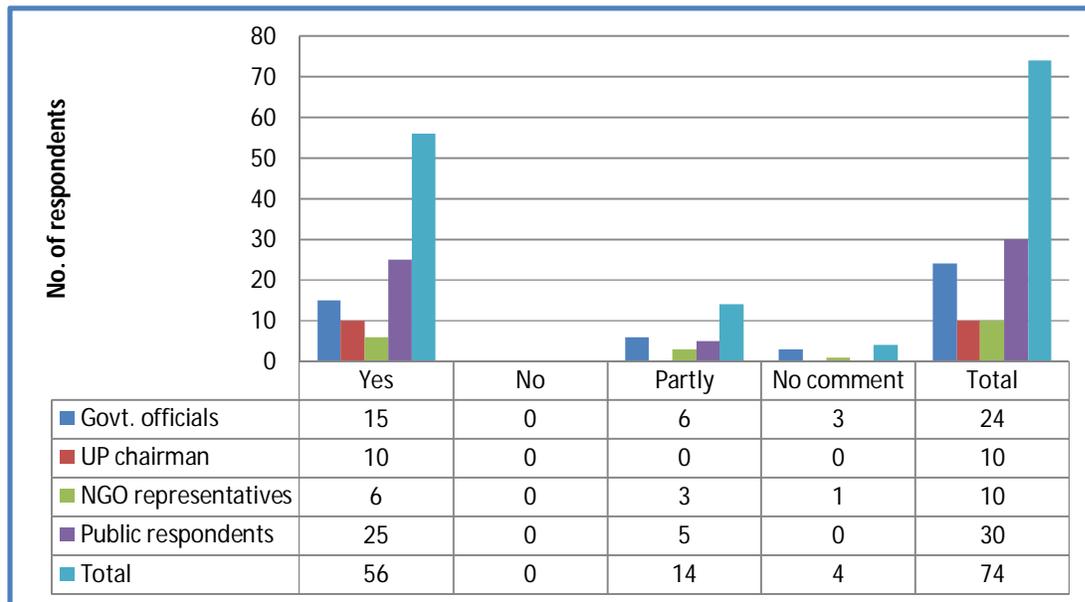


Figure 5: How self-employment program should be taken

Total 56 out of 74 respondents of all four categories said that self-employment programs for the local poor should be undertaken locally, 14 respondents gave opinion as partially, and only 4 respondents declined them for making any comment. None of the respondents make negative comment, i.e. no need to undertake or formulate self-employment programs locally.

6. Conceptual Model of the Study

The study findings have revealed that Bangladesh governance and local governance are facing a lot of problems and challenges in implementing self-employment programs for poverty reduction. Based on these weaknesses and challenges, literature review and relevant variables a conceptual model has been drawn in order to provide an analytical basis to ensure effective local government (UP) for promoting self-employment programs to alleviate poverty, which is the ultimate goal of this study. The model is mainly of two parts: Part-One: Present Programs Implementation System and Problems, and Part-Two: Proposed Model and Prospects. The first part of the model focuses the Present self-employment activities of the government and its implementation problems. The second part of the model focuses proposed model and its prospects of effective implementation of self-employment programs. The second part has also suggested some elements of good governance and practical aspects for ensuring active and strengthened local government for promoting self-employment programs of poverty mitigation.

6.1 Present Program Implementation System and Problems (Part-One)

Part One of the model has been divided into two: (1) Present self-employment program implementation system, and (2) problems of present self-employment program implementation system.

6.1.1 Self-employment Program Implementation System in Bangladesh

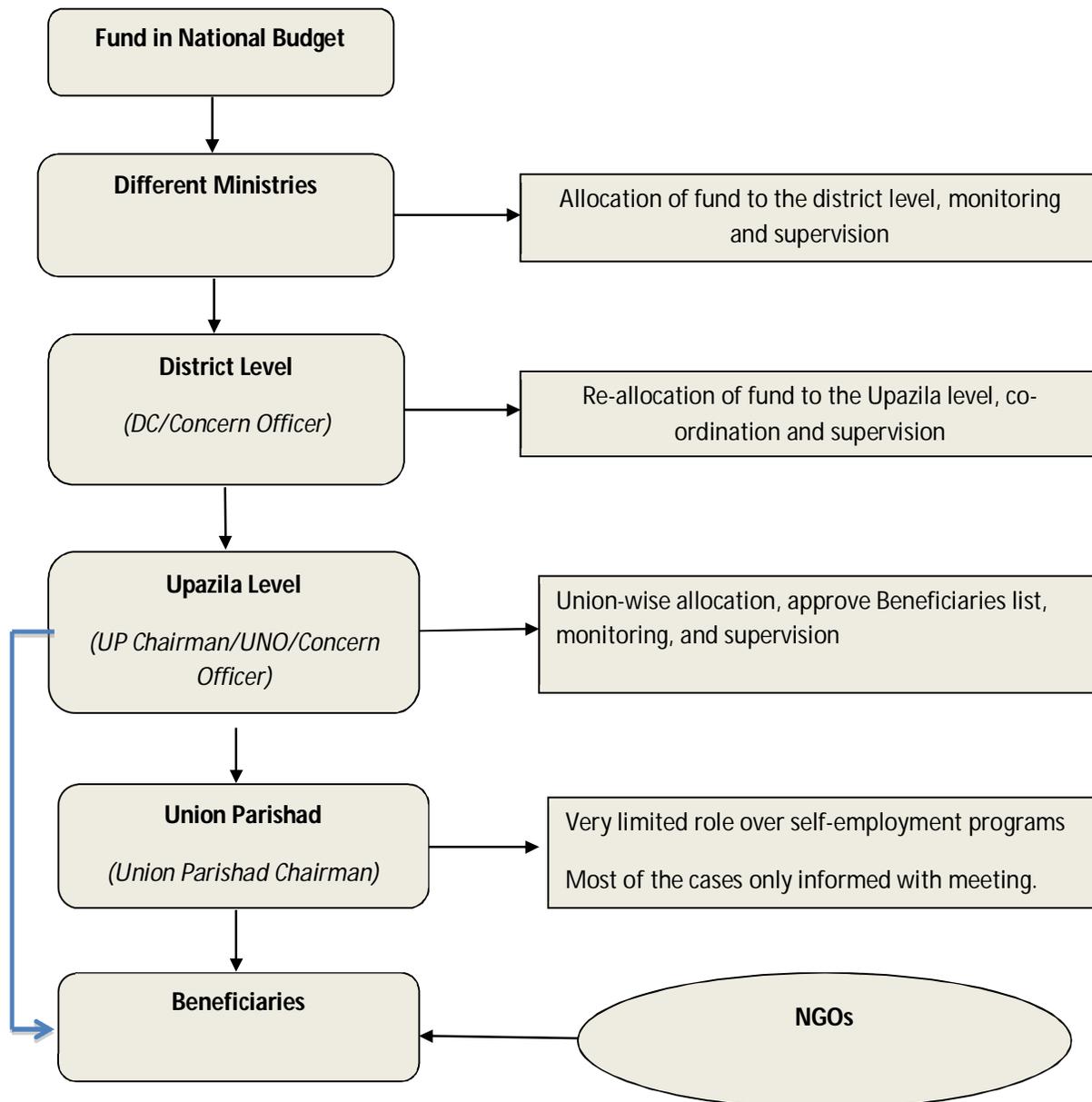
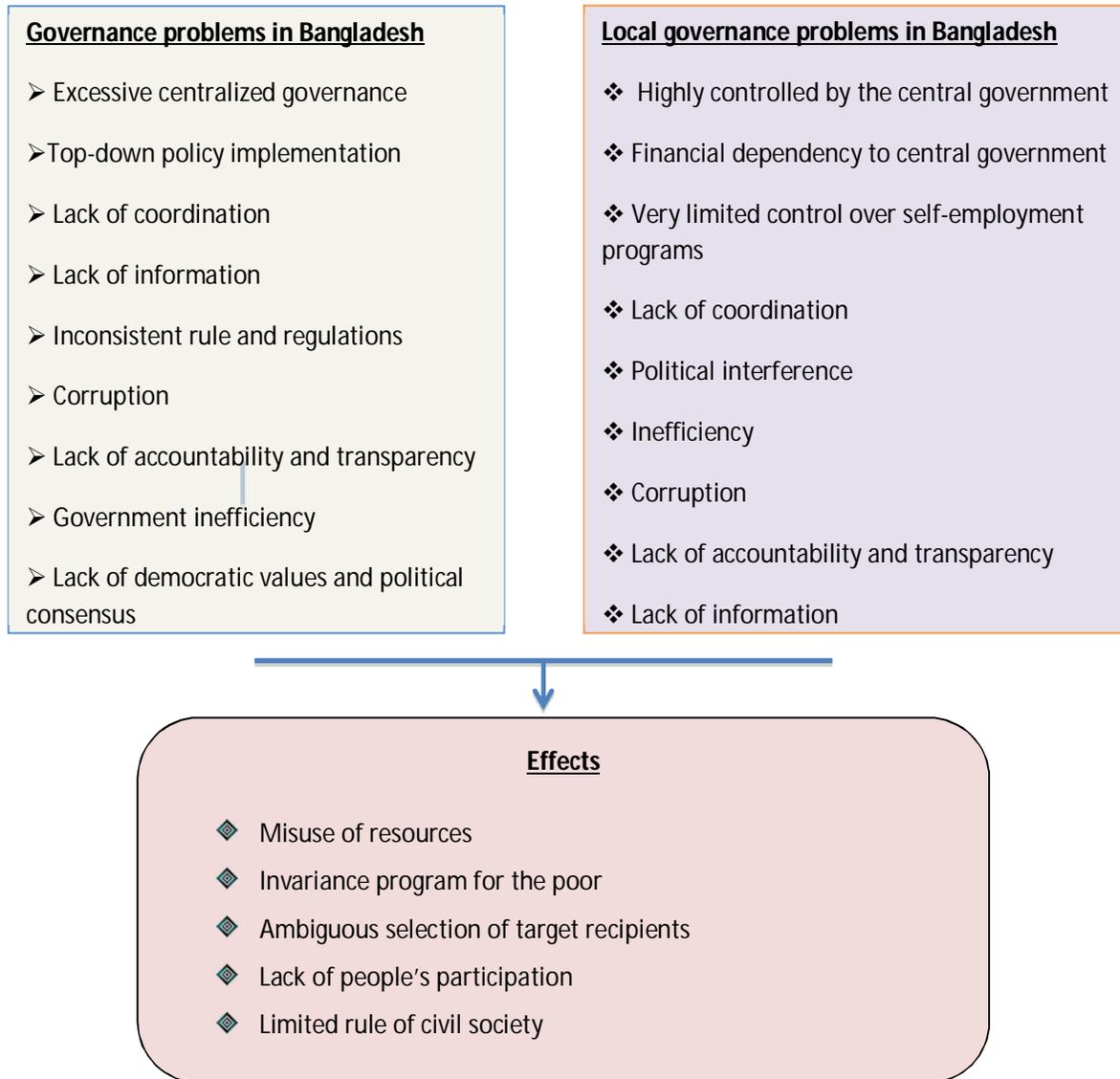


Figure 9: Present Self-employment program Implementation System

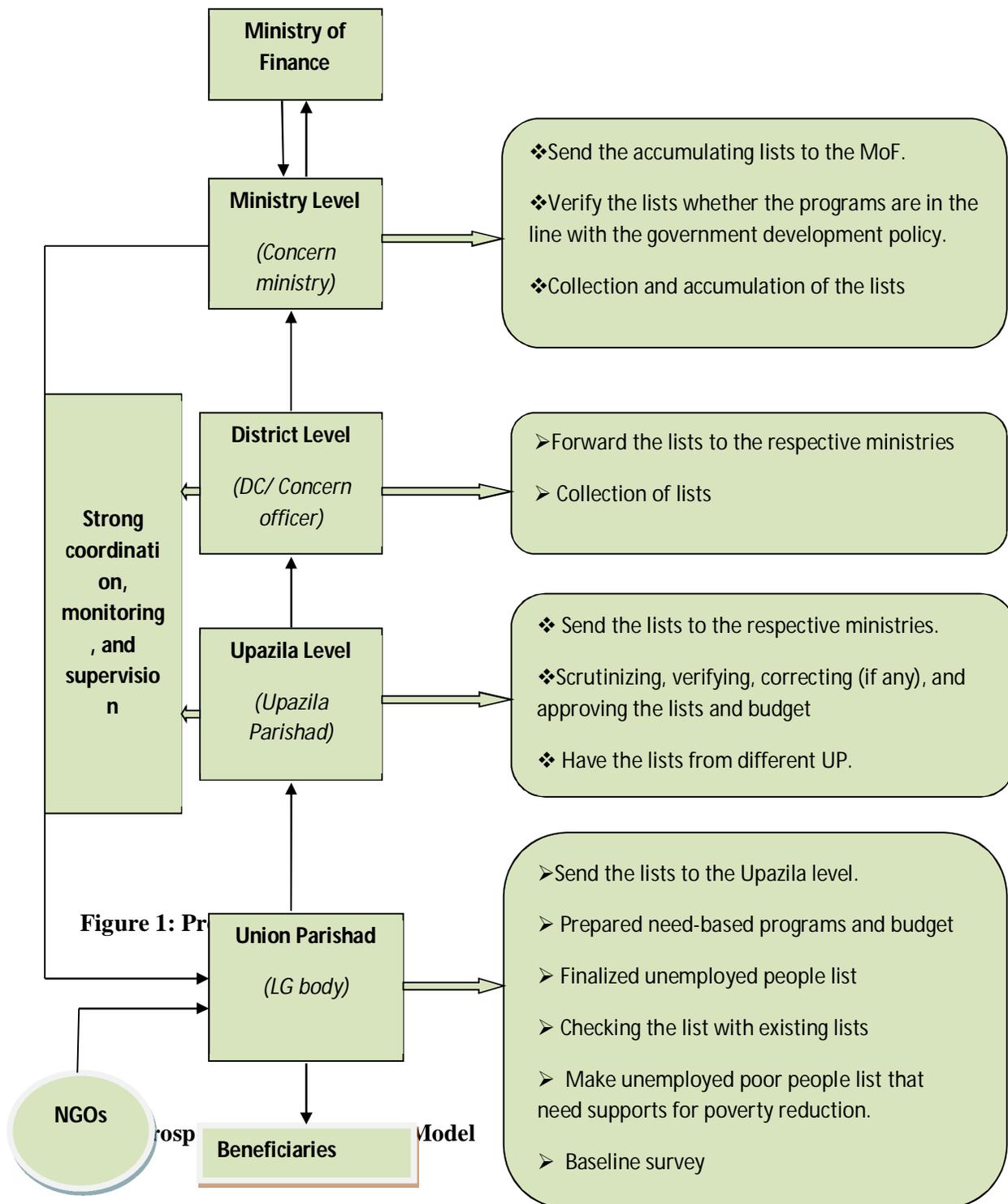
6.1.2 Problems of Present Self-employment Program Implementation System

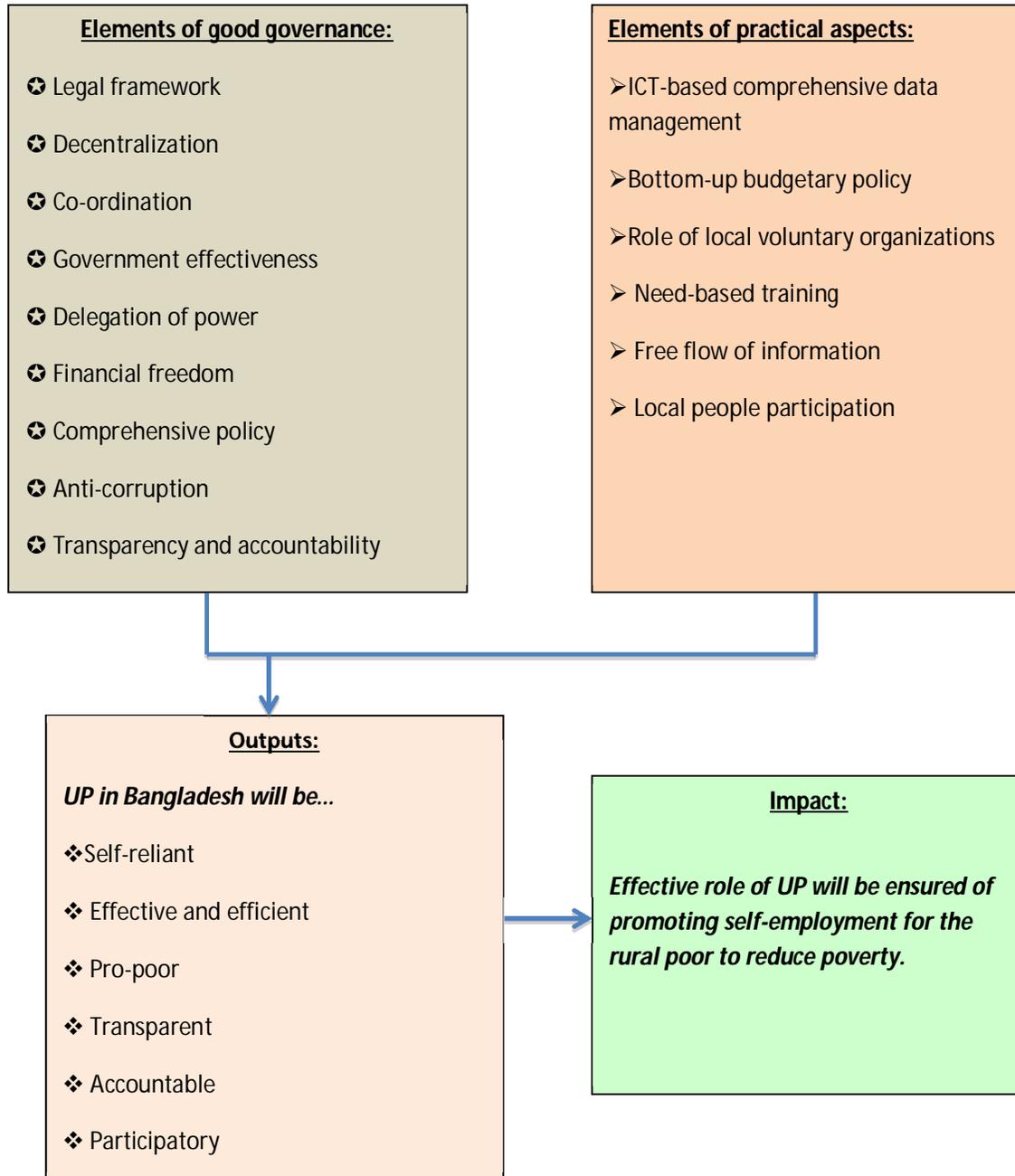


6.2 Proposed Model and Prospects (Part-Two)

Part Two of the model has also been divided into two sub-parts; these are: (1) Proposed model—the ways to overcome the problems; and (2) Prospects of the proposed model.

6.2.1 Proposed Model- The Ways to Overcome the Problems





Conclusion

Poverty and unemployment are the major problems in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has formulated Poverty Reduction Strategies Paper (PRSPs), and SFYP (2011-2015) as the country is committed to achieve Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and a vision to become a middle-income country by 2021. The study has revealed the government and NGOs' activities in the rural area for poverty mitigation, and the role of local government in this regard. It is found that Bangladesh government has been implementing a number of self-employment programs for the rural poor to reduce poverty and a huge number of NGOs are doing so too. It is also found that central government implementing its self-employment programs through different government agencies in which UP has almost no involvement with it. On the other hand, SSNPs are being implemented through local government body like Union Parishad but they have very little control over it. There is a big gap of coordination among government agencies, NGOs, and local government institutions. Finally, having analyzed the major constraints of the governance and local governance, especially UP in Bangladesh, a model has been proposed suggesting a way out of these problems. With the rising unemployment in the country, it is time to move forward to adopt a sustainable employment generating strategies. For the promotion of an adequately high rate of employment-intensive growth to the process of poverty reduction, promoting self-employment among the poor could be one of the best strategies. Thus, it is very crucial to make local government strengthened and effective to play an important role of promoting self-employment for the rural poor to alleviate poverty and to improve the socio-economic condition. The study findings have also focused on some area of functions where certain improvement is urgently needed. The study serves a way to have a self-reliant, pro-poor, effective, and efficient LG for promoting self-employment for the rural poor; eventually, that will make contribution to build-up poverty-free nation with sustainable socio-economic development of Bangladesh.

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