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Research Article

Policy and Practice in Bangladesh: Obstacles and Outcomes

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Abstract. Policy making and implementation are crucial aspects of governance that significantly impact the socio-economic development of a country like Bangladesh. Over the period from 2009 to 2024, Bangladesh has faced numerous challenges and obstacles in formulating and executing policies effectively. The purpose of this study is to examine the issues and difficulties that Bangladesh faced during this time in developing and implementing policies. We used qualitative research methods to meet our research objectives. In this study, we carefully followed journal articles, newspapers, policy documents, and related books. We examine various factors contributing to these challenges, including political instability, bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, lack of coordination, inadequate resources, and external influences. The result reveals that the policy could not be successful due to corruption, accountability, transparency, political influence, and the participation of the general people in the policy formulation. Finally, the paper formulated potential solutions and recommendations to address these issues and improve the policy-making process in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Policy making, Problems, Challenges, Implementation, Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh, a rapidly developing South Asian nation, has made significant strides in socioeconomic indicators over the last few decades (Hossan et al., 2024). From impressive GDP growth rates to notable advancements in healthcare, education, and poverty alleviation, the country has often been cited as a model for development among low- and middle-income countries (World Bank, 2020). However, despite these gains, a persistent disconnect remains between policy formulation and its practical implementation, raising critical questions about the efficacy of governance, administrative capacity, and institutional accountability in Bangladesh (Hossan et al., 2024).

Public policy in Bangladesh is often driven by ambitious development agendas, including the Five-Year Plans and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Yet, the transition from policy design to successful implementation is frequently hindered by a variety of obstacles, ranging from bureaucratic inefficiencies and political interference to resource constraints and corruption (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2018; Hossan, 2025). Results have been inconsistent across sectors as a result of this implementation gap. For instance, while policies targeting universal primary education have improved enrollment rates, issues related to quality, teacher training, and infrastructure remain unresolved (Asadullah & Chaudhury, 2015).

One of the major barriers to effective policy implementation in Bangladesh is the complex and often overlapping administrative structure. Multiple ministries and agencies are involved in the execution of development programs, leading to coordination failures and duplication of efforts (Siddiquee, 2003). Moreover, top-down governance and centralized decision-making processes often neglect grassroots realities and local needs, making policies less responsive and adaptable. This misalignment is particularly evident in rural development programs, where local government institutions often lack autonomy and resources, rendering them ineffective in delivering intended services (Rahman & Ahmed, 2019).

Another significant challenge is the politicization of public administration. Bureaucratic appointments and transfers are frequently influenced by political considerations rather than merit, leading to low morale and reduced efficiency among civil servants (Zafarullah & Khan, 2007). This undermines the institutional capacity necessary for sustained and transparent policy implementation. In addition, widespread corruption within public institutions further erodes public trust and diverts resources away from their intended purposes, exacerbating inequalities and reducing the impact of otherwise well-intentioned policies (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2022).

Despite these obstacles, Bangladesh has also witnessed several instances of successful policy implementation that demonstrate the potential for positive outcomes when planning and execution are aligned. The success of the national immunization program and family planning initiatives illustrates how community involvement, international collaboration, and strong political commitment can yield

transformative results (Chowdhury et al., 2013; Hossan et al., 2025). Similarly, the growth of the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) industry showcases the country's ability to leverage policy incentives and labor market dynamics to drive economic growth and empower millions, particularly women (Hossan, 2024). This research seeks to critically examine the interplay between policy formulation and its practical execution in Bangladesh. By identifying the core obstacles that hinder effective implementation and evaluating both failed and successful case studies, the study aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how governance, institutional culture, and socio-political dynamics shape development outcomes. The findings will contribute to the broader discourse on policy effectiveness in developing nations and inform future strategies for bridging the gap between policy and practice in Bangladesh.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Policy formulation and implementation in Bangladesh have long been areas of critical scrutiny in development discourse. As a developing country with significant socio-economic and political challenges, Bangladesh exhibits a complex policy environment. The gap between policy intentions and actual practice often reflects deeper structural, institutional, and governance-related impediments. This literature review synthesizes key academic discussions, theoretical contributions, and empirical findings related to policy and practice in Bangladesh, with a particular focus on identifying obstacles and evaluating outcomes. Policy-making in Bangladesh operates within a centralized bureaucratic framework, often influenced by political leadership and donor agencies. According to Khan (2008), public policy in Bangladesh is highly politicized, with limited participation from civil society and marginalized groups. The top-down approach predominates, where policy initiatives stem from executive directives rather than participatory or grassroots-driven demands.

Jahan (2006) emphasized that policy design is often disconnected from the realities of implementation, largely due to weak administrative capacities and politicized bureaucracy. The role of political parties in shaping policy direction often results in frequent changes in policy priorities based on electoral cycles rather than long-term developmental goals (Rahman, 2012). Numerous studies highlight that the major obstacles in translating policy into practice include poor governance, corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of coordination among ministries, and inadequate resource allocation. Hossain and Osman (2007) argued that one of the persistent challenges is the "implementation gap," where policies fail to achieve their intended outcomes due to mismanagement and lack of institutional readiness.

Corruption is cited as a major hindrance to effective policy implementation. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB, 2020) reported widespread corruption in various public sector institutions, particularly in the health, education, and local government sectors. This undermines not only the quality-of-service delivery but also public trust in government policies. In education policy, for instance, the National Education Policy 2010 introduced progressive reforms, but its implementation has been marred by teacher shortages, poor infrastructure, and limited monitoring (Chowdhury et al., 2014). Similarly, health policies aimed at achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC) face setbacks due to urban-rural disparities and inefficient

public healthcare delivery systems (Ahmed et al., 2015). International donors play a significant role in Bangladesh's policy environment, often shaping policy agendas through conditional aid. While donor support has contributed positively in areas like primary education and microfinance, it has also raised concerns about ownership and sustainability of reforms. White (1999) warned of a "donor-driven development agenda" that often fails to align with local needs and priorities. Aminuzzaman (2002) further noted that donor-funded policy projects are frequently implemented in silos, without sufficient integration into national planning processes. This external influence can undermine domestic policy capacity and create parallel systems of governance, reducing accountability to citizens. Despite the challenges, Bangladesh has experienced notable successes in some policy areas. The country has made commendable progress in meeting certain Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), especially in reducing child mortality and improving gender parity in education (World Bank, 2019). These achievements are attributed to effective collaboration between the government, NGOs, and international partners.

The Rural Electrification Board (REB), microfinance programs led by institutions like Grameen Bank, and social safety net programs such as the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) scheme, stand out as examples of relatively successful policy implementation. According to Mahmud and Mahmud (2006), these programs succeeded due to clear targeting, community participation, and strong monitoring mechanisms. However, these successes are not uniformly distributed across sectors or regions. Urban-rural disparities, gender gaps, and socio-economic inequality continue to affect policy outcomes. Haque (2013) argued that sustainable policy outcomes require institutional reform, decentralization, and inclusive governance—areas where Bangladesh still lags behind. The literature on policy and practice in Bangladesh reveals a recurring theme of ambitious policies hindered by systemic obstacles. While notable outcomes in health, education, and poverty reduction demonstrate potential, the overall policy landscape is marred by governance deficits, politicization, and weak institutional capacity. Bridging the policy-practice divide requires not only technical reforms but also political will, inclusive governance, and a commitment to transparency and accountability. Bangladesh's journey toward effective policy implementation remains a work in progress, full of challenges but not without hope.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The broad objective of the paper is to conduct an extensive study on problems and challenges in policy making and implementation in Bangladesh. The specific objectives are:

1. To find out the major obstacles to ensuring policy implementation in Bangladesh.
2. Investigating factors causing the gap between policy formulation and implementation.
3. Exploring how political dynamics, bureaucracy, and governance shape policy outcomes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The character of this research study is a qualitative approach. Research for this study mainly includes secondary resources, consisting of books, newspapers, and periodical articles from the national and international levels. Research has also been conducted using online resources. Instead of using quantitative language, the study's findings are presented in a descriptive style.

POLICY

The term “policy” refers to a standard set of principles that guide a course of action. A policy is a set of ideas or plans that serves as the foundation for making decisions, particularly in politics, economics, or business, for the betterment of the general public, which ultimately decides and defines the future and development of a country (Hossan et al., 2023).

Here are some quotations about policy from scholars:

"A policy is a collection of interconnected decisions made by a political actor or group of players about the choice of objectives and the methods for accomplishing them in a given circumstance, decisions that should, in theory, be within those actors' capacity to make." - Thomas R. Dye

"A public authority's choice of action or inactivity to solve a particular problem or related group of problems is known as a policy." - Eugene Bardach and Eric M. Patashni

Policy making

Policy making refers to the process by which governments, organizations, or institutions formulate and implement plans, principles, rules, and guidelines to address specific issues, achieve objectives, or regulate behavior within a certain context. It involves identifying problems, analyzing potential solutions, considering various stakeholders' interests, and ultimately deciding on a course of action to guide future behavior or decisions. Policy making can occur at various levels, including local, national, and international, and it often involves input from experts, stakeholders, and the public to ensure that policies are effective, equitable, and acceptable (Hossan and Alom, 2024).

Here are a few quotations from scholars about policy making:

Table 1. The definition of Policy-making by scholars.

Author's Name	Definition
Thomas R. Dye	Policy making is not a series of individual decisions but a complex and continuous process of choice and feedback.
Theodore J. Lowi	Policy making is an inherently political activity, characterized by power struggles, negotiation, and compromise among competing interests.

Eugene Bardach	Policy making is both an art and a science, requiring a blend of analytical rigor, creativity, and practical wisdom.
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Policy implementation

The process of putting a developed policy into practice is known as policy implementation. It entails converting a policy's objectives, guiding principles, and instructions into practical on-the-ground programs, processes, and activities. Policy implementation is a critical phase in the policy-making process, as it determines whether the intended objectives of the policy are achieved and how effectively they are carried out (Hossan et al., 2024).

Problems and Challenges of Policy making and implementation in Bangladesh

Policy making in Bangladesh encounters various problems and challenges that stem from the country's socio-economic and political context. "Policy making is an inherently political activity, characterized by power struggles, negotiation, and compromise among competing interests."

❖ According to Eugene Bardach,
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Policy implementation

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Corruption

Corruption remains a pervasive problem in Bangladesh and poses a significant obstacle to effective policymaking and implementation (Hossan et al., 2023). Rampant corruption within government institutions, regulatory bodies, and law enforcement agencies undermines transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. Grand corruption and systemic corruption include the simultaneous deployment of several corrupt practices with related objectives. Bribery, embezzlement, theft and fraud, graft, extortion and blackmail, influence peddling, networking, abuse of discretion, favouritism, nepotism, etc., distort policy outcomes and erode public trust in the government. These practices distort policy priorities, undermine public trust, and divert resources away from essential programs and services. Example: In Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index, which scored 180 on a scale from 0 ("highly corrupt") to 100 ("very clean"), Bangladesh scored 24. Out of 180 countries in the Index, Bangladesh came in at number 149 in terms of score; the nation with the highest ranking is thought to have the most honest public sector. "Of

the eight South Asian countries, Bangladesh remains the second lowest both in score and rank, better than only Afghanistan," said Iftekharuzzaman, Executive Director of Transparency International Bangladesh, who introduced the 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index. According to the Global Corruption Perception Index of 2016, which was released on January 25, 2017, Bangladesh moved down six spots to 145th place out of 180 nations, although gaining one point in the scoring. According to this ranking, the nation with the most honest public sector is at number one, while the nation with the most corrupt public sector is at number 180. Despite its upward scoring improvement, Bangladesh's rating dropped because other nations had been able to eradicate corruption more effectively than Bangladesh.

Political Instability

One of the primary challenges faced by Bangladesh in policy making and implementation is political instability. The country has experienced frequent changes in government, political unrest, and polarization, which have disrupted the policy-making process. Political instability often leads to policy inconsistency, uncertainty, and delays, hampering long-term planning and development

initiatives. Example: Bangladesh's democracy is fragile, afflicted by rampant political violence. Mujeeb's daughter, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, is also the leader of the Awami League, the ruling party. The Awami League has exhibited unsettlingly authoritarian tendencies under Hasina's leadership and has employed every tactic at its disposal to crush its political rivals. With the exception of a caretaker administration backed by the military that delayed the 2007 parliamentary elections, the Awami League and BNP have taken turns ruling since the early 1990s. Khalida Zia, a member of the BNP, served as prime minister twice, from 1991 to 1996 and from 2001 to 2006. Bangladesh has been under the increasing control of a single party with a single leader since Hasina took power as prime minister in 1996 and returned in 2008. There is no shortage of proof that political violence is still occurring throughout Bangladesh, according to the Awami League of its opponents. Over 2,400 people were killed and 126,300 were injured in 14,000 instances of political violence in Bangladesh between 2002 and 2013, according to the International Crisis Group. The 2014 and 2018 general elections were marred by widespread accusations of vote tampering and other irregularities.

Bureaucratic Inefficiency

Another significant challenge in policy making and implementation is bureaucratic inefficiency. The bureaucratic machinery in Bangladesh is often plagued by red tape, corruption, and a lack of accountability, which hinders the effective execution of policies. Delayed decision-making, bureaucratic hurdles, and lack of capacity within government institutions have impeded the implementation of key policies and programs. Examples of bureaucracy are all around us. Workplaces, schools, and governments all typically have hierarchical structures with individuals filling positions based on skill or merit (real or perceived).

Abuse of authority and position

According to some scholars, the gradual deterioration of the educational system and its standards of excellence is the reason why the caliber of the personnel in the public sector is dropping, which will make future policy implementation more difficult. For instance, 41% of Bangladeshis believe that the parliament is corrupt, whilst 45% believe that political parties are corrupt. The only institutions thought to be more corrupt are the police and the courts. According to Transparency International Bangladesh, the parties "are believed to harbour criminals and terrorists," and many politicians are seen as outright criminals. The parties frequently give away party cash due to extortion or swap it for favors. Additionally, they misuse public funds to purchase contracts, licenses, and positions for party members, among other things. The majority of party funds are opaque; although laws mandate that reports be filed to the electoral commission, they are either nonexistent or very seldom, and violations are rarely penalized.

Complex Social Dynamics

Bangladesh is a densely populated country with diverse social, cultural, and religious dynamics. Formulating policies that address the needs and aspirations of different population groups while promoting social cohesion and inclusivity is a significant challenge.

Lack of Coordination

Poor coordination among government agencies, departments, and stakeholders is another critical challenge in policy making and implementation. Fragmented decision-making, overlapping mandates, and turf wars often result in disjointed policies and ineffective implementation strategies. There is a need for better coordination mechanisms, collaboration, and information-sharing among relevant stakeholders to enhance policy coherence and synergy (Hossan et al., 2024).

Morale is inadequate

Due to a ridiculous transfer and promotion process and an unsuitable wage structure, the majority of government workers have low morale. Consequently, their efficiency is likely to be inferior, affecting policy implementation. For instance, on April 9, 2012, the assistant personal secretary, general manager of the eastern region, and commandant of security for Railway Minister Suranjit Sengupta were on their way to Suranjit's home with 7.4 million taka in bribe money when they were handed in by their chauffeur, Azam Khan. Syed Abul Hossain was accused by the World Bank in 2012 of being a conspirator in the Padma Bridge Scandal. He left his position on July 23, 2012. Abul Hasan Chowdhury, an Awami League MP and former state minister for foreign affairs, was also a part of that corruption scheme. 97% of Members of Parliament engaged in illegal activities, according to a 2012 study. Of these, 77% abused their positions on local election boards, 75% abused development projects for personal gain, such as accepting commissions in exchange for approving projects or programs, 53% engaged in outright criminal activity, 69% influenced procurement decisions, and 62% influenced local elections.

Over-centralization

Because there is insufficient decentralized governance and formal power delegation, decision-making takes a long time. Decision-making delays such as this also necessitate more public spending. Centralization encourages ineffective and subpar management, which postpones the execution of policy. Employees can only carry out decisions made at a higher level; they are unable to participate in the organization's decision-making process since decision-making is limited to personnel at the headquarters level. This lack of participation in decision-making leads to decreased motivation, performance, and innovation. Furthermore, because senior executives are merely decision makers and not decision implementers, they will not comprehend when staff struggle to put some of the decisions into practice. Bangladesh faces significant resource constraints in funding and implementing policies aimed at addressing socio-economic challenges such as poverty, healthcare, education, and infrastructure development. Limited financial resources and competing priorities often restrict the government's ability to implement comprehensive policies.

Lack of Data and Research

Inadequate data and research infrastructure pose challenges to evidence-based policy-making in Bangladesh. The lack of reliable data and research findings makes it difficult for policymakers to assess the effectiveness of existing policies and formulate informed decisions, and for bureaucrats in policy analysis, planning, and implementation.

Environmental and Climate Change Challenges

Bangladesh is highly vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change, including rising sea levels, cyclones, floods, and droughts. Policy makers must address environmental sustainability and climate resilience concerns in policy formulation and implementation to safeguard the country's natural resources and protect vulnerable communities.

Capacity Constraints

Limited institutional capacity and expertise among government officials and civil servants hinder the formulation and implementation of effective policies. There is a need for continuous capacity-building and training programs to enhance the skills of policymakers.

External Influences

Bangladesh is susceptible to external influences that can impact its policymaking and implementation process. International donor agencies, multilateral organizations, and foreign governments often exert pressure or influence on Bangladesh's policy agenda through aid conditionality, trade agreements, or geopolitical considerations. While external assistance can provide valuable support, it can also undermine national sovereignty and priorities if not managed effectively.

Ineffectiveness of Government Administration

The effectiveness of Bangladeshi bureaucracy is problematic. The majority of the nation's large government agencies are unresponsive and undifferentiated. The decision-making process is incredibly cumbersome and hierarchical. There are many different underlying causes of insufficient efficiency. Several of the causes of low productivity and effectiveness are listed below.

Infractions of the laws

In all levels of administration, including secretariat administration, jurisdictional violations are common. To be finished, approved, or decided, a file must travel a long way, which causes the most intense animosity in the hearts of regular people. Most files are kept secret or remain that way without the use of speed money or other bribery by cunning employees. The way policies are implemented is directly impacted by these acts.

Conflict between generalists and specialists

Extremism among different groups, including liberation fighters and generalists against experts. There are various heinous and malevolent methods in the implementation of Bangladeshi policy, such as direct officers versus promoted officers, administrative cadre versus other cadres, B.Sc. engineers versus diploma engineers, CSP versus BCS, and cadre versus non-cadre officers. In addition to being a waste of time for any task, conflicts hinder the development of "teamwork" among federal servants.

CONCLUSION

The development journey of Bangladesh presents a compelling paradox: remarkable achievements alongside persistent structural and institutional challenges. While national policies have consistently aimed at economic progress, social development, and poverty reduction, the gap between policy formulation and effective implementation remains a critical bottleneck. This disjunction, shaped by a combination of bureaucratic inefficiency, political interference, resource mismanagement, and weak accountability, continues to undermine the realization of policy objectives. This study underscores that obstacles to policy implementation in Bangladesh are not merely technical or procedural but deeply embedded in the country's governance framework and political culture. The centralization of decision-making, politicization of public service, and inadequate local-level capacity significantly weaken the effectiveness of even the most well-intentioned policies. Moreover, the lack of inclusive stakeholder engagement and poor inter-agency coordination further impede the translation of policy into practice. Yet, the outcomes are not universally negative. Bangladesh's progress in certain areas, such as public health initiatives, disaster management, and the growth of the RMG sector, demonstrates that success is possible when there is a coherent alignment among policy goals, institutional capacity, and community engagement. These examples illustrate the importance of strong leadership, decentralized authority, transparency,

and context-sensitive strategies. To move forward, Bangladesh must undertake comprehensive reforms aimed at strengthening institutions, depoliticizing the bureaucracy, and promoting participatory governance. Building a robust monitoring and evaluation system, encouraging civic participation, and fostering inter-agency collaboration can help close the implementation gap. Furthermore, policies must be designed with implementation realities in mind, grounded in data, responsive to local needs, and flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances. In conclusion, bridging the divide between policy and practice is essential for sustaining Bangladesh's development trajectory. It requires more than visionary plans; it demands a systemic transformation of the governance ecosystem. By addressing the underlying obstacles and learning from both failures and successes, Bangladesh can better harness its policy potential to deliver meaningful and inclusive outcomes for its citizens.

Recommendations

Bangladesh, a resource-constrained nation, has few choices for developing and implementing field-level policy. However, some effective strategies are needed to create acceptable regulations, guarantee expected execution, and bring about expected social changes. There are various things that could be done in this respect:

1. Using visions and thorough research to identify policy issues.
2. Analysis of alternative strategies is done from a national, regional, and international standpoint.
3. Stakeholder hearings are held throughout the policy-making process.
4. The country's future objectives should be considered when formulating policies.
5. The classification of potential policies to be put into effect according to the perspective of general development and the comprehensiveness of the interests of all demographic groups.
6. When necessary, grassroots involvement in the execution process should be encouraged, and the establishment of policy assessment committees should receive more attention.

Bangladesh appears to be more competent of dedicating various resources to policy making, implementation, etc., year after year, despite numerous restrictions, as a result of greater improvements in a number of fields. But more attention should be paid to obtaining the necessary financial, human, and other resources. In order to develop and implement successful national policies, it is also essential to allocate financial and other resources in a proper manner. Bangladesh's expected economic, political, and other advances in the twenty-first century are thought to be achievable with an ambitious policy agenda, well-crafted public policies, and their proper implementation.

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