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Who Speaks at Ward Meetings? Participation and Agenda Control in Two Bangladeshi Municipalities

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Abstract

Public meetings can expand consultation while leaving substantial control over local priorities with established representatives. This article examines participation and agenda setting in ward meetings in two medium-sized Bangladeshi municipalities. The research combines observations of 24 meetings, a survey of 198 attendees, and interviews with 32 councillors, residents, and municipal staff. Speaking turns were coded by topic, gender, and whether an intervention received a recorded administrative response. Residents raised drainage and street-lighting problems frequently, but meeting chairs devoted more time to projects already listed in municipal plans. Women participated more often when neighbourhood associations submitted questions collectively before meetings. Attendance alone consequently overstated opportunities to influence spending priorities. Differences between municipalities suggest that advance circulation of agendas matters when accompanied by clear procedures for recording unanswered questions. The sample excludes residents who never attended, limiting conclusions about overall political inclusion. Municipal consultation could become more accountable through public response registers that connect residents' proposals to subsequent decisions and explanations of resource constraints.

Keywords: local government, public participation, agenda setting, municipal accountability, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

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2. Methods

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