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Politicised decentralisation and local governance fizzle in disaster policy delivery: evidence from coastal Bangladesh

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Abstract

Why does decentralisation fail to improve policy delivery in settings where local entities have statutory implementation authority? This article argues that one answer lies in politicised decentralisation, where local mandates are delegated, but the discretion to execute them is structured by patronage, lax accountability, and vertical political control. This article examines this problem in disaster governance using a mixed-methods study of Gabura Union in coastal Bangladesh.

This study employs a household survey of 400 respondents, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, regression analysis, and multi-criteria decision analysis to rank perceived political barriers to implementation. Respondents cited politicised resource allocation, discrimination for political interest, centralisation, governance capture, and nepotistic manipulation of beneficiary lists as the regnant hurdles to successful disaster policy delivery. The quantitative findings are corroborated by qualitative evidence demonstrating that relief targeting is mediated by partisan brokerage, beneficiary lists serve as instruments of political control, and local institutions administer implementation without protected autonomy.

The central premise of this article is that these patterns are best understood as political rather than administrative implementation (Matland 1995). The contribution is threefold. First, it shows that local disaster delivery in Bangladesh is shaped by distributive conflict over execution, not simply by lack of capacity (Ahmed et al. 2016; M. A. Quader et al. 2023; M. S. Uddin, Haque, and Khan 2020). Second, it defines a mechanism preventing formal to substantive transformation of

decentralisation as local institutions have mandates, but not the authority to execute them impartially (Elias Sarker 2003, 2006; Fox and Menon 2011; Khemani 2015). Third, it extends frontline implementation scholarship by demonstrating how beneficiary-list control and allocative gatekeeping transmute weak accountability into discriminatory access to public support (Gofen, Meza, and Pérez Chiqués 2022; Hupe and Hill 2007; Lipsky 1981; Peeters and Campos 2023).

Keywords
Decentralisation, policy implementation, local governance, disaster policy delivery, frontline implementation

1. Introduction

Decentralisation is meant to improve policy delivery by placing implementation closer to people. In theory, local institutions should have better knowledge about people's need, greater sensitivity to context, and stronger incentives to respond to those they serve. But in practice, decentralisation seldom deliver these benefits. Public administration research has constantly demonstrated that devolving formal responsibility does not warrant responsive implementation when local institutions lack protected autonomy, when accountability is effete, or when access to public goods is bridled by patronage (Khemani 2015; Yilmaz, Beris, and Serrano-Berthet 2010).

This article starts with that discrepancy between promise and practice. Its central claim is that the lens of politicized decentralisation best explains the case of local disaster policy delivery in coastal Bangladesh. Local institutions are responsible for implementation, but partisan broking, informal gatekeeping, and vertical political reliance still shape how resources are distributed, who gets them, and how relief is delivered. The outcome is not only uneven implementation, but also a failure of local government as public power exercise is politically biased under the appearance of administrative procedure.

Disaster governance offers a particularly insightful framework to investigate this issue. Disaster policy relies on a strong foundation of decentralisation. Local institutions are considered better than central agencies to identify need, mobilise local expertise, and organise equitable delivery prior to and after hazard occurrences. Bangladesh presents an analytically powerful case combining its complex disaster management architecture with repeated evidence of local implementation failure. Existing researches suggests that coastal disaster governance suffers from weak monitoring, ineffective committee functionality, limited participation, favouritism, and political interference (Ahmed et al. 2016; M. A. Quader et al. 2023; M. S. Uddin, Haque, and Khan 2020). However, most of this research remains framed as a disaster-management issue. This article posits that it ought to be interpreted as a fundamental public administration concern involving discretion, accountability, and implementation within the framework of distributive conflict.

The article addresses three questions:

- How do political dynamics shape local disaster policy delivery in coastal Bangladesh?
- Which political barriers are perceived as most consequential for implementation?
- How do these barriers produce local governance failure?

The paper is empirically based on a mixed-methods study of Gabura Union in Shyamnagar Upazila. Conceptually, it coalesce implementation theory, decentralisation research, and street-level bureaucracy to rethink disaster policy delivery as political execution with limited accountability (Hupe and Hill 2007; Matland 1995; Sabatier 1986).

The article offers three specific contributions. First, it demonstrates that local disaster delivery in coastal Bangladesh is best conceptualised as political implementation where formal rules exist, but distributive conflict renders outcomes contingent on control over execution (Matland 1995).

Second, it identifies a mechanism of politicised decentralisation in which local institutions have implementation mandates without protected autonomy, making delivery susceptible to both vertical interference and local capture (Elias Sarker 2003, 2006; Fox and Menon 2011; Khemani 2015). Finally, it broadens frontline implementation scholarship by showing how beneficiary lists, relief allocation, and gatekeeping practices mediate weak accountability into discriminatory access to public support (Gofen, Meza, and Pérez Chiqués 2022; Hupe and Hill 2007; Lipsky 1981; Peeters and Campos 2023).

2. Politicized decentralization and implementation failure

2.1 Decentralization and real authority

The case for decentralisation rests on a simple administrative argument. Local actors need to be better informed about local need and be more directly accountable for delivery outcomes. But the literature on decentralisation has long pointed out that formal devolution does not mean real authority. Decentralisation has been often proclaimed in Bangladesh but weakly institutionalised. Sarker characterises it as more apparent than genuine as local governments still operates under central bureaucratic and political authority (Elias Sarker 2003). His later research demonstates that politicisation and centralisation have sustained across reform cycles (Elias Sarker 2006). Fox and Menon argue similarly that the emergence of an accountable and capable local state in Bangladesh has remained elusive (Fox and Menon 2011).

Within public administration, the principal concern is not the formally transfer of authority, rather the existence of protected discretion within local institutions and their accountability regarding its utilisation. Yilmaz and colleagues contend that local discretion enhances performance only when both supply-side and demand-side accountability are simultaneously promoted (Yilmaz, Beris, and

Serrano-Berthet 2010). Otherwise, decentralisation simply shifts opportunities for arbitrary or captured delivery.

2.2 Political implementation and frontline discretion

Implementation research has progressed significantly beyond the simplistic view that policy execution is merely a linear process of transmitting explicit directives from higher authorities. Sabatier demonstrated that implementation occurs across various actors and levels, requiring both top-down and bottom-up perspectives (Sabatier 1986). Matland subsequently contended that implementation is shaped by ambiguity and conflict. When conflict is intense and rules are comparatively explicit, implementation transforms into a political process where results hinge on control over execution rather than technical administration (Matland 1995). That idea is especially helpful here because the main problem with disaster governance in Bangladesh isn't that there aren't any rules. It is conflict over who gets what, when, and via whom.

Street-level bureaucracy scholarship elucidates the manifestation of conflict in service delivery. Lipsky posited that frontline public service delivery is characterized by discretion exercised amidst scarcity and pressure (Lipsky 1981). Hupe and Hill posited that street-level actions should be contextualized within accountability frameworks at various levels of governance (Hupe and Hill 2007). May and Winter show that interactions among legislators, managers, and frontline actors exert a greater influence on implementation than any individual layer of control (May and Winter 2009). In weak institutional settings, accountability deficiencies and resource shortages compel unresolved complexities to the frontline, resulting in improvisation, informality, and inconsistent access (Peeters and Campos 2023). In environments characterized by systemic corruption, discretionary actions may become intertwined with informal transactions and the circumvention of regulations (Gofen, Meza, and Pérez Chiqués 2022).

2.3 Political capture and local governance failure

Political capture links decentralisation to unfair distribution. When enforcement is insufficient and authority is inequitably allocated, elites and partisan networks may appropriate decentralised institutions, as illustrated by Khemani (2015). Lewis and Hossain (2022) elucidate the mechanisms of local political consolidation in Bangladesh, specifically through capture, brokerage, and informal organisational control. Rahman demonstrates that interference by members of parliament compromises the autonomy of local government institutions (Rahman 2012).

This article characterises local governance failure as the distorted application of public authority in service delivery, rather than the absence of institutions. It happens when formal mandates exist, but access to public goods is systematically filtered through political loyalty, brokerage, or informal gatekeeping. Bangladesh studies in the disaster field have found corruption, favoritism, lack of transparency, limited participation, dysfunctional committees, and poor monitoring (Ahmed et al. 2016; M. A. Quader et al. 2023; M. S. Uddin, Haque, and Khan 2020). The argument advanced here is that these issues are best understood as signs of politicised decentralisation.

Three analytical expectations guide the empirical analysis.

- Expectation 1. Where local discretion is politically mediated, relief and resource allocation prioritise loyalty and connection above measured needs.
- Expectation 2. If decentralisation is not accompanied by true autonomy, local implementation will be limited by vertically organised political control.
- Expectation 3. Lack of accountability can lead to capture, nepotism, and selective exclusion during beneficiary selection.

3. Institutional context and research design

3.1 Disaster governance in Bangladesh

The Standing Orders on Disasters makes it clear that local institutions are responsible for important parts of disaster management in Bangladesh. Disaster management framework containing committee structure that goes up to the Union level make it look like a decentralised disaster governance model on the surface. In reality, there is a big difference between how the law works and how institutions work. Local disaster management committees frequently do not meet regularly, lack clear roles, and operate without proper monitoring or trustworthy data (Ahmed et al. 2016). Union Disaster Management Committees continue to rely on external entities and lack the necessary financial and administrative independence needed for successful institutionalization (M. A. Quader et al. 2023). Local disaster governance in coastal Bangladesh is further encumbered by corruption, political favouritism, weak transparency, and limited community inclusion (M. S. Uddin, Haque, and Khan 2020).

3.2 Study Design

The study used a mixed-methods approach. Qualitative methods provided an in-depth understanding of political influence on the implementation of the disaster management related interventions and activities and the political hindrance the officials and implementors face to implement policies. To explore community determined political barriers of the disaster management intervention implementations the study conducted Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with the community peoples. To discern the perspective of policy implementation at the local level, this study adopted Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with the relevant Disaster Management Committee members and key informants in the community. Finally, after both the service provider and receiver (community and implementers) shared their views, the political barriers were compiled and incorporated in the household survey questionnaire which was used for semi

structured questionnaire interview. After data collection, both quantitative and qualitative analysis were employed to synthesize comprehensive findings. In the qualitative part, analysis was conducted to explore the community perception, recommendations and political condition categorization based on community perception, and case study. In the quantitative part of the analysis, effort was made to statistically analyse the distribution of ineffective implementation, prevalence of political barriers and most costly political barriers determination. MCDA was applied to rank the influence level of each political barriers and barrier category based on the ranking elicited by survey. Figure 2 illustrates the methodological framework of this study.

3.3 Case selection

Gabura Union in Shyamnagar Upazila (Figure 1) is an analytically appropriate case because it combines significant disaster exposure with sustained reliance on local implementation systems. It is the top climate vulnerable union (CVI: 0.65) of Bangladesh (UNDP 2023). The area has experienced frequent cyclone impacts, embankment failures, saline intrusion, and chronic livelihood stress. It is therefore a setting in which local disaster policy delivery should matter greatly and where distortions in allocation, listing, and relief distribution are likely to be visible.

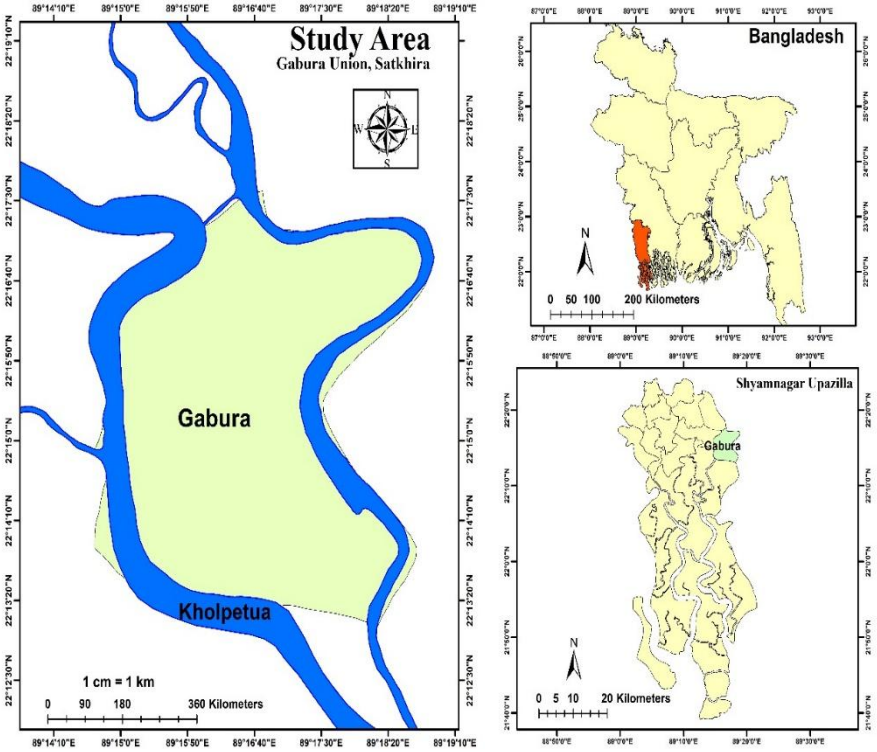


Figure 1: Study area. (Source: Author's development).

3.4 Methodological framework

This study employed a mixed method approach. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. The qualitative data collection method employed FGD, Case study, and KII tools whereas a household survey was conducted for semi-structure interview questionnaire for eliciting both quantitative and qualitative insights from the community. Thematic analysis method was used for qualitative analysis whereas, statistical and multi criteria decision analyses were employed for quantitative ranking and insights. This set of methodological arrangement ensured that we can elicit the level of political hindrance on policy and interventions implementations at the local level using the existing theoretical knowledge without obstructing the path of exploring additional facts that were yet to be explored. Figure 2 illustrates the methodological framework of the research.

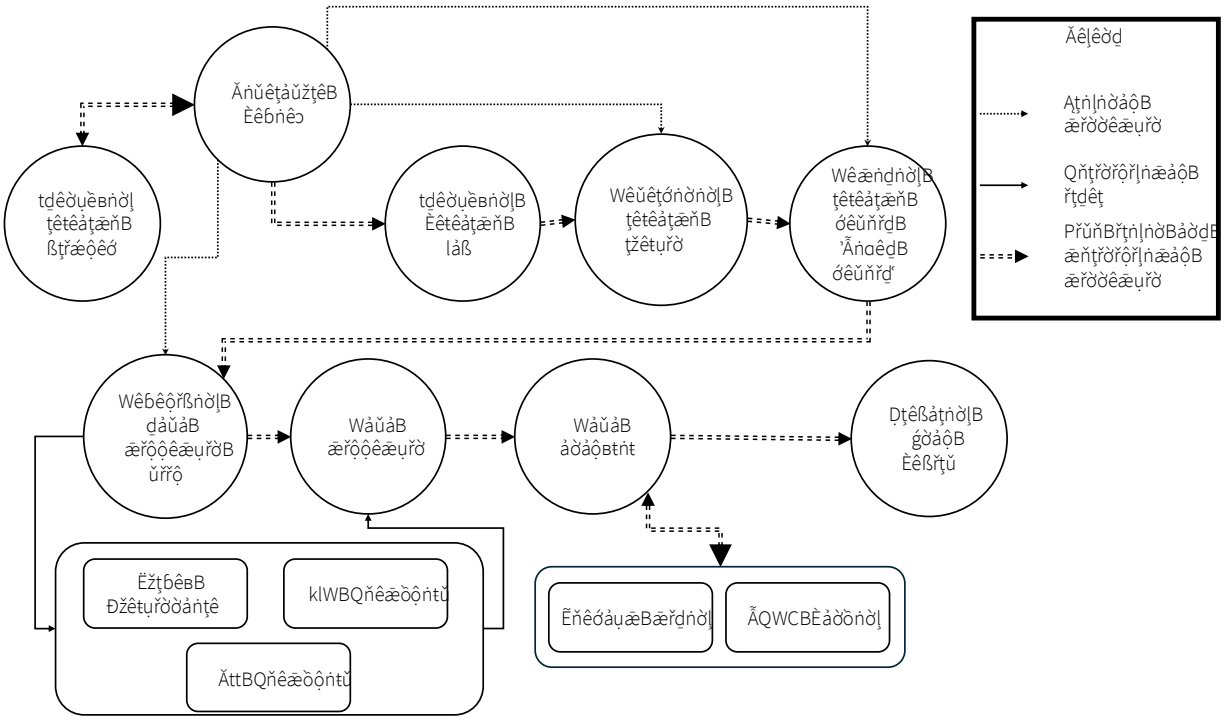


Figure 2: Methodological framework of the study. Source: Author's development.

3.5 Data and methods

The article uses a mixed-methods case study design. The primary quantitative component consists of a household survey of 400 respondents in Gabura Union. Primary data was collected by using Kobo toolbox for household survey and qualitative data were collected manually. The sample design ensured consistent ward wise sample distribution around 11%, gender equal participation, and a simple random sampling method. The qualitative component consists of 5 focus group discussions and 5 key informant interviews with Community leader, Disaster management expert (NGO activists), DMC member, Local political leader, and Member of local government (Table 1).

Table 1: Data Collection Methodology

Data Type	Method	Source	Sample Size
Qualitative	Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)	Community leader	5

		Disaster management expert (NGO activists) DMC member Local political leader Member of local government	
Qualitative	Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).	Mixed group Male group Female group Group of elderly people Group of CPP members with person with disabilities	5
Quantitative	Surveys	Semi structured questionnaire surveys	400
Mixed	Desk Review	**SOD, NPDM, DM Policy, DM Act**, INFORM Risk Index, CVI, NCVI, EM-DAT, research articles and books	

(Source: Author's development)

3.6 Sampling Unit and Method

A simple random sampling method was used for household surveys in Gabura Union, ensuring diverse representation. The qualitative sampling was based on availability of relevant stakeholders and local community leaders, government officials, policymakers, and disaster response professionals. For household survey, the sample size for the questionnaire survey was calculated using the formula of Cochran (1942), where the precision level is 5% and the confidence level is 95%, as noted in the following equation,

$$\mathrm{n} = \frac{z^2 pq}{e^2}$$

$$\mathrm{n} = \frac{1.96^2 \times .5 \times .5}{0.05^2}$$

$$\mathrm{n} = 384.16$$

Where n is the number of samples, z is the critical value and a standard value for the corresponding level of confidence, which is 1.96 at 95% confidence level. p is the estimator of a proportion, p = 0.5, q = 1–p, and e is the margin of error or precision in this case which is 0.05. The required sample size was 385. This study collected data from 400 respondents through our survey questionnaire to ensure the data quality.

3.7 Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis to discern recommendations, perception, categorization based on political condition, and case study from the community. Quantitative data were processed using statistical software (SPSS) for descriptive and regression analysis, identifying correlations between political factors and multicriteria decision analysis-based ranking evaluation was used for assessing the effectiveness of policy implementation, distribution of ineffective implementation, prevalence of political barriers, and most influential political barriers to implementing disaster related policies. The analysis proceeds in three steps:

- Descriptive statistics identify the salience of perceived political barriers to implementation.
- Multi-criteria decision analysis ranks those barriers using a novel weight assignment process for the indicators of the broad political barriers. The weights were determined by normalising the aggregation of the indicators under each political barriers by comparing across all the six political barriers.
- Regression analysis estimates the association between political affiliation and relief reception using model summary, ANOVA results, and coefficient interpretation. All of these results were assessed together to determine the strength, direction, and statistical significance of the relationship.

Qualitative material is utilised to explain the operational dynamics of the ranked barriers. The goal is not to derive general statistical inferences from a particular case, but to identify mechanisms pertinent to implementation, discretion, and decentralisation. The detailed analysis is expounded in the Annex.

3.7.1 Ranking method of the political barriers

The multicriteria decision analysis-based ranking of the political barriers followed a novel weight assignment process for the indicators of the broad political barriers. The weights were determined by normalising the aggregation of the indicators under each political barriers by comparing across all the six political barriers. For this calibration and ranking, the formula in the Table 2 were used.

Formula used

Table 2: Formula for ranking

Sl	Formula used
1.	$Normalized\ median(median_{norm}) = \frac{median}{maximum\ value}$
2.	$Normalized\ mode(mode_{norm}) = \frac{mode}{maximum\ value}$
3.	$Indicator\ index(x_i) = median_{norm} \times mode_{norm}$
4.	$Indicator\ index(x_i) = median_{norm} \times mode_{norm}$
5.	$Aggregation\ for\ barrier(\overline{x_\iota}) = \frac{\sum x_i}{n} = \frac{Sum\ of\ all\ indicator\ index}{Total\ number\ of\ indicators}$
6.	$Weight\ for\ indicators\ (W_i) = Normalized\ aggregation\ for\ barrier\ (\overline{x_\iota}_{norm}) = \frac{1 + \frac{(100-1) \times \overline{x_\iota} - \overline{x_\iota}_{min}}{\overline{x_\iota}_{max} - \overline{x_\iota}_{min}}}{100}$

4. Findings

4.1 Politicized allocation and partisan access

The most significant quantitative finding is that respondents indicated prioritization of resources based on political affiliation as the primary obstacle to effective local disaster policy implementation, achieving a cumulative score of 67.64 percent (Table 5). The regression analysis supports this trend by showing a moderate positive relationship between political affiliation and relief reception, with a reported correlation of R = 0.338 (Table 3). Consequently, access to disaster relief is not regarded as a neutral administrative outcome. The structure of it is based on political ties (Figure 3).

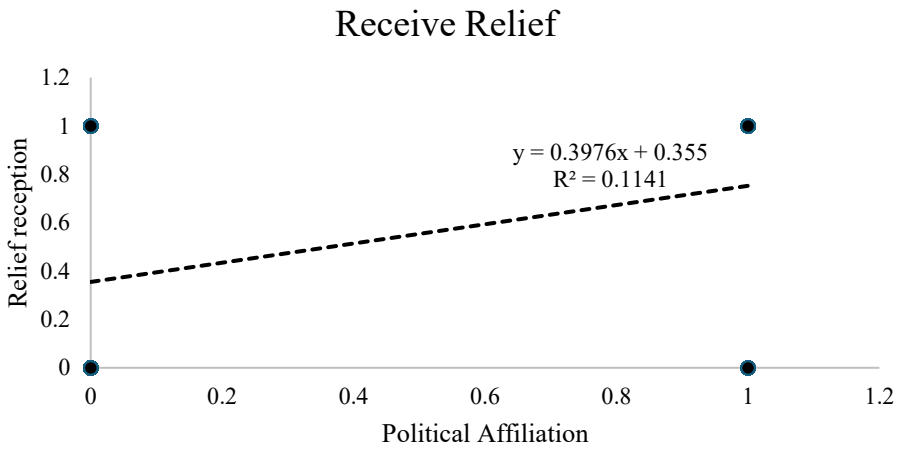


Figure 3: Regression analysis of politics of relief. (Source: Field data analysis, 2025)

Regression Table

Table 3: Regression Analysis

	Regression Statistics	*Value*
Model Summary	Multiple R	0.3378
	R Square	0.1141
	Adjusted R Square	0.1119
	Standard Error	0.4692
	Observations	400

ANOVA Findings	*Source*		*df*	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*Significance F*
	Regression		1	11.2859	11.2859	51.2698	3.92×10^{-12}
	Residual		398	87.6115	0.2201		
	Total		399	98.8975			
Coefficient Results	Variable	*Coefficients(β)*	*Standard Error*	*t Stat*	*P-value*	*Lower 95%*	*Upper 95%*
	Intercept	0.355	0.0268	13.259	< 0.001 (1.732×10^{-33})	0.3024	0.4077
	Political affiliation	0.3976	0.0555	7.16	< 0.001 (3.92×10^{-12})	0.2885	0.5068
						(Source: Field data analysis, 2025)	

This result aligns with previous research conducted in Bangladesh. M. S. Uddin, Haque, and Khan (2020) posit that political favoritism, corruption, and insufficient accountability hinder the execution of local disaster policies in coastal regions. Ahmed and colleagues identify local bias, electoral politics, and nepotism as significant challenges in relief coordination (Ahmed et al. 2016). Ali and Savoia demonstrate that subnational public expenditure in Bangladesh is influenced by political alignment and patronage rather than local necessity (Ali and Savoia 2023). The implication is clear: political reasons are being used to make decisions instead of following public standards.

Community response shows clear evidence of political affiliation determining relief distribution. In the latest experience, most of the non-politically affiliated people (64.5%) did not get any relief (Figure 4). But the relief was given to 75.27% of the people with political affiliation. This means that political affiliation accounts for 39.77% of the probability of getting relief. 24.73% of those who received relief did not disclose any political affiliation, but qualitative investigation states that those were obtained through high financial cost advanced ahead of distribution by the individual. The distribution of relief in this community is thus dependent on political affiliation or monetary exchange.

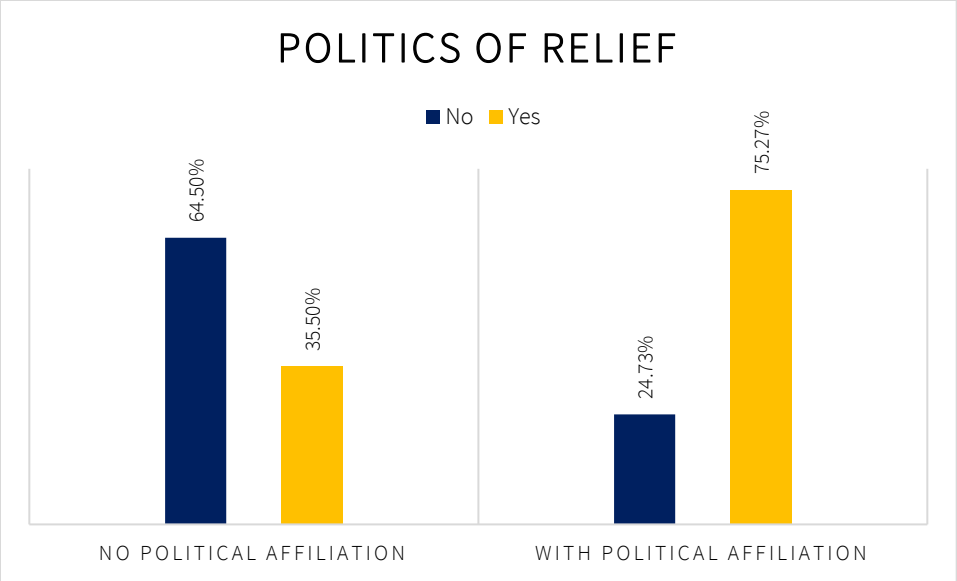


Figure 4: Politics of relief. (Source: Field data, 2025)

This fact was endorsed by the female vice chairman of the Gabura Union Council. In her words,

> *"Party leaders always prioritize their own party members in every matter."*

4.2 Beneficiary-list manipulation and exclusion

The second set of findings pertains to the administrative context in which distributive politics materializes: the beneficiary list. Respondents rate discrimination for political interest as a major problem, with an overall index of 60 percent as a big effect (Table 4). Participants also say that people who don't have political loyalty or can't make informal monetary donations are taken off beneficiary lists or left out of distribution.

> *"Those who don't pay money to the chairman or members get their names removed from the (distribution) list."-Female FGD participant of age 27.*

The list serves as a tool for political gatekeeping rather than a neutral record of need.

Table 4: Ranking of Inequity and Exclusion Rooted in Political Interests

Inequity and Exclusion Rooted in Political Interests						
Indicators	Marginalized groups excluded from planning and decision-making	Unequal access to relief and compensation	Unequal distribution of recovery benefits	Gender-insensitive policies influenced by power structures	Policies reinforcing inequality between groups	Weak political commitment to equity and inclusion
Median	4	4	4	3	3	4
Mode	5	5	4	3	3	4
Normalized median	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.8
Normalized mode	1	1	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.8
Index for indicators	0.8	0.8	0.64	0.36	0.36	0.64
				Aggregation for barriers	0.6	
				Weight for indices	0.666024096	
Weighted normalized value of the indicators	0.426255422	0.426255422	0.27280347	0.086316723	0.086316723	0.27280347
Ranking of indicators	12	12	23	31	31	23
					(Source: Field data analysis, 2025)	

Secondary research offers substantial corroboration for this interpretation. Aase demonstrates that post-Sidr relief lists in Bangladesh evolved into arenas of resource conflict, potentially intensifying rather than alleviating disparities in vulnerability (Aase 2020). Nadiruzzaman and Wrathall demonstrate that post-disaster aid frequently traverses established power networks, thereby favoring the relatively affluent and fostering uneven resilience (Nadiruzzaman and Wrathall 2015). Similar findings from social safety nets indicate that informal politics, kinship, and clientelist relations affect selection and distribution beyond formal regulations (Rahman Rezvi 2021; Sarker and Nawaz 2021).

From an implementation perspective, beneficiary selection functions as a frontline allocation system that transforms formal eligibility into politically mediated access. This is a clear example

of political implementation in Matland's sense where the fight over who should benefit is more important than the policy's clear wording (Matland 1995).

The systematic MCDA revealed that the politicisation of resource allocation is the predominant political barrier identified by the community. The community thought that the most important political factor that hurt their area's disaster management was politicization of resource allocation. They also thought that centralization and political control hurt their ability to make and carry out disaster-related policies at the local level. Because of this, they put it as the second most important barrier to effective local disaster governance. The third most important political barrier that made disaster-related policies less effective at the local level was a network of corruption and governance capture (Table 5). After this barrier, there was discrimination for political reasons. People said that party politics and election manipulation had the second least effect on how local disaster-related policies were put into action. The last and least important barrier that the community reported was political control of knowledge and information. This was also the only barrier that less than 50% of people thought had an impact. Table 5 shows how the political barriers to disaster-related policy implementation at the local level compare to each other.

Table 5: Ranking of Ranking of political barriers based on aggregated index

Barriers	Aggregated Index	Rank
Centralization and Political control	0.62	2
Politicization of resource allocation	0.676363636	1
Party politics and election manipulation	0.55	5
Network of corruption and governance capture	0.605714286	3
Discrimination for political interest	0.6	4
Political control of Knowledge and information	0.45	6

(Source: Field data analysis, 2025)

One participant from the focus group discussion stated,

> *"Because of the chairman's loyal followers, we are often deprived of opportunities and benefits. You have to pay money to get your name on the list, yet not everyone gets included. They say, 'You'll get it next time.' My mother-in-law had to pay 4,000 taka to get her old-age allowance card."*
>
> *(Female FGD participant of age 27)*

4.3 Centralization and constrained local autonomy

A third important finding is that respondents cite centralisation and national political control over local operations obtained an aggregated index of 62% as a barrier to effective disaster policy delivery (Table 6). This finding is important as it demonstrates that local failure cannot only be explained by opportunism of local actors. Implementation responsibilities are locally delegated but vertically bounded in discretion.

This finding is quite similar to the previous studies on decentralisation in Bangladesh. According to Sarker, decentralisation in Bangladesh is more apparent than real, as local bodies remain under the central bureaucratic and political power (Elias Sarker 2003). In his later work he argues that politicisation and central control have systematically impeded feasible local government reform (Elias Sarker 2006). Rahman demonstrates that interference by members of parliament undermines the independence of local government (Rahman 2012). Quader and colleagues show that Union Disaster Management Committees are nevertheless externally dependent and often lack the authority to implement their own decisions (M. A. Quader et al. 2023). Similarly, Ahmed and colleagues report ineffective functioning and monitoring of committees (Ahmed et al. 2016).

The issue in public administration is uneven implementation. Local institutions are in charge of delivery, but they don't have full political or administrative control over how delivery happens. This is one way that decentralization can't be fully put into place.

This political barrier had six indicators (Table 6). Among them Centralized decision-making limits local autonomy is the most influential barrier (0.482236145). That indicates the local government responsible for disaster management related policy implementation lacks autonomy to function independently. The community marked this lack of liberty as a key depressor of effectiveness of disaster management activities. On the other hand, the community believes that political reluctance to devolve authority to local level (0.097652819) has the least to do with the effective implementation of disaster management policies. That reflects that the community prioritise the real execution on the field instead of good will of politics. This is because the community has limited reliance on the good will of the politician due to recurrent breach of promise. However, the rest of the components of this centralization and political control barrier have more or less equal impact (0.308631133) according to the community. Table 6 presents the ranking analysis of centralization and political control had significantly (62%) jeopardised the effectiveness of disaster management policy implementation in Gabura.

Table 6: Ranking of Centralization and Political Control

	Centralization and Political Control					
Indicators	**Centralized decision-making limits local autonomy**	**Political reluctance to devolve authority to local level**	**Centralized control of disaster funding by national actors**	**Lack of fiscal decentralization for local disaster activities**	**Limited local discretion in fund-use due to political control**	**State-centric approach undermines community priorities**
Median	4	3	4	4	4	4
Mode	5	3	4	4	4	4
Normalized median	0.8	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8
Normalized mode	1	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8

Index for indicators	0.8	0.36	0.64	0.64	0.64	0.64
				Aggregation for barriers	0.62	
				Weight for indices	0.753493976	
Weighted normalized value of the indicators	0.482236145	0.097652819	0.308631133	0.308631133	0.308631133	0.308631133
Ranking of indicators	8	28	15	15	15	15

(Source: Field data analysis, 2025)

The limitation imposed by centralised decision making joined with political control is real in Gabura. One of the members of the Union Disaster Management Committee clearly stated,

> *"There is not enough budget based on people's vulnerabilities. Even the budget that is allocated often does not arrive on time. Therefore, people have become self-adaptive instead of depending on the government or administration."*

4.4 Governance capture and corruption networks

Respondents also prioritise governance capture, with corruption networks accounting for 60.57 percent of the aggregated barrier index (Table 7). This suggests more than isolated bribery or occasional misconduct. It implies that institutional processes are organised on durable networks of influence, brokerage, and favouritism.

Table 7: Ranking of Governance Capture and Corruption Networks

	Governance Capture and Corruption Networks						
Indicators	Patronage networks dominate disaster governance	Corruption in procurement of relief and projects	Persistent elite capture of local governance systems	Institutional monopolizatio n of authority	Political interference in operational decisions	Institutional resistance to reform due to vested interests	Normalizatio n of corruption in disaster-related institutions

Median	4	4	4	3	4	3	4
Mode	5	5	4	3	4	3	4
Normalized median	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.6	0.8	0.6	0.8
Normalized mode	1	1	0.8	0.6	0.8	0.6	0.8
Index for indicators	0.8	0.8	0.64	0.36	0.64	0.36	0.64
				Aggregation for barriers	0.605714286		
				Weight for indices	0.691015491		
Weighted normalized value of the indicators	0.442249914	0.442249914	0.283039945	0.089555608	0.283039945	0.089555608	0.283039945
Ranking of indicators	10	10	20	29	20	29	20

(Source: Field data analysis, 2025)

The evidence from Bangladesh is consistent. According to Uddin and colleagues, local disaster implementation is plagued by corruption, political favouritism, a lack of transparency, and the marginalisation of local inhabitants (M. S. Uddin, Haque, and Khan 2020). Ahmed and colleagues highlight elite influence and political meddling as drivers of bias and weak coordination (Ahmed et al. 2016). Lewis and Hossain show that local political consolidation in Bangladesh proceeds through capture, brokerage, and informal organisational control (Lewis and Hossain 2022). In theoretical terms, this is the appropriation of decentralized authority by local power networks (Khemani 2015).

Capture alters the interpretation of formal institutions. A disaster committee can meet, a list can be created, and a distribution can occur, yet the process can remain substantively confidential. Noncompliance alone is not the problem. It is the repurposing of public authority through informal power.

Political patronage and corruption are the most impactful (0.442249914) indicators of governance capture and corruption networks at local level of disaster governance. Among the seven indicators three indicators have overall ranking of 20 (Table 7). The resistance to institutional reform and

monopoly of authority are reported to have the least impact among the indicators under this barrier (Figure 5). The overall strength of this barrier is very high (60%) in hampering the implementation of disaster related policy at the local level (Table 7). The perceived impact of monopoly of authority and resistance to reform is low because of high level of elite capture of local governance system usually minimises the alternative choices by employing external coercion like legal harassment, arrest for false charge which are very convenient to the local elites due to the prevalence of corruption network in the Sundarbans especially the report of drug smuggling and robbery is high in the community.

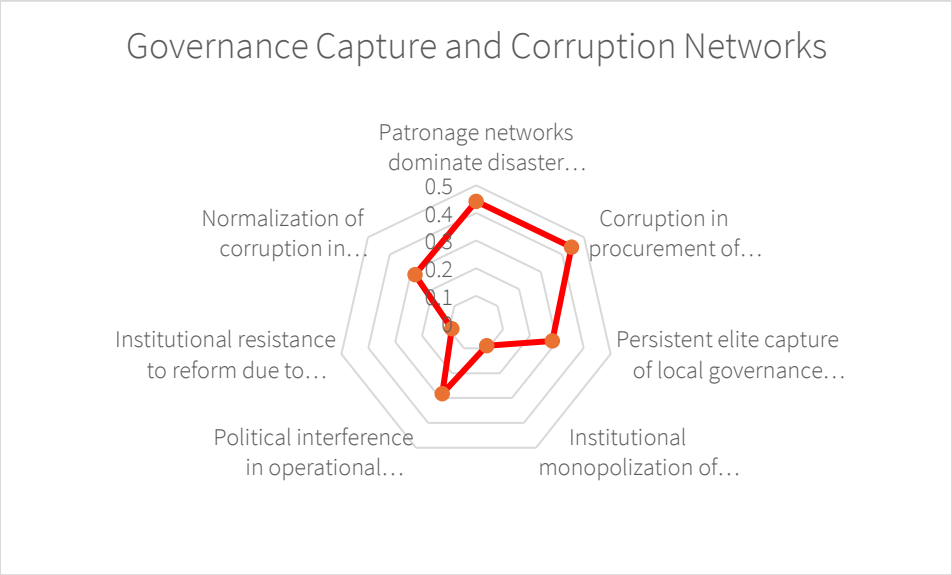


Figure 5: Ranking of indicators of Governance Capture and Corruption Networks. (Source: Field data, 2025)

One male participant from FGD stated,

> *"If anyone tries to take action against political leaders, they falsely accuse them of illegal activities and hand them over to the police. People are taken to jail without any case filed against them, and then they have to pay money to get released. Since the literacy rate here is low, they exploit this situation more*

often. In fact, the police have as many sections as there are stars in the sky."
(male FGD participant of age 42)

The statement of the female vice chairman of Gabura union reflects the condition of governance capture and corruption network aptly. She stated,

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"In the Union Disaster Management Committee (UDMC), the committee is always formed with the people of whoever becomes the Chairman."

People of the community also expressed their helplessness in the face of corruption network. The scenario is so bad that, corruption is normalised now in Gabura if we are talking about disaster governance.

4.5 Gendered access under politicized delivery

The findings also indicates that relief distribution is gendered, but not in a socially neutral way. Respondents report discrepancies in access, and the data indicate that political connections significantly influence who receives aid. Existing Bangladesh evidence indicates that political connectedness can dominate local decision-making processes in post-disaster relief even where gender inequalities exist (Sultana et al. 2022). This implies that gendered exclusion in disaster recovery may be mediated through the same patronage channels that shape other forms of access.

The study uncovered a proficient gender based political marginalisation of relief distribution at the local level. The data showed that gender discrimination often relinquished when both genders are politically affiliated (around 75%). But discrimination aggravates when both the genders lack political affiliation. When considered without political affiliation, women headed household faced disproportionate deprivation in terms of relief distribution. Only 21% of the women headed

households without any political affiliation got relief whereas this proportion in men headed households was 36.18% (Figure 6). Therefore, the cost of political affiliation affects women headed households more (54% drop) than men headed households (39.1% drop).

One of our focus group discussants clearly articulated,

> *"We have to stand in line the whole day to receive relief. But relatives of political leaders and their loyal supporters get help quickly. Male members receive more relief compared to women." (Female FGD participant of age 40)*

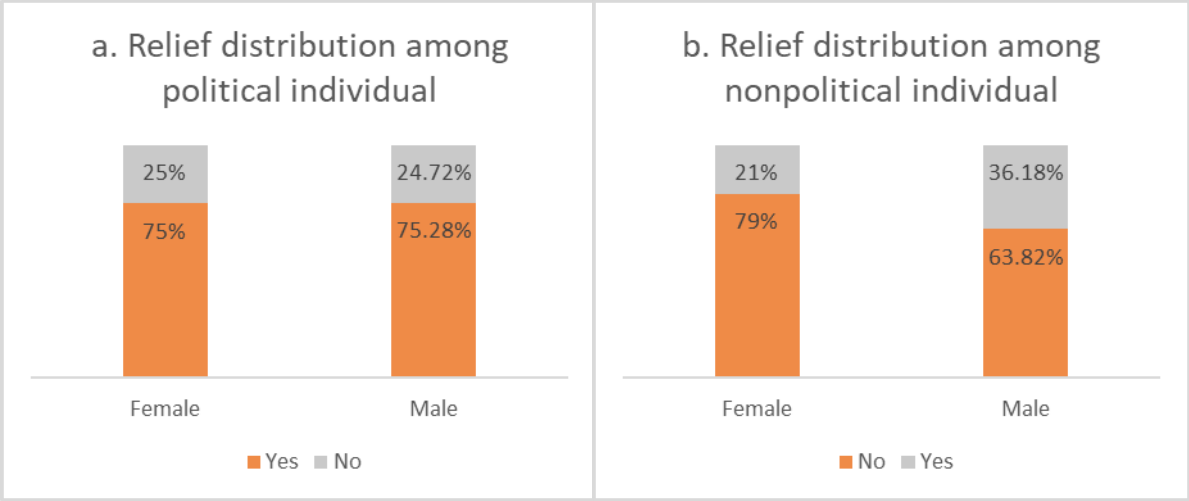


Figure 6: Gender vs politics. a) Relief distribution among political individual; b) Relief distribution among nonpolitical individual. (Source: Field data, 2025)

4.6 Mechanisms of politicized disaster policy delivery in Gabura Union

This exploration found a proficient mechanism of politicized decentralization producing local governance failure in disaster policy delivery (Figure 7). The mechanism bases on six specific political hindrance at behind ineffective implementation of disaster management related policies at the local level based on the comprehensive literature review. These barriers are supported by

both the study findings and the existing literature (Barua, Mitra, and Eslamian 2021; M. Quader et al. 2023; S. Islam et al. 2021; S. Islam, C. Chu, and J. Smart 2019; M. Uddin, Haque, and Khan 2020). It indicates politicization of resource allocation paves the way for resource misappropriation by means of elite capture, political favouritism and funding politicisation. Party politics and electoral manipulation debilitate the local disaster management committees by maintaining and using a committee subservient to the political will of winning the election of the ruling political party, making disaster related activities redundant and ineffective. Centralisation limits the autonomy of local bodies to prioritise local priorities which may change rapidly after a disaster. In this way, the financial efficiency of supports and other disaster related activities decays. The local governance of disaster related mechanism disintegrates as corruption network takes the control of governance due to political interest of resisting change, monopolising governance and which incriminates the processes by normalising corruption. Political interest in democratic countries mostly consider the majority or in weak democracy it preserves the dominion of the dominant. In this way marginalisation in a society increases aggravating vulnerability of the community. Finally control of information and knowledge by politics often misrepresent the reality for political advantage.

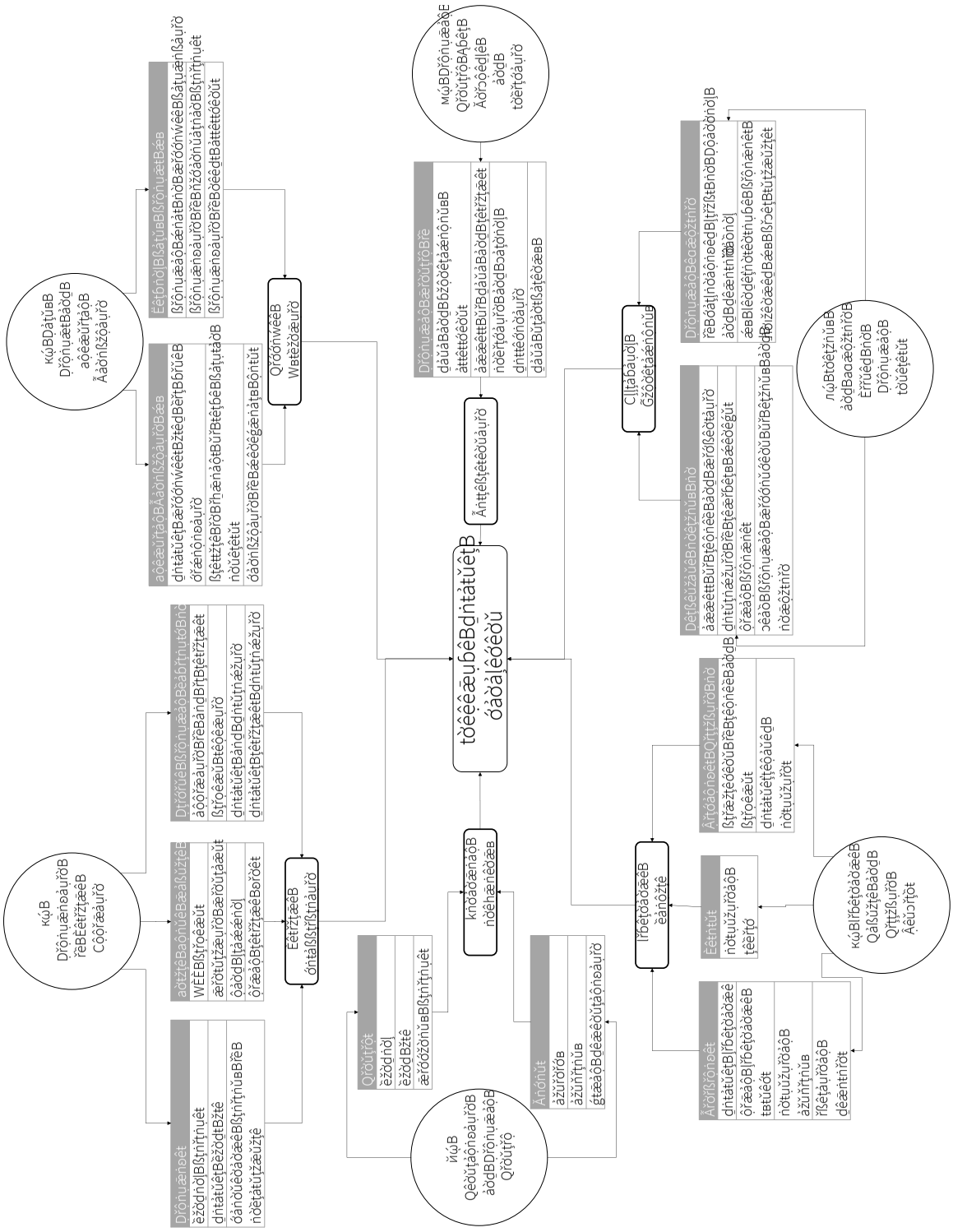


Figure 7: Mechanisms of politicized disaster policy delivery in Gabura Union. (Source: author's development)

5. Discussion

The findings are strongest when read as an interacting mechanism rather than a catalogue of barriers. Politicised allocation determines who receives relief. Beneficiary-list control translates formal eligibility into a frontline exclusion mechanism. Centralisation limits the effective autonomy of local institutions. Capture links formal delivery structures to informal power. Gendered disparities emerge within these same channels rather than outside them. Taken together, the evidence supports a clear claim that implementation is decentralised in form but politically governed in operation.

This mechanism repositions the case within implementation theory. Following Matland, the evidence suggests to political implementation rather than administrative execution (Matland 1995). Bangladesh's disaster governance system is not primarily defined by a lack of norms rather by conflict over distributive control. Once relief, targeting, and listing become politically useful, implementation outcomes are less dependent on statutory requirements and more on who controls execution. The article's core theoretical claim is therefore that local disaster policy failure is generated not simply by weak capacity, but by the political structuring of discretion.

The case also sharpens street-level bureaucracy scholarship by showing how discretion operates in a weakly institutionalised and politically saturated environment. Scarcity matters, but it does not by itself explain selective delivery. What really important is how scarcity is governed. Frontline decisions about visibility, listability, and eligibility are nested within political relations that shape who can be recognised, excluded, and who can challenge those decisions. Hupe and Hill's emphasis on multi-level accountability is especially useful in this context since it explains why local actors may be simultaneously powerful over citizens and constrained by higher-level political structures (Hupe and Hill 2007). Peeters and Campos likewise help explain why

unresolved institutional deficits are pushed downward to the frontline, where implementation becomes improvised, uneven, and distributive (Peeters and Campos 2023).

The argument also directly addresses decentralization research. The Bangladesh literature has long described decentralization as partial, stalled, or illusory (Elias Sarker 2003, 2006; Fox and Menon 2011). This article specifies one mechanism through which that condition is reproduced. Responsibilities are localised, but local institutions do not enjoy protected autonomy. They are therefore exposed to two linked pressures: vertical interference from central political actors and horizontal capture by local elites and brokers. This dual vulnerability is especially consequential in targeted and conspicuous policy arenas such as disaster relief, where decisions over access are both politically valuable and administratively discretionary.

A final implication concerns the meaning of local governance failure. Governance failure is often attributed to low capacity or managerial weakness. The evidence here supports a precise formulation. Governance fails when public authority is exerted based on politically selective criteria while retaining the appearance of administrative procedure. Committees exist, lists exist, and distributions occur, yet eligibility, access, and responsiveness are regulated through partisan and informal channels. On this view, capacity deficits matter, but they are not the primary explanation. Reforms focusing just on training, equipment, or coordination will remain incomplete unless they also confront the political organization of discretion (Ahmed et al. 2016; M. Quader et al. 2023).

6. Conclusion

This article contends that local disaster policy failure in coastal Bangladesh is best understood as a case of politicised decentralisation. Using mixed-method evidence from Gabura Union, it shows that respondents perceive politically affiliated resource allocation, discrimination for political

interest, centralisation, governance capture, and nepotistic list manipulation as the most significant barriers to effective implementation. These are not isolated deficiencies. Together they form a mechanism in which decentralised delivery is ostensibly delegated to local institutions but substantively shaped by patronage, brokerage, and weak accountability.

The theoretical contribution is to elevate this case from the fringes of disaster studies to the core concerns of public administration. The findings show how decentralisation can produce political implementation when distributive conflict overtakes administrative neutrality (Matland 1995). They further show how frontline discretion in weakly accountable settings becomes a mechanism of selective delivery and administrative exclusion (Gofen, Meza, and Pérez Chiqués 2022; Hupe and Hill 2007; Peeters and Campos 2023). Most importantly, they specify a concrete mechanism through which decentralisation in Bangladesh remains more formal than substantive: local mandates are devolved, but the authority to use them impartially is not (Elias Sarker 2003, 2006; Fox and Menon 2011).

The policy implications are straightforward. Beneficiary-list preparation should be insulated from unchecked partisan influence through transparent criteria, verifiable records, and review mechanisms. Oversight and grievance systems should be strengthened so that exclusion and targeting bias can be contested. Local disaster committee meetings should be true participatory planning forums rather than symbolic institutional rituals. Public awareness of rights and entitlements should also be reinforced so that downward accountability becomes more actionable for citizens.

Data Availability Statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. The primary field data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly for the privacy of individuals that participated in the study and the political nature of the study. The data will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Ethics Declaration

The study protocol was reviewed and approved for ethical consideration by the ethics sub-committee of Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies (IDMVS), University of Dhaka. This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards set out in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent amendments, or with comparable ethical standards. The data were stored and handled in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation under the Data Protection Act 2018. Informed consent was obtained from every participant before interviewing them and they were free to discontinue the interview whenever they want.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Annex: Supplementary Material

Regression analysis of politics of relief

This study conducted a simple linear regression analysis to assess the influence of political affiliation on relief reception (Figure 3). This analysis involved, model summary, ANOVA results, and coefficient interpretation (Annex Table 1). All of these results were assessed together to determine the strength, direction, and statistical significance of the relationship.

Annex Table 1: Regression statistics

Model Summary	*Regression Statistics*						*Value*
	Multiple R						0.3378
	R Square						0.1141
	Adjusted R Square						0.1119
	Standard Error						0.4692
	Observations						400
ANOVA Findings	*Source*		*df*	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*Significance F*
	Regression		1	11.2859	11.2859	51.2698	3.92×10^{-12}
	Residual		398	87.6115	0.2201		
	Total		399	98.8975			
Coefficient Results	Variable	*Coefficients (β)*	*Standard Error*	*t Stat*	*P-value*	*Lower 95%*	*Upper 95%*
	Intercept	0.355	0.0268	13.259	< 0.001 (1.732×10^{-33})	0.3024	0.4077
	Political affiliation	0.3976	0.0555	7.16	< 0.001 (3.92×10^{-12})	0.2885	0.5068

(Source: Field data analysis, 2025)

The model summary showed a Multiple R value of 0.338, suggesting a moderate positive correlation between political affiliation and relief reception. The R Square value of 0.114 indicates that approximately 11.4% of the variance in relief reception could be explained by variation in political affiliation. The Adjusted R Square (0.1119) confirmed that the explanatory power of the model was consistent when adjusted for the sample size and the number of predictors. The Standard Error (0.469) indicates that, on average, the deviation between predicted values from actual values was by approximately 0.47units. Considering the sample size of 400 respondents, the model provided a statistically meaningful representation of the relationship between relief reception and political affiliation.

ANOVA Findings

The ANOVA results (Annex Table 1) indicated that the regression model was highly significant, with an F-statistic of 51.27 and a corresponding p-value less than 0.001. This entails that political affiliation significantly predicted the likelihood of relief reception in the provided dataset. The extremely small p-value (3.92×10^{-12}) attested that there is a very low probability that these results occurred by chance. Hence, the overall regression model provides a good fit to the data.

Coefficient Results

The coefficient table (Annex Table 1) contains a statistically significant intercept ($\beta_0 = 0.355$, $p < 0.001$), representing the expected level of relief reception when political affiliation is zero. On the other hand, the slope coefficient for political affiliation ($\beta_1 = 0.398$, $p < 0.001$) is positive and statistically significant, indicating that as political affiliation increases by one unit, relief reception is expected to increase by approximately 0.40 units, holding other factors constant. The 95% confidence interval (0.288–0.507) further supports the robustness and consistency of this positive relationship, as it does not cross zero.

MCDA analysis

Ranking method of the political barriers

The multicriteria decision analysis-based ranking of the political barriers followed a novel weight assignment process for the indicators of the broad political barriers. The weights were determined by normalising the aggregation of the indicators under each political barriers by comparing across all the six political barriers. For this calibration and ranking, following formula in Annex Table 2 were used.

Formula used

Annex Table 2: Formula used for ranking

Sl	Formula used
1.	$Normalized\ median(median_{norm}) = \frac{median}{maximum\ value}$
2.	$Normalized\ mode(mode_{norm}) = \frac{mode}{maximum\ value}$
3.	$Indicator\ index(x_i) = median_{norm} \times mode_{norm}$
4.	$Indicator\ index(x_i) = median_{norm} \times mode_{norm}$
5.	$Aggregation\ for\ barrier(\overline{x_\iota}) = \frac{\sum x_i}{n} = \frac{Sum\ of\ all\ indicator\ index}{Total\ number\ of\ indicators}$
6.	$Weight\ for\ indicators\ (W_i) = Normalized\ aggregation\ for\ barrier\ (\overline{x_{\iota norm}}) = \frac{1 + \frac{(100-1) \times \overline{x_\iota} - \overline{x_{\iota min}}}{\overline{x_{\iota max}} - \overline{x_{\iota min}}}}{100}$

Ranking of the political barriers

The detailed result of the ranking analysis of the key perceived impact of the political barriers employing the formula mentioned above is presented in Annex Table 3.

Annex Table 3: Ranking of the perceived impact of the political barriers

1. Centralization and Political Control						
Indicators	**Centralized decision-making limits local autonomy**	**Political reluctance to devolve authority to local level**	**Centralized control of disaster funding by national actors**	**Lack of fiscal decentralization for local disaster activities**	**Limited local discretion in fund-use due to political control**	**State-centric approach undermines community priorities**
Median	4	3	4	4	4	4
Mode	5	3	4	4	4	4

Normalized median	0.8	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8
Normalized mode	1	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8
Index for indicators	0.8	0.36	0.64	0.64	0.64	0.64
		Aggregation for barriers				0.62
		Weight for indices				0.753493976
Weighted normalized value of the indicators	0.482236145	0.097652819	0.308631133	0.308631133	0.308631133	0.308631133
Ranking of indicators	8	28	15	15	15	15
		2. Politicization of Resource Allocation				

Indicators	PDisaster ofunds l diverted for i political t purposes i c a l i n f l u e n c e o v e r f u n d i n g p r i o r i t i e s	Political favouritism in allocation of aid or resources	PDisaster oaid l distributed i through t political i loyalty c a l f a v o u r i t i s m i n p r o j e c t s e l e c t i o n	Patronage-based distribution of disaster resources	EElite capture in l construction or i infrastructure t contracts e c a p t u r e o f d i s a s t e r r i s k r e d u c t i o n (D R R) p r o j e c t s	Land grabbing under disaster or recovery projects	PNeglect of omaintenance l in politically i low-priority t areas i c a l i n t e r f e r e n c e i n l o c a l r e s o u r c e z o n e s
Median	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3
Mode	5	3	5	5	5	5	5	5	3	4	4
Normalized median	0.8	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.6	0.8	0.6
Normalized mode	1	0.6	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.6	0.8	0.8
Index for indicators	0.8	0.36	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.36	0.64	0.48
			Aggregation for barriers	0.676363636							

					Weight for indices	1					
Weighted normalized value of the indicators	0.64	0.1296	0.64	0.64	0.64	0.64	0.64	0.1296	0.4096	0.2304	
Ranking of indicators	1	26	1	1	1	1	1	26	14	24	

3. Party Politics and Electoral Manipulation						
Indicators	Disaster committees used for vote mobilization	Pressure on officials to serve partisan interests	Political bias in committee participation	Politicization of humanitarian priorities	Politicization of needs assessments	Manipulation of beneficiary lists
Median	2	4	4	3	3	5
Mode	2	4	5	3	3	5
Normalized median	0.4	0.8	0.8	0.6	0.6	1
Normalized mode	0.4	0.8	1	0.6	0.6	1
Index for indicators	0.16	0.64	0.8	0.36	0.36	1
		Aggregation for barriers	0.55			
		Weight for indices	0.461927711			
Weighted normalized value of the indicators	0.011825349	0.18920559	0.295633735	0.059865831	0.059865831	0.461927711
Ranking of indicators	35	25	19	33	33	9

4. Governance Capture and Corruption Networks							
Indicators	Patronage networks dominate disaster governance	Corruption in procurement of relief and projects	Persistent elite capture of local governance systems	Institutional monopolization of authority	Political interference in operational decisions	Institutional resistance to reform due to vested interests	Normalization of corruption in disaster-related institutions
Median	4	4	4	3	4	3	4
Mode	5	5	4	3	4	3	4
Normalized median	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.6	0.8	0.6	0.8
Normalized mode	1	1	0.8	0.6	0.8	0.6	0.8
Index for indicators	0.8	0.8	0.64	0.36	0.64	0.36	0.64
			Aggregation for barriers	0.605714286			
			Weight for indices	0.691015491			

Weighted normalized value of the indicators	0.442249914	0.442249914	0.283039945	0.089555608	0.283039945	0.089555608	0.283039945
Ranking of indicators	10	10	20	29	20	29	20

5. Inequity and Exclusion Rooted in Political Interests						
Indicators	Marginalized groups excluded from planning and decision-making	Unequal access to relief and compensation	Unequal distribution of recovery benefits	Gender-insensitive policies influenced by power structures	Policies reinforcing inequality between groups	Weak political commitment to equity and inclusion
Median	4	4	4	3	3	4
Mode	5	5	4	3	3	4
Normalized median	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.8
Normalized mode	1	1	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.8
Index for indicators	0.8	0.8	0.64	0.36	0.36	0.64
		Aggregation for barriers	0.6			
		Weight for indices	0.666024096			
Weighted normalized value of the indicators	0.426255422	0.426255422	0.27280347	0.086316723	0.086316723	0.27280347
Ranking of indicators	12	12	23	31	31	23

6. Political Control Over Knowledge and Information				
Indicators	Politicization of data and vulnerability assessments	Restricted access to data and resources for political reasons	Information and warning exclusion based on loyalty or influence	Lack of data transparency in politically sensitive contexts
Median	3	4	2	4
Mode	3	4	2	4
Normalized median	0.6	0.8	0.4	0.8
Normalized mode	0.6	0.8	0.4	0.8
Index for indicators	0.36	0.64	0.16	0.64
		Aggregation for barriers	0.45	
		Weight for indices	0.01	
Weighted normalized value of the indicators	0.001296	0.004096	0.000256	0.004096
Ranking of indicators	38	36	39	36

(Source: Field data analysis, 2025)

Ranking of political barriers based on aggregated index

Based on the barrier level aggregated index, Annex Table 4 contains the final ranking of each political barrier.

Annex Table 4: Ranking of Ranking of political barriers based on aggregated index

Barriers	Aggregated Index	Rank
Centralization and Political control	0.62	2
Politicization of resource allocation	0.676363636	1
Party politics and election manipulation	0.55	5
Network of corruption and governance capture	0.605714286	3
Discrimination for political interest	0.6	4
Political control of Knowledge and information	0.45	6

(Source: Field data analysis, 2025)