CLEAR
Covid-19 Learning, Evidence and Research Programme

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Synthesis Report 4

Accountability and Citizen–State Relations in Bangladesh

Findings from the CLEAR Programme

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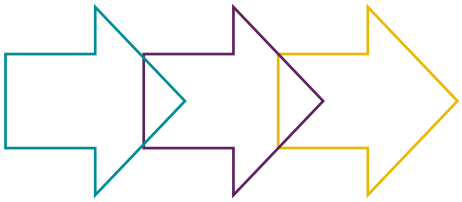
June 2024



The Covid-19 Learning, Evidence and Research Programme in Bangladesh (CLEAR), coordinated by IDS, is building a consortium of research organisations in Bangladesh to generate policy-relevant research and evidence to support Covid-19 recovery and increase resilience to future shocks. CLEAR is funded by the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

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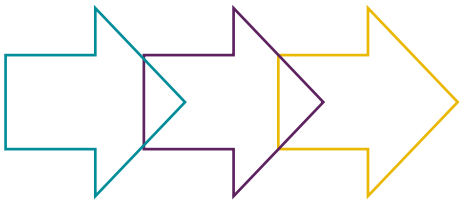
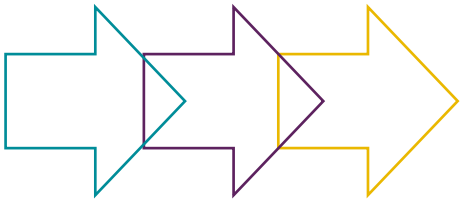


Summary

This report synthesises findings on accountability and citizen–state relations in Bangladesh from the Covid-19 Learning, Evidence and Research Programme in Bangladesh (CLEAR). To do this, it refers to five projects from the programme that dealt with these concepts, which were: (1) Becoming Poor; (2) Effective Digital Health Platforms for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights; (3) Durdin-er Diaries; (4) The Feedback State; and (5) Rethinking Accountability for Digitised Futures in Bangladesh. Section 1 of this report introduces the CLEAR programme and the projects synthesised. Section 2 presents the political context of Bangladesh and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the country. Section 3 presents the findings on expectations, accountability, and responsiveness along with findings on new issues on e-governance and key groups that need increased attention from the government and scholars. We find that households who were part of CLEAR research did not expect much from the government and had low trust in the local government. Additionally, very few households took action to hold the government accountable and there were almost no instances of collective action for accountability. Regarding responsiveness, while the government responded quickly to the Covid-19 pandemic, the formal government was not viewed as responsive to citizen voice and people relied more on informal actors or intermediaries. An important emerging issue is the increased reliance on digital forms of service provision and accountability. This report finds that the digital mode of accountability is vulnerable to challenges much like the analogue mode, and it is not a silver bullet to resolve issues of corruption and rent-seeking since those problems are visible under the digital mode as well. Additionally, the current digital infrastructure for accountability is very fragmented, making it hard for citizens to get a bigger picture of grievances and their redressal and likewise for the government. Lastly, Section 4 explores the findings' national and global implications, including the implications for the Sustainable Development Goals and lessons for development and policy in low- and middle-income countries.

Keywords

Accountability; Bangladesh; new poor; citizen–state relations; trust; social protection.



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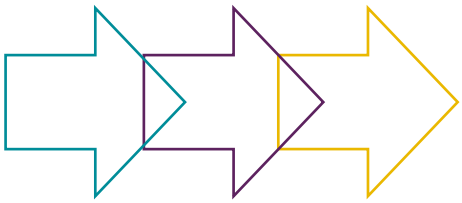

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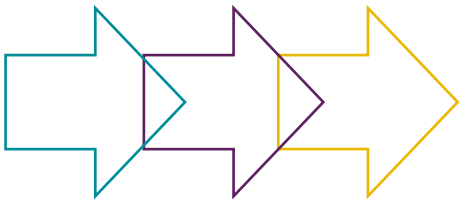
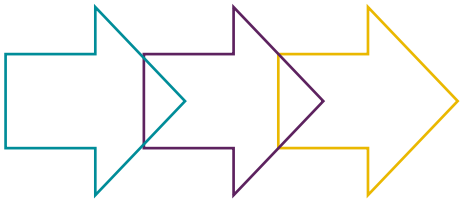


Acronyms

ACO	authoritarian cultural orientation
a2i	Aspire to Innovate
BIGD	BRAC Institute of Governance and Development
CLEAR	Covid-19 Learning, Evidence and Research Programme in Bangladesh
DGHS	Directorate General of Health Services
GDP	gross domestic product
ICT	information and communication technology
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IRI	International Republican Institute
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NID	National Identity Documentation
PPRC	Power and Participation Research Centre
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SRHR	sexual and reproductive health and rights
UDC	Union Digital Centre

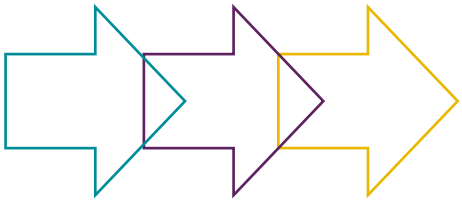


1. Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Bangladesh witnessed significant changes in citizen–state relations. These changes were triggered by several factors, including the government's push for digitalisation of citizen engagement at the local level, changes in autonomy of local government, and the civic space for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) facilitating citizen engagement in holding the state accountable (Nazneen and Aziz 2023). The state was quick in its response to the public health crisis, took emergency measures such as lockdown and relief programmes, and rolled out an effective vaccination programme with 88 per cent of the population receiving one dose of the vaccine by January 2023 (DGHS 2024; Hebbar and Shebab 2020). It addressed economic vulnerabilities through the expansion of social protection, deploying relief programmes, and targeted stimulus packages for ready-made garment workers and small- and medium-sized enterprises. The degree to which these measures were effective is still in question (Nazneen and Aziz 2023).

The Covid-19 Learning, Evidence and Research Programme in Bangladesh (CLEAR) was a two-and-a-half-year programme (2021–24) to support an evidence-informed Covid-19 response and recovery in Bangladesh. It also aimed to support increased evidence uptake among policymakers and share lessons from the Covid-19 response to better prepare for future shocks. CLEAR focused on the social and political impacts of the pandemic under the following **four broad thematic areas**, namely: (1) poverty and vulnerability; (2) service delivery, accountability, and governance; (3) rights of marginalised population and disadvantaged groups; and (4) innovations in technology and programmatic policy implementation. Changes in citizen–state relations emerged as a cross-cutting theme through the various research grants conducted under CLEAR.

In particular, this Synthesis Report makes use of the findings of five CLEAR projects, namely two related to the service delivery and accountability theme (The **Feedback State**, co-ordinated by the Accountability Research Center, Manusher Jonno Foundation, and BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD); and **Rethinking Accountability**, led by University of Bath along with CARE and Aspire to Innovate (a2i)), one from the poverty and vulnerability theme focused on the 'new poor' and multidimensional poverty (**Becoming Poor**, led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and BIGD), one under innovations that focuses on digital apps and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) (**Digital Health Platforms**, led by James P. Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University), and one led by IDS on the Chronicles of Hard Times (**Durdin-er Diaries**) that explores how the new poor navigate governance

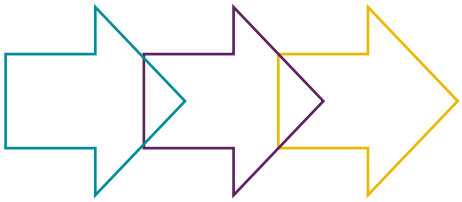


needs using various formal and informal channels.[1] Research findings from these projects lay the foundation for this synthesis. This synthesis is one of five that provide summaries of the emerging development priorities under specific themes based on the findings of all the CLEAR research grants. The Synthesis Reports formed the basis of the CLEAR end-of-programme conference in 2024, which helped shape discussion about the thematic areas at the event. The papers also connect these findings in light of the global debates on the issues and propose a tentative knowledge agenda that is relevant under the themes.

The **Feedback State** project found that the government in Bangladesh was committed to responding to citizens' needs during the pandemic. However, findings from **Durdin-er Diaries** and **Feedback State** reveal that this commitment was not reflected in people's expectations from or engagement with the State. There were mixed expectations from its citizens that the government would respond to their needs, and this differed in relation to local and central government, people's networks, and political affiliations. In some areas, respondents perceive government support to be a right, but there were residents who lacked the documentation or recognition of their citizenship rights such as in urban slums. In other areas, it was found that people do not expect much from the local government and have less trust in them than the central government, while in others there was a general lack of expectation from the state. While Roelen *et al.* (2024) and Nazneen *et al.* (2024) found that there was shame attached to seeking help from the state and relatives, the former found that households felt more shame in seeking support from relatives than from the state. Often these interactions of seeking state support were taking place at the local level, and issues with patronage and intermediation persisted, affecting people's experiences with the state. Nazneen *et al.* (2024) and Basu and Devine (2024) found that political affiliation, proximity to local authorities, and identity factors can play a role in accessing intermediaries and receiving government support. This meant that people engaged with accessing state support with varying levels of success.

Findings from **Feedback State** research also show that various accountability mechanisms were set up with new channels through which citizens could make themselves heard by government – with varying levels of success in terms of use and responsiveness, with more openness within government to listening to citizens' concerns and complaints during the pandemic (Ahmed *et al.* 2023). Issues that plagued these new mechanisms included that people were not using complaint mechanisms as they did

[1] Publications for each of these projects can be found in the references.

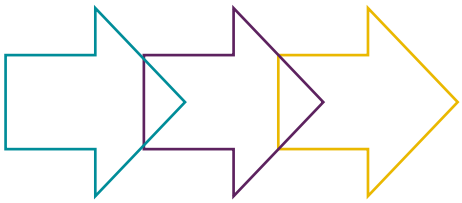


not believe it would make a difference, and the fragmented nature of accountability mechanisms; as a result, direct engagement with local authorities remained the default approach (Ahmed *et al.* 2023). How these relationships and accountability play out with the different levels of government, especially in relation to service delivery, has a continued impact, particularly for more marginalised groups. CLEAR's sister programme Covid Collective found that bureaucratic power was consolidated during the pandemic period with implications for local-level autonomy (Shahan *et al.* 2023).

Common across all studies was the use of a mixed-methods approach, with a combination of primary and secondary data, qualitative and quantitative, from digital ethnography to longitudinal surveys, qualitative panel studies, process tracing, validation workshops, and policy workshops.

In the **Becoming Poor** study, methods for data collection and analysis included: (1) five rounds of nationally representative secondary longitudinal survey data (offering a key source of information on the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic on households, coping strategies, and formal and informal support mechanisms); (2) a round of primary survey data, administered with a sub-sample of the longitudinal Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC)-BIGD survey in low-income neighbourhoods in Dhaka and Chattogram, adding an additional wave to the longitudinal data set in these two cities; and (3) primary qualitative data collection in selected low-income neighbourhoods in these two cities (Roelen *et al.* 2024).

In **Rethinking Accountability**, the team used a series of tailored policy workshops, inviting a more homogenous group of stakeholders to each: one targeting urban citizens; one targeting rural citizens; one targeting duty bearers (including members of local government, NGOs, and private sector employers); one targeting officers from the international NGO CARE; and one targeting duty bearers at one successful Union Digital Centre (UDC), Bangladesh's government one-stop shops (Basu and Devine 2024). The policy workshops were an integral part of a 12-month multidisciplinary project exploring citizens' engagement with digitised public services deployed during the Covid-19 pandemic in Bangladesh and examining the impact of the digital on the effectiveness and accountability of service delivery. The research was built around four main work packages: secondary data mapping; ethnographic dives in six locations that provided insights into the operations of two UDCs; key informant interviews with local duty bearers; and the policy workshops. To facilitate discussions in each workshop, the team deployed several techniques including small group exercises; visual mapping of the process of accessing welfare services; visual minutes to highlight emerging themes; and group

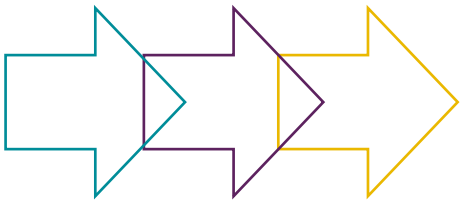


discussions to identify key citizen demands to improve accountability and trust on digitalised services.

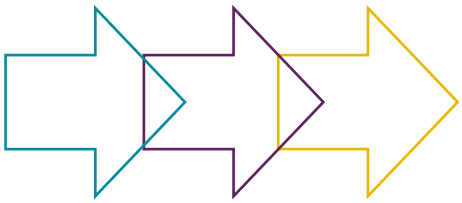
The **Feedback State** project comprised four research components aimed at maximising the benefits of interdisciplinary research and mixed methodologies, harnessing in-depth insights from multi-sited qualitative research, with the breadth of evidence enabled by a nationally representative sample survey (Ahmed *et al.* 2023). The four components were: (1) policy process tracing, which assessed national-level policy processes through which local governance reforms were implemented and mechanisms introduced to gather and respond to citizens' feedback regarding health and social protection services during the pandemic; (2) a nationally representative sample survey that gathered data about citizens' experiences with feedback and response during the pandemic; (3) a series of local-level case studies exploring these questions in locations where local governments were identified as successfully enabling citizen feedback and response during the pandemic; and (4) a transnational accountability mechanisms analysis which assessed how citizen engagement mechanisms were deployed in World Bank Covid-19 projects in Bangladesh.

To explore which governance channels were used by the new poor in their attempt to survive the pandemic and bounce back to their pre-pandemic economic status, the **Durdin-er Diaries** team used a household-level qualitative panel survey, as an iterative alternative to ethnographic studies and large-n surveys that often lack comparability and sensitivity respectively, to gather qualitative information over time (Nazneen *et al.* 2024). The study followed the trajectories of new-poor households across urban, peri-urban, and rural locations, documenting their coping strategies, constraints and lived experience of governance over several months through a series of visits and interviews. The team also conducted two rounds of interviews with selected local intermediaries, actors who play a role in households meeting their governance needs, providing community leadership, or providing services – from government officials to informal middlemen, private sector actors, local politicians, and service-providing NGOs – to triangulate household-level findings and unveil how and when the views and experiences of those in positions of authority or with service provision responsibility aligned with those of the households.

Finally, the **Digital Health Platforms** study employed a mixed-methods approach, including a quantitative survey of 829 respondents, a qualitative study consisting of 18 focus group discussions, 26 in-depth interviews, 3 key informant interviews, and digital ethnography. Once the data was processed and analysed, the study conducted a validation workshop including digital health-care providers and users to validate the emerging findings (Mitu *et al.* 2023).



This synthesis of these five projects focuses on the theme of accountability and is divided into four sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 briefly contextualises the political background and the impact of the pandemic on Bangladesh. Section 3 focuses on citizen–state relations, highlighting citizens' expectations of the state, the various accountability issues, the state level of responsiveness, the new effects of digitalisation on citizen voice, and the groups left out. Section 4 emphasises some of the implications of CLEAR findings to national and international policymaking with regards to attaining the Sustainable Development Goals, and overall development.



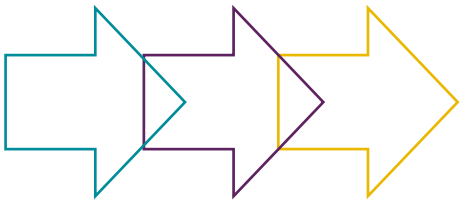
2. Context

2.1. Political context of Bangladesh

The People's Republic of Bangladesh was formed in 1972. Since then, the country has gone through periods of democracy, military rule, and hybrid regime. Between 1991 and 2008 the country had a competitive multi-party democracy with two parties alternating as the government. Since 2008, the Awami League has won every national election and formed the government. Bangladesh is now perceived to have a dominant party system since one political party has considerable political power with limited threats of opposition (Hassan and Raihan 2017; Ali, Hassan and Hossain 2021) .

Citizen–state relations in Bangladesh have changed over the last 20 years. As a part of its 2008 manifesto *Din Bodoler Sanad* (Charter of Change), the Awami League promised transformation of the relationship between citizens and the state. Some of the governance reforms that resulted from this included setting up laws and agencies to tackle corruption, provide the right to information, and strengthen protection of human rights. In addition to this, several local governance reforms were undertaken to increase engagement with frontline workers through processes such as participatory planning, participatory budgeting, public hearings, filing right-to-information applications, participation in public procurement, citizens' charter, and a whistle-blower law (Chowdhury and Panday 2018, in Chowdhury and Hossain 2022). These participatory processes have helped improve public service delivery and citizens' ability to hold public authorities accountable (Chowdhury and Hossain 2022).

Despite the efforts towards reducing corruption and increasing accountability, Bangladesh reports high corruption and poor public service performance (Jamil and Ashvik 2017, in Nazneen *et al.* 2024). Bangladesh ranked 149th out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perception Index 2023 (*The Daily Star* 2024; Transparency International 2024). Transparency International (2020) found that 72 per cent of Bangladeshis think corruption is a big problem and 24 per cent of public service users paid a bribe in the 12 months leading up to the Global Corruption Barometer 2020 survey. However, studies on Bangladesh report high levels of trust in local public institutions despite the corruption and poor public service (Mahmud 2021, in Nazneen *et al.* 2024). Jamil and Baniamin (2021) studied this puzzle and found that high authoritarian cultural orientation (ACO) explains this puzzle and submissiveness towards authorities which can lead to high trust despite poor performance. In fact, recent surveys by the International Republican Institute (IRI 2023) and The Asia Foundation and

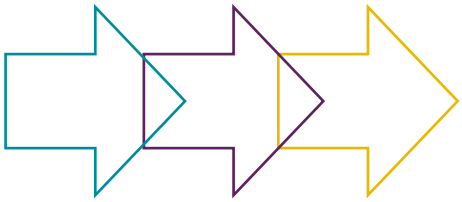


BIGD (2022) found that levels of confidence in the government to deliver social and economic development are lower than before.

2.2. Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic was a global shock that, like in other countries, disrupted Bangladesh in various ways. The pandemic was a shock to the health systems and economy, and the lockdowns disrupted education and several livelihoods. Bangladesh's gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate was over 8 per cent before the pandemic. The GDP growth rate fell to 3.45 per cent in the fiscal year 2019/20 and 6.94 per cent in the fiscal year 2020/21 (Ministry of Finance 2022, in Nazneen *et al.* 2024). Importantly, an estimated 1.6 million people fell into poverty based on the US$1.90 poverty line, of which the poorer were hit very hard (Tateno and Zoundi 2021, in Nazneen *et al.* 2024). Studies showed that urban low-income settlements were more affected compared to rural areas (Rahman *et al.* 2021, in Nazneen *et al.* 2024). Bangladesh was prompt in its response to the coronavirus: nearly 90 per cent of the population received one dose of the vaccine by early 2023, and there was overall high uptake of vaccines. However, the social protection systems were not adequately expanded to support the millions of people who fell into poverty during the pandemic (Hebbar and Shebab 2020; Nazmunnahar *et al.* 2023).

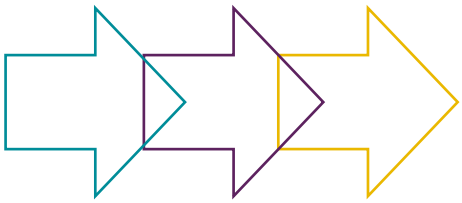
The government took several initiatives to support people. Emergency reliefs were activated, the coverage of existing social safety net programmes was increased, and new social protection schemes were launched. The Gratuitous Relief programme was one of the emergency relief programmes that distributed £8m in cash transfers, £2.7m in cash transfers for baby food, and over 201 metric tonnes of unconditional food transfers. The programme reached 75 million beneficiaries between March 2020 and June 2020 (Hebbar and Shebab 2020: 14). Two cash transfer programmes aimed at the poor and workers were introduced. However, these measures were insufficient and inadequate in helping the huge population that was affected during the crisis (Hebbar *et al.* 2021, in Nazneen *et al.* 2024).



3. Findings on citizen–state relations: expectations, accountability, and responsiveness

Accountability has been very important in international development since the 2000s, becoming a part of the 'new consensus' in international development referring to concepts of transparency, accountability, participation, and inclusion being universal features of policy statements and programmes across major powerful actors in the international development community (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014). However, scholars have debated the elusiveness and fuzziness of the concept. Accountability has been understood as being an elusive concept because of the multiple meanings it has (Bovens 2007). There is political accountability, social accountability, administrative accountability, professional accountability, corporate accountability, legal accountability, upward vs downward accountability, individual vs institutional accountability, among others based on the context, actors, and relationships involved (Bovens 2007; Fox 2022). Fox (2022) argues that accountability is frequently confused with concepts which overlap with accountability but which are not synonymous with it, such as good governance, democracy, responsiveness, and responsibility. Importantly, while accountability is understood as essential to democracy, and some argue that the terms can be used interchangeably (see Warren 2014), in practice accountability is not always visible in democracies and is therefore not a defining part of democracy. Rather, accountability can be found across regimes including in democracies and authoritarian regimes (Joshi 2023; Fox 2022).

Key in accountability relations are citizens' expectations of the state. In fact, an early understanding of accountability was that it is the management of expectations (Romzek and Dubnick 1987). Expectations that a public authority will be accountable vary from place to place and by groups as well. Due to varying contexts of institutional mechanisms for accountability, responsive public authorities, awareness of rights and accountability, and power dynamics entrenched in race, gender, caste, and class, expectations of accountability can differ (Auerbach and Kruks-Wisner 2020; Auerbach and Thachil 2021; Griffin and Flavin 2007). These expectations also play a huge role in accountability claims-making and



therefore it is important to understand them, what shapes them, and for whom.

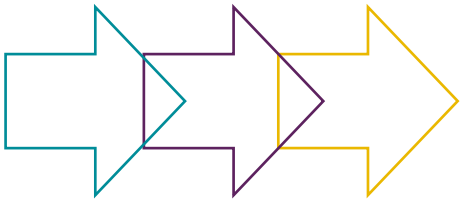
Additionally, responsiveness is not synonymous with accountability. Accountability does not always include responsiveness and conversely responsiveness does not always include accountability (Fox 2022). Government or public authorities might respond in one-off instances but not have sustained responsiveness, and sustained responsiveness does not need to include answerability and sanctions, which are critical aspects of accountability. Responsiveness is dependent on the discretion of the authorities instead of being an obligation on the part of the authority towards the people, and therefore it is important to distinguish between responsiveness and accountability (Fox 2022).

3.1. Expectations

Across the various CLEAR projects, findings on expectations from the state reveal that there was an expectation that the state should listen to citizens, that there should be increased transparency about service delivery and processes, that digitised systems should make processes easier and reduce corruption and costs, that there should be one digital identification system, and improved data security and digital access for all citizens; however, in practice the majority of the citizens did not trust the state to address the complaint and therefore did not even voice their grievances.

The **Feedback State** found that there was a generally positive appraisal of the government's efforts to gather feedback from citizens, unlike in the past (Hossain 2022a, 2022b). However, this belief in the state's willingness to listen was not matched by practical experiences of reporting complaints and expecting the state to address the problem. The study observed a cognitive dissonance amongst citizens wherein they reported believing that the state listens to citizen feedback and responds to it, but acted in a way which demonstrated that they believed providing feedback or airing grievances would be futile. In effect there appears to be a contradictory set of expectations held by citizens on accountability. The positive appraisal of the state was found across citizens, state officials, political representatives, and development partners who approved of the aspiration of the state to systematically listen to citizens. Data on complaints revealed that only a small portion of those who had grievances took action to complain. Those who did not act on the grievance revealed that they did not do so because it would be futile; and smaller numbers provided reasons such as that they were unaware of the processes or did not have people to complain to.

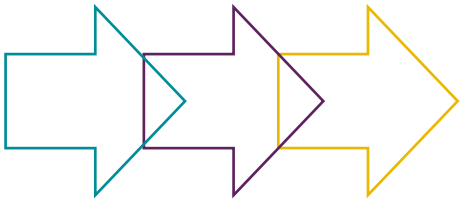
The **Feedback State** also noted a shift in expectations of the state where a top-down approach to communication was previously expected, such as



the state broadcasting to inform citizens, and now citizens expected the state to take steps towards listening and responding to bottom-up communication by the citizens towards the state. Their analysis of the use of the 333 hotline, which was set up in 2018 for people seeking help or information about government services, revealed that during the pandemic, more than seeking information, people called the hotline to complain about public services across different agencies (Ahmed *et al.* 2023; Hossain 2023).

Rethinking Accountability and **Durdin-er Diaries** found that overall levels of trust in bureaucratic and political practices were low. This confirms findings from other surveys (see IRI 2023; The Asia Foundation and BIGD 2022). Respondents in **Rethinking Accountability** reported lack of transparency in distribution of essential services and goods at the local level. Respondents believed that digital systems could work if the people running it were honest and if people mobilised for accountability; however, respondents reported that they did not expect either of the scenarios to be true. This reveals that citizens did not expect the state to have honest officers and neither did they expect other citizens or themselves to engage in organising against corruption. Respondents also did not expect the digital services to be free of error and corruption and wished for the state to keep manual records to verify digital activities and transactions to limit corruption. Migrants particularly faced challenges in having their expectations met. They would have to visit local offices multiple times and make informal payments for these services only to be told that since they were migrants they were supposed to go to their 'home' jurisdiction to receive these welfare services or collect documents. Their research found that households that were wrongly excluded from the list of recipients of welfare programmes would not approach the Chairman to correct the list due to expectations of not being allowed to meet the Chairman or the elected member. In one case, out of fear they did not approach their elected member because their experience suggested the member could ask the police or local gangs to deal with them, risking violence (Basu and Devine 2024).

The **Durdin-er Diaries** found that new-poor households did not expect the local government to help them, especially if they were not affiliated with the ruling party or were not a part of their network. This reveals that people's expectations of the state regarding improved services and grievance redressal is shaped by their relationship with the local government and the political identities at play. Additionally, several new-poor households expected the local government to not distribute social protection fairly. However, while households reported low expectations from the local government, they did not have similar expectations from the national government. They believed that the national government was



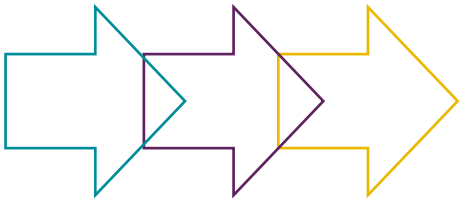
distributing social protection and funding it, but it was the local government which was failing them (Nazneen *et al.* 2024).

Across the three studies, it was found that new-poor households did not trust and expect much from the government, particularly the local government, countering recent findings that show higher levels of trust in local government as compared to central government when opportunities for voice in national government are limited in majoritarian systems (Fitzgerald and Wolak 2016; Hegewald 2024). New-poor households believed that the local government was not honest and indulged in corruption. Furthermore, they believed that networks and political alliances were important in accessing social protection.

3.2. Accountability

Overall, CLEAR findings reveal that while accountability mechanisms might be present on paper, these mechanisms are highly fragmented with few people airing their grievances through these. A small minority of citizens used hotlines, and an even smaller proportion used online systems to report complaints. Also, when citizens demanded answers from the state it was often as individuals, with almost no forms of collective action found in demanding accountability. As detailed in the previous section, citizens have expectations from the state, but these expectations might not include trusting the state to be accountable. Additionally, when these expectations are not met, they did not mobilise or organise themselves to demand that their expectations be met.

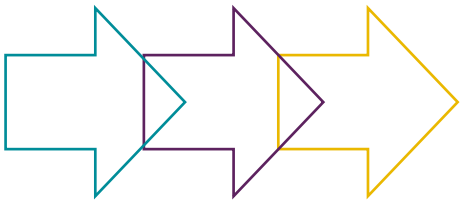
The **Rethinking Accountability** project, which studied the digitalisation of social protection during the pandemic, found that there was an overall increase in charges, rent, and tariffs, both legal and illegal. On the one hand, some respondents reported that digitalisation has reduced opportunities for rent-seeking, corruption and forgery, such as when collecting cash stipends, linking National Identity Documentation (NID) to prepare digitised property sale deeds, and cash transfers to beneficiaries. On the other hand, several other respondents revealed that rent-seeking behaviour was prevalent within these new digital structures as well, particularly when citizens were less aware of the process. Often these included arbitrary charges at multiple UDCs in addition to the usual costs expected to access these services or to ‘speed up’ the process. One common example of these extra costs was the correction of errors on government documents such as birth certificates or NIDs, where officials would seek fees for each step of the process which would be higher than the official rates.



Both UDCs, set up to ease access to digital government services for those needing support, and local computer shops offering similar services began charging fees to help people navigate the online portals and systems set up by the government. For those seeking social protection, the greatest expense occurred at the point of selection of beneficiaries, which determined inclusion to the list of beneficiaries prepared by the Councillor and local members. The above experiences suggest that in several instances, digitalisation of the state and social protection allowed for malpractices that existed before digitalisation to continue instead of solving them. Experiences of migrants also revealed that despite them expecting services from local officials, they were often turned away and told to go to their 'home' jurisdiction to receive welfare or documents. And even when did go home, they had to pay steep bribes to receive welfare. However, despite these grievances, respondents of the **Rethinking Accountability** study, local or migrant, did not report any complaints or action towards holding the officials accountable.

The **Feedback State** found through their analysis of grievance redressal mechanisms during pandemic that there were a huge number of feedback mechanisms in place both pre-pandemic and set up during the pandemic, but they were highly fragmented, making it hard for citizens to report grievances and for the government to make use of the feedback. The integrated system for feedback and complaints handling by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) was an effective mechanism for grievance redressal. However, social protection does not have a similarly well-integrated and effective mechanism for grievance redressal. The study found that complaints and grievances reported were a fraction of the total population, approximately 12,500 individual complaints in the first nine months of 2023 out of a total population of 170 million. Challenges in seeking accountability and providing feedback included a lack of awareness of formal procedures for registering complaints, lack of faith in the complaint being addressed, and lastly problem-solving being attempted through in-person contact with local officials and political representatives rather than online.

On the issue of voicing grievances, the **Feedback State** found that few households act on them. When they do air a grievance, it is usually in the form of direct feedback to the local frontline worker or political representatives. While 30 per cent of their respondents reported facing problems in the vaccination process, only 10 per cent of those who reported facing problems voiced them to authorities. Of those voicing problems, less than 1 per cent used the hotline or other online facilities such as Facebook to voice them; instead, most gave direct feedback to local authorities. Frontline workers reported receiving complaints and



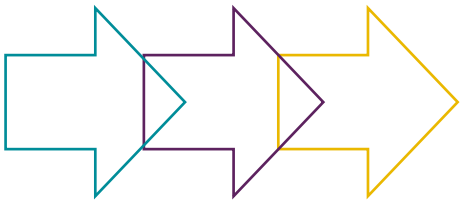
addressing them, and local community members reported complaining and the problems being addressed. However, these grievance redressals might not be captured in these mechanisms and systems, and therefore not contribute to the policy feedback loop, as the complaint is resolved informally. While the overall number of people voicing their grievances to authorities was low, almost two-thirds of those who complained reported that their issues were resolved.

Citizens faced various challenges related to demanding accountability; the three main challenges as per the **Feedback State** included being unaware of which systems to use to file a complaint, distrust in the mechanism to result in resolving the problems, and when they do file complaints they do so in-person with local officials and political representatives instead of through digital nationwide systems. The study also found that there were many grievance mechanisms in place, several of them digital that came up during the pandemic, but as a result the entire system was fragmented, making it hard for responsible actors to take appropriate action in response.

Confirming the finding of the **Feedback State** that people did not voice grievances, the **Durdin-er Diaries** found no instances of people seeking accountability from the government. There were no instances of protests or individuals using any grievance redressal mechanisms to report corruption or report the injustice of them being denied social protection due to them being politically affiliated with an opposition party.

3.3. Responsiveness

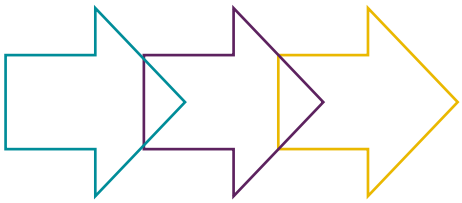
A reaction to the urgency and uncertainty of the pandemic was the relative higher relevance of feedback within the Bangladeshi government, with government actors more aware of gathering and responding to such feedback than in the past. Yet, there is still a long way to fully utilise feedback mechanisms due to bottlenecks from both the citizen side and the state side. For instance, the predominant and more trustworthy modes of communication for both citizens and government actors when feeding back on issues related to health and social protection services continued to be informal, quasi-formal, and face-to-face. According to many citizens, government focused on broadcasting rather than listening to citizens (Ahmed *et al.* 2023). On the other hand, district-level and *upazila*-level (sub-unit of a district) administrators said that, while it is possible to register complaints online (on grievance redressal portals), usually these portals are choked with false and ineligible complaints, making the online procedure dysfunctional. They spoke about staff, resources, and supply falling well short of demand as the main reasons for not being able to deliver social safety nets in a consistent manner (Basu and Devine 2024).



The **Feedback State** research team notes that during the pandemic and due to the nature of the crisis, policy decision-making became more centralised, reducing the possibility for a participatory process of citizen consultation or engagement. On a positive note, the pandemic pushed the government to use more digital and online modes of operation, in effect changing the organisational culture and working practices within the government. This change contributed to speeding up processes of internal information-sharing across levels of government which, potentially, can make citizen feedback travel rapidly, easily, and in aggregate forms from the frontline to the centre (Ahmed *et al.* 2023; Basu and Devine 2024). A good example of this improvement was visible in the success case of the Surokkha application, where people registered for the vaccine.

According to the **Rethinking Accountability** team, Bangladesh is one of the few governments (along with the Philippines, Indonesia, Kenya, and Brazil) which has renewed its policy commitments to further digitalise social protection provision. Aspirations to modernise social security provision and seamlessly bring 'government services to the doorstep of citizens' (Planning Commission 2020: 96), however, are set in a deeply rooted patronage system, particularly in local government structures (Lewis and Hossain 2022) and increasingly critical to determining political authority and distribution of resources locally (Jackman and Maîtrot 2021). While the digitisation of records made the application process less time-consuming, if respondents have to engage local officials to help amend incorrect entries on essential documents, then the process becomes exacting and time-consuming as it often involves multiple visits to local government offices and a lot of waiting: 'they do not value our time' was the most often used quote by citizens. While the expansion of mobile phone payments has reduced rent-seeking opportunities when collecting cash stipends, other arbitrary charges at multiple UDCs seem to have increased. For instance, charges for correcting errors on a birth certificate or NIDs can be exacted at every stage of the process and are almost always higher than the official rates. This means people end up paying additional 'speed money' to get things done quickly.

There is a set of new intermediaries between citizens and the state in the form of local computer shops and UDCs, making a business by helping citizens navigate the complex digitised process of applications in exchange for a fee (Basu and Devine 2024). As public trust in formal feedback mechanisms weakens and citizens prefer to either seek help directly from local government officials or use informal channels, feedback mechanisms have limited effectiveness (Nazneen *et al.* 2024). Several UDCs have evolved as a rent-sharing space for a set of actors, such as party cadres, local government officials, and computer operators. The UDCs that work effectively have clear arrangements in place for rent-sharing. Despite

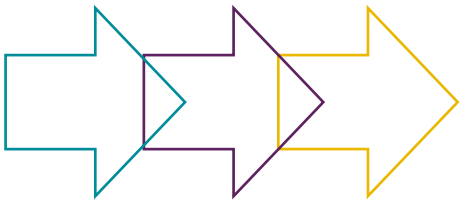


changes in the formal systems, poorer citizens are relying on informal channels and practices to access state services and assistance, and the spaces at the local level for citizen engagement are shifting rapidly (Nazneen *et al.* 2024).

The **Rethinking Accountability** team highlights that the success stories at the local level are based on good coordination across several actors, combined with a mix of using analogue and digital practices. For instance, Gazipur District's successful response to the pandemic was mainly down to the coordination between government, NGOs, and the private sector through health care, food relief, and awareness-raising initiatives. Along with that, the digital initiatives launched during the pandemic such as the Surokkha app and health awareness programmes worked because of the footwork of NGOs and private employers who carried out most of the field-level handholding that enabled marginalised and vulnerable groups to access these services. In other words, the digital would not have worked if not for the analogue coordinated grass-roots support mobilised by local duty bearers. In another example, the reasons for success of a UDC was due to three factors, namely the high coordination between the representatives of the *upazila* office, the Union Parishad office, and the local elected leaders (with regular meetings and information shared between them); the transparency in services offered (with all charges published outside the office); and the enterprising nature of the UDC providing different public and private services (including banking). Key in all this was the role of the Upazila Nirbahi Officer, having good connections with the leadership at Aspire to Innovate (a2i).

3.4. New issues with e-governance

Digitalisation of social protection and government services is often framed as a solution to corruption and manual errors, but findings from CLEAR reveal that it comes with its own share of problems while not solving the problems it is expected to solve. Digitalisation of government services comes with problems related to accountability such as lack of transparency on processes or rent-seeking behaviour and corruption in accessing digital services. In some cases, rent-seeking in accessing digital services costs more than the costs incurred under the older analogue approach. **Rethinking Accountability** found that corruption is more likely when people are less aware of the digital processes, so improved digital literacy and awareness of government processes is important to reduce occurrence of rent-seeking and corruption. As highlighted by the **Feedback State**, the grievance redressal mechanisms are highly fragmented, which leads to confusion on both ends with citizens being unsure of which mechanism to use and the state being unable to see all

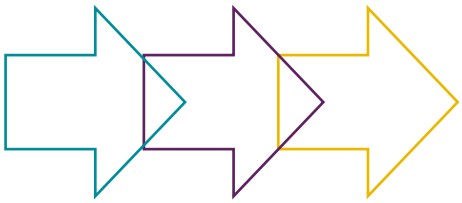


the grievances in one place, address them systematically, and keep account of the total number of grievances resolved. Without the necessary digital infrastructure and ecosystem which allows everyone to freely access the services in an informed way, citizens will be dependent on intermediaries and rent-seeking actors to help them access these services. Another issue highlighted through clear research is the concern highlighted by most researchers over data security (Mitu *et al.* 2023; Basu and Devine 2024; Ahmed *et al.*). There are big transparency and accountability concerns, with many citizens unaware who can access their data, and therefore the need for a complaint monitoring system and polices focused on data protection (Mitu *et al.* 2023). While digitalisation received a boost during the pandemic, data security needs to be strengthened to prevent corruption and misuse.

3.5. Key groups missing out

The **Rethinking Accountability** research team highlights that one of the most common observations of their fieldwork was that in every research site there was always a group systematically excluded from welfare services and emergency relief during the pandemic. Respondents pointed out that their exclusion was linked to the fact that they had poor relations or connections with local political authorities or that local leaders did not care for them. Some of the key groups that appear to fall through the cracks of state responsiveness include the new poor (Nazneen *et al.* 2024), urban low-income residents (Roelen *et al.* 2024), local migrant workers (Basu and Devine 2024), digital illiterates (Mitu *et al.* 2023), and those unaware of accountability mechanisms (Ahmed *et al.* 2023).

The new poor are overlooked by the state in the support they need to recover to their pre-pandemic economic status. While some have networks which enable them to receive support through intermediaries and the government, many face issues of shame and honour in seeking support. Another group suffering from social norms are residents of urban low-income neighbourhoods, experiencing stigmatisation and discrimination especially when moving outside of their neighbourhoods to access services. Unable to enrol their children in schools, under constant surveillance of the police, and turned away at public institutions when being honest about where they live, many feel like second-rate citizens. Though emergency relief was available in urban areas during the pandemic, government social protection was patchy and difficult to access. Like the case of the new poor, having the right connection and networks was paramount to access relief provided by community leaders and government during the pandemic. One group that struggled to access these local networks were local migrant workers. As migrants, they

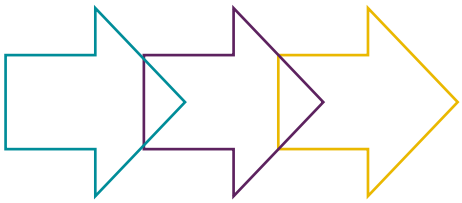


are not local voters and as such have limited value to local politicians. Generally, they felt stranded between local governments in their home villages and their place of work, particularly because processes being only partly digitised meant they had to travel back to their home villages for essential documents and had to pay additional 'speed money' to get things done quickly. People who are digitally illiterate are likely to be dependent on intermediaries to help them access digital services provided by the government, which increases their vulnerability to corruption and paying more than the government-mandated prices for accessing these services. Finally, there are those unaware of accountability mechanisms both because of a lack of awareness or clarity regarding which mechanisms to use for what type of demand, as well as due to the fragmented nature of the mechanisms in place, the lack of trust built by the government in these systems, and the people working to resolve the issues.

4. National and global implications of findings

4.1. Sustainable Development Goals

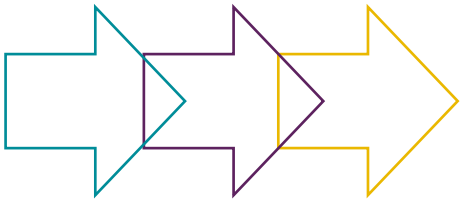
The longer-term impact of accountability and citizen–state relations is very relevant to Bangladesh's pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as it is related towards progress in several different goals. CLEAR studies highlight numerous implications across many of the SDGs, in particular Goals 3 (Good health and well-being), 10 (Reduced inequalities), 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions), and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). A better understanding of how national and local government is operating and accountable to its citizens, especially the most marginalised, is an important addition to evidence-informed policymaking in the country to reduce inequalities. Bangladeshi citizens have expectations that the government listens to them and addresses their concerns; however, in its current state, accountability mechanisms are not adequate for a just Bangladesh. Importantly, reliance on centralised and digital systems to improve accountability might be counterproductive since several citizens rely on in-person communication of grievances. Additionally, as **Rethinking Accountability** have found, digital systems do not solve problems faced in analogue methods but instead mirror them, with people reporting corruption and rent-seeking behaviour from officials and institutional systems supporting the digital government platforms. Another challenge is that grievance redressal mechanisms are too fragmented for citizens to use and for the state to get the macro picture of grievance redressal (Ahmed *et al*. 2023). A positive aspect of accountability in Bangladesh is that there is a reasonably well-functioning system for health which people are using to report problems in the health systems (Ahmed *et al*. 2023). Reporting of such problems and resolving the issues could improve health and wellbeing overall. **Durdin-er Diaries** found that there were high levels of distrust in the local government in terms of solving problems, although the **Feedback State** project reports that in hypothetical situations people would prefer to go to the local government and officials rather than online systems or a hotline. For increased accountability, the state needs to build citizens' trust in central and local government, both in rural and urban settings.



4.2. Lessons for development and handling crises: policy in low- and middle-income countries

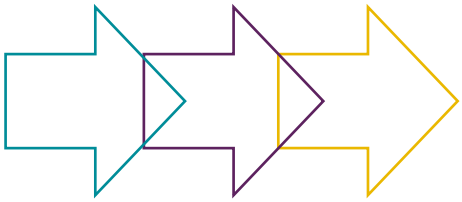
As the research team of the **Feedback State** notes, the Bangladesh state has a strong record of learning from crises (Ahmed *et al.* 2023). The government derives its credibility from the claims it makes with respect to its performance in delivering development and sustaining democratic participation at the local level. Bangladesh has been a lead player in making significant gains in the delivery of health, nutrition, social protection, agriculture, and reducing poverty. In the post-pandemic period though, sustaining these gains requires effective governance and citizen engagement. With the rise of a dominant party system and the current economic crisis, whether Bangladesh stays on course is open to debate. While people have built up 'distress resilience' (PPRC–BIGD 2020) they are experiencing a steep depletion of savings and assets (Nazneen *et al.* 2024; Roelen *et al.* 2024) – they are coping, not thriving. Three main lessons can be taken from the work of the various CLEAR projects, namely on better information and communication technology (ICT) integration, strengthening frontline face-to-face systems, and improving coordination.

First, when it comes to ICT integration, as **Rethinking Accountability** notes, the policy prospects for harnessing ICT for poverty reduction and resilience depends far more on the political dynamics of resource distribution and citizen–state engagement than on technology alone (Basu and Devine 2024). On the one hand, Bangladesh has seen very positive changes in disaster response through the use of digital, where it is possible to rapidly aggregate data on impact of natural hazards on households on a range of indicators and feed this back to all stakeholders within 24 hours. On the other hand, a key challenge for the country is the short lifespan of apps, which are developed for specific programmes but remain with few subscribers and are often phased out after a project ends. Part of this challenge is linked to ongoing efforts to persuade government ministries to integrate these digital applications, to share data between NGOs and relevant ministries, and to create a unified system for citizen feedback and response (Ahmed *et al*. 2023; Basu and Devine 2024). To a certain extent, the 333 hotline already plays the role of a unified system for feedback and response, but it still needs strengthening. The **Digital Health Platforms**, while mentioning that there is a list of existing policies and programmes (e.g., the National ICT Policy 2018, the Digital Security Act 2020, and the Smart Bangladesh ICT Masterplan 2024), recommends in fact to create an effective grievance redress mechanism, to ensure transparent monitoring (Mitu *et al.* 2023).



A second important lesson is the need to strengthen frontline face-to-face systems for receiving and handling feedback (Ahmed *et al*. 2023; Roelen *et al*. 2024), as most of the citizen feedback is still conveyed through face-to-face interaction with trusted local authorities or state actors (Basu and Devine 2024; Nazneen *et al*. 2024). The government needs to invest in supervision and management of the feedback systems, as well as dealing with power differentials, so that those responsible for responsiveness feel that they must act. There is a need for stronger investment in capacities for response – citizens may get frustrated and lose faith in the system if they are invited to give their views, but their concerns go unaddressed (Ahmed *et al*. 2023). Not only there is a need for a digital upskilling for health-care providers through training programmes to enhance their digital proficiency, to ensure that they stay up to date on emerging technological advances in health care (Mitu *et al*. 2023), but also a need to increase awareness among frontline workers to reduce stigma and discrimination of people in low-income neighbourhoods (Roelen *et al*. 2024).

Finally, there needs to be an enabling environment for civil society organisations to engage constructively with the state in ensuring accountability works. As seen in the cases highlighted by the **Rethinking Accountability** team, success in interventions at the local level depends on strong coordination between all actors, including local government, NGOs, and the private sector (Basu and Devine 2024). According to the **Feedback State**, the state also needs to partner with citizen groups to raise awareness and support participation, as successful citizen feedback systems need organised civic groups to support citizens in their efforts to be heard (Ahmed *et al*. 2023).



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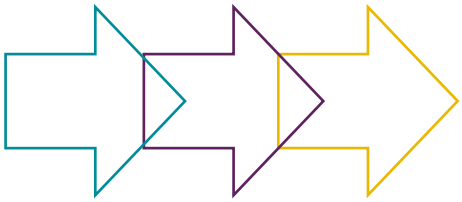

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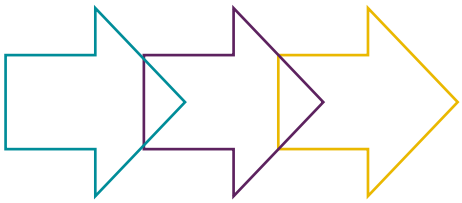

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