



PUBLIC HEARING AS A TOOL OF BUREAUCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY: A STUDY ON FIELD-LEVEL OFFICES IN BANGLADESH | Md. Morshed Alam, Ph.D., Md. Majedul Islam, Ph.D.

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Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre  
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This research report is submitted to the BPATC authority to fulfil the researchers' professional obligation to meet a decision taken by its research committee in its 57<sup>th</sup> meeting held on 3 November 2020.



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## DECLARATION

The two researchers have contributed to this report in the following ways. They can use the contents from their respective chapters without permission from the other. However, none can use the other's contents for any purpose without having his written permission.

**Md. Morshed Alom, Ph.D.**, has partly contributed to this report's first chapter on introduction. He alone has written three chapters. These chapters are the third chapter on methodology, the fourth chapter on findings, and the fifth chapter on discussion and conclusion. He preserves exclusive rights to the chapters he has contributed alone. Therefore, he has the exclusive rights to making publications using the contents from his three chapters.

**Md. Majedul Islam, Ph.D.**, has partly contributed to this report's first chapter on introduction. He alone has written one chapter, which is the second chapter on literature review. He preserves exclusive rights to his chapter. Therefore, he has the exclusive rights to making publications using the contents from his chapter on literature review.

## ABSTRACT

According to the accountability literature, an accountability relationship entails two parties. One party involves the principle or the forum that holds the other party—called an agent or actor—accountable. From a country or the macro perspective, the citizens represented by their lawmakers in the parliament constitute the principal, and the bureaucrats paid from the citizens' taxes are the agent. This principal-agent accountability relationship has been ignored in the micro perspective, i.e., at the organizational level. At this level, the public administration has developed hierarchical mechanisms and third party auditing for accountability relationships. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) in Bangladesh has regularly conducted public hearings at the field-level administrative units since 2014 to improve public service delivery by addressing the grievances of the citizens. The ACC brought the service providers in these hearings to answer the questions of the service seekers face to face. This study was an attempt to see the accountability effect of the ACC's public hearings. Traditionally, the public hearing had been seen as a tool to gather citizens' opinions for making governmental decisions. The imperative for this study came from a need to understand the accountability effect of public hearings. The study specifically aimed to explore the citizens' expectations from the public hearings they had attended, describe the public hearing's effect on these expectations, and on bureaucratic accountability.

The study followed a grounded theory approach. Citizens who participated in the public hearings of the ACC constituted the core group of the respondents of this study. In addition, public officials and civil society members were also interviewed. The researchers purposively chose ten public hearing locations from seven administrative divisions out of the eight covering the geographical spread of the country. Purposively selected 43 complainants were interviewed qualitatively over the telephone. The interview transcriptions produced 40,945 words. Codes developed from the transcripts produced patterns and themes which were arranged in line with the three specific objectives of the study.

The interviewees had complained in the public hearing sessions mostly against the service providers of field-level land, health, education, electricity, and social security-related offices. The complaints included individual and public problems. Among the complainants, 60% reported their individual problems, 30% reported public problems, while 10% reported both types of problems. Fifty-four per cent of the individual problems and 23% of the public problems were solved after complaining in the public hearings. Seventy-five per cent of the interviewees who reported both individual and public problems reported that the reported problems were solved. The interviewees, irrespective of the solution to their problems, opined that the public hearings were effective. It bolstered their confidence and enhanced trust in the accountability mechanism. The citizens who had voiced public problems in the hearings did not pursue remedies after complaining. Personal benefits motivated complainants to pursue remedies to personal problems. The hearing event had impacted the relationships between service providers and service seekers by improving them but temporarily. The positive change in the behaviour of the field-level bureaucrats faded when they sensed the occasionality of the accountability event. The public hearing suffered some other limitations. The publicity was limited to the vicinity of the public hearing locations. The vast hinterland of the concerned administrative units had remained out of the publicity of the event. Some complainants faced social and bureaucratic hazards after complaining to the public hearings. The ACC could not protect them from harassment. The relative power positions of the different actors of the accountability relationship had unreasonably affected the outcome of the public hearings. Some vulnerable and poor complainants could not use the accountability mechanism to fulfil their expectations because of their relatively weak positions in society.

This research contributed to the accountability literature by examining the accountability effect of public hearings. The past research studied it as a tool for getting citizens' input in government decision-making. This study found that public hearings can be used as an accountability tool to benefit the service seekers of the field-level offices. The ACC's public hearings brought the field-level bureaucrats and their aggrieved service seekers face to face and obligated the service providers to answer the questions of the service seekers before the public. The ACC needs to strengthen the mechanism by

addressing several issues. Firstly, publicity of the public hearings needed broader coverage so that the entire population of an administrative unit knew about the events. The public hearing was a new concept to the people who needed to be familiarized with the tool's effectiveness. Citizens who participated in the event knew about its benefits. Secondly, the frequency of holding public hearings needed to be increased. The bureaucrats had positively changed their behaviours towards the service seekers after holding a public hearing. However, they reverted to their usual practices as the event was not held anymore. Thirdly, the ACC needed more and intense follow-ups on the decisions regarding the vulnerable and the poor. Some decisions for the vulnerable and the poor were unclear and not well communicated to the concerned stakeholders and had remained unimplemented. Future researchers can focus on how different offices engage with the ACC in making the public hearings effective.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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The Researchers

February 2022



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## ABBREVIATIONS

AC	Assistant Commissioner
ACAD	Advanced Course on Administration and Development
ACC	Anti-Corruption Commission
BPATC	Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre
BRTA	Bangladesh Road Transportation Authority
BRC	BPATC Research Committee
CD	Cabinet Division
CPC	Corruption Prevention Committee
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DIP	Department of Immigration and Passport
GOB	Government of Bangladesh
GRS	Grievance Redress System
IFB	Islamic Foundation Bangladesh
KII	Key Informant Interview
NGO	Non-Government Organization
NIS	National Integrity Study
PIO	Project Implementation Officer
RAJUK	Rajdhani Unnayan Kartipakkha
REB	Rural Electrification Board
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SSC	Secondary School Certificate
TIB	Transparency International Bangladesh
UNCAC	United Nations Convention Against Corruption
UNO	Upazila Nirbahi Officer

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 BACKGROUND

A public hearing organized by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) is a formal meeting attended by service providers and service seekers, where the latter gets an opportunity to express their grievances and the former addresses them. It is considered a social accountability tool to improve service provisions and combat corruption by creating social accountability of service providers. The rationality of holding a public hearing lies in addressing administrative injustice. A service seeker may become aggrieved not only by the rent-seeking behaviour of service providers but also because of other causes relating to service seeking. A public hearing session is supposed to provide the service seekers with an opportunity to make the service providers accountable to the public. The ACC got the authority to organize public hearings from the Cabinet Division through a circular issued on June 5 in 2014, which were expected to improve integrity and prevent corruption in the public offices (NIS 2017). The ACC organized the first public hearing in 2014 with the help of Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB). So far, ACC had conducted 140 public hearings across the country when this study was conducted.

The ACC gets support from its Corruption Prevention Committees (CPC), working at the district and Upazilla levels in organising public hearings. Such committees work for creating awareness among citizens. The ACC requests the concerned Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) to publicly advertise the event before it actually happens so that people at large are informed. It can be argued that citizens, aggrieved by decisions of service-providing offices, attend such public hearings with a view to lodging complaints with the organisers and expecting remedies. These arrangements attempt to bring accountability in public offices through citizen engagement. These events are expected to empower citizens because they remove the asymmetry of information between the

service seekers and the service providers, which helps them with a better bargaining position. The organising authority invites relevant public officials of an administrative unit to face the citizens of the same locality. The system allows the citizens to question their officials face to face regarding their grievances generated by seeking services from the public offices.

The Five Year Strategic Plan of 2017 - 2021 of ACC highlighted the importance of public hearings in ensuring corruption-free public service delivery (CD 2014). Bangladesh ratified the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) to combat corruption effectively. The convention stipulated that state parties should ensure participation of society (Article 13) and public reporting (Article 10) to curb corruption. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 also urges countries to set agenda to reduce corruption and bribery (Goal 16.5) and develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions (Goal 16.6).

Generally, the public hearing is described as a tool for generating citizens' views in governmental decision-making. Some scholars describe public hearings as a weak method of citizen participation. Cole & Caputo (1984), who studied public hearings in the American context as a mechanism of citizen participation, found that although the mechanism is aimed at changing governmental behaviour so that governmental units respond to citizens' needs and refrain from arbitrary use of power, it did the little effect on the pattern of such behaviour. Agencies do public hearings to comply with the law. These are done late in the decision-making process as a formality to satisfy minimum legal requirements (Buttny 2010). Thus they are mainly ceremonial rather than substantive events (Topal 2009). They can have important issues for citizens, but they are not enough as mechanisms of citizen participation (Checkoway 1981).

Although studies reveal a minor contribution of public hearings as a method of citizen participation, "one major goal (of citizen participation) has been the forging at all levels of a more accountable, more responsive, more democratic government, especially in administrative and bureaucratic activities" (Cole & Caputo 1984, p.414). Therefore, public hearings can be used to serve a variety of objectives regarding improvement of

governance. Cole & Caputo's (1984) study concluded that participation in public hearings might bring positive consequences for the participating citizens—a better and more informed citizenry.

Public officials sometimes indulge in corruption because of their self-interest. Supervisors sometimes fail to detect those deviances for the information asymmetry among them. Thus, social accountability tools can help reduce information asymmetry between policy-makers or supervisors and public officials so that policy-makers can detect public officials' deviances and thereby make them accountable. Several tools have been practised worldwide to convalesce goods and services from a decline by building accountability of service providers through civic engagement. They include public hearings, report card surveys, face public and social audits. The ACC has been regularly carrying out public hearings since December 2014. However, its effectiveness and impact on bureaucratic accountability have not been studied with rigour. From this perspective, the current study laid its focus on the accountability dimension of public hearings in the Bangladesh context.

## **1.2 OBJECTIVE**

The ACC had organized public hearings at the Upazila and district levels with the participation of the service seekers of the field-level offices. The ACC's objectives were to address the complaints of the service seekers to enhance service quality and prevent corruption. The underlying assumption was to provide the service seekers with an accountability forum at the field level of public administration. Therefore, the study's main objective was to describe the accountability effect of the ACC's public hearings in the field-level public bureaucracy by building a grounded theory.

The specific objectives were:

1. To explore the nature of the complaints made to the public hearings;
2. To describe the consequences of the public hearings; and

3. To explore the public hearings' relations with bureaucratic accountability.

### **1.3 RATIONALE**

The ACC works to empower citizens to prevent corruption, and thereby the service delivery systems can improve (Ahmed 2017). This agency also undertakes follow-up actions to know the effects of public hearings (Ahmed 2017). For this reason, conducting research works to assess the effectiveness of public hearings is needed. On the other hand, institutionalizing the public hearing tool in public service delivery is also essential. Identification of the challenges and impacts of public hearings can help the ACC eradicate corruption.

So far, the ACC had conducted public hearings at field level offices incorporating the land office, sub-registrar's office, Rural Electrification Board (REB) office, and central offices such as Rajdhani Unnayan Kartipakkha (RAJUK) or the capital city development authority, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), and Department of Immigration and Passport (DIP). To what extent these public hearings successfully curbed corruption, minimized public harassment, and improved public services needed to be examined.

Worldwide there is a dearth of research works on public hearings as a tool of accountability mechanisms. Few studies on public hearing (e.g. Buttny 2010, Topal 2009, Lando 2003, Ebdon 2002) are available in other contexts. Only a few studies, such as Alam et al. (2017) and Ahmed (2017), have been conducted on this issue in the context of Bangladesh. Alam et al.'s (2017) study was based on very few cases. The structured survey they had conducted with complainants could not be done with all the participants. Therefore, a more detailed and in-depth study to assess the effectiveness of public hearings was justified.

The study generated knowledge about public hearings' effect regarding accountability in the context of Bangladesh. It related the findings with the existing



theories of accountability. Moreover, the findings of this study might help the ACC in designing its corruption prevention strategies.

#### **1.4 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS**

Public hearings organized by the ACC to hold public bureaucrats accountable came within the purview of this study. However, not all such hearings were included. Public hearings, which were meant to be for frontline public offices, were included in the study. The study covered the public hearings organized by the ACC until March 2020 as the research population. The research participants comprised the participants of these public hearings. They included service seekers and public officials. For attaining the objectives of this study, it also included public officials involved in the agencies, both organizers of the hearings and as parties to the concerned accountability problems. The study covered public hearings organized for field-level offices. Upazila and district-level hearings were purposively selected from seven divisions of the country. It looked into the effects of the ACC's public hearings in holding the public bureaucrats accountable.

#### **1.5 ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT**

The second chapter reviews the limited literature on public hearings. The third chapter describes the methodology followed in this research. The fourth chapter presents and analyses the findings. The findings are arranged under three sections that correspond to the three specific objectives of the study. The categories and the sub-categories relevant to the three objectives are placed in the three sections. The fifth section offers a discussion on the findings and concludes the report.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter provides a review of the literature on public hearings. The literature describes public hearings as a tool of engaging citizens in public issues. The objective is to get citizens' inputs in government planning. Pavlycheva (2017) described public hearings as a popular platform where citizens participate in solving important social issues. These are good tools for public participation and bureaucratic accountability. However, the objectives of the hearings are not always achieved, many problems exist, and expectations are often not fulfilled (Baker et al. 2005). Middendorf and Busch (1997) mentioned that communication is mostly one way in a public hearing, citizen engagement is poor, and public input is controlled. Farkas (2013) also pointed out that the public has access to the public hearings, but their input is controlled and restricted. Lowndes et al. (1998) pointed out a lack of awareness and access to information about participation, which is a limitation of public hearings. Another shortcoming is that most of the hearings can attract a small number of people, probably due to peoples' lack of trust and confidence in public officials. They may assume that their input does not make a difference, or they believe that the officials do not value people's thinking (Ebdon 2002). Participants in the study conducted by King et al. (1998) indicated that they like public hearing, but the way it is being arranged has a problem. Moreover, conflict and confrontation may occur due to citizens' lack of trust in government officials. According to Elliot and Smith (2007), public hearings often do not consider contextual factors. Instead, it directs attention too narrowly. For this reason, public hearing sometimes fails to fulfil expectations, enable participation and make radical changes.

Citizens' lack of interest in public issues is another problem (Davis 2000). Attracting and engaging younger citizens, females, and ethnic/indigenous minorities have also been challenging (Lowndes et al. 1998). According to Midden (1995), in Europe, participation differs based on gender (men participate more than women), age (young and elderly have less participation) and education (more participation by the educated

people). Even participation was reported low on critical health-related issues that organizers widely publicized. Government officials often face challenges with involving media; they try to communicate in an objective and nonsensational way and try to highlight the importance of the issues to build public interest (Baker et al. 2005). Although past studies highlight various challenges in holding effective public hearings and that expectations from such hearings often are not met, it continues to be the most commonly applied type of public engagement method (Ahmed 2017).

The effectiveness of public hearings depends on different factors, such as active participation of the participants, commitment and responses of the concerned institution, the environment of the hearing session to raise complaints. The study of Alam et al. (2017) found a reasonable prospect of ACC's public hearings to develop as an effective tool to combat corruption by face to face interaction between service seekers and service providers. It is an effective social accountability tool that can build greater trust between the two parties. The study of Alam et al. (2017) also has found evidence of measures taken not only to address grievances of the complainants but also to make positive changes in the processes of institutional service delivery.

According to Islam et al. (2018), public hearings are effective generally, but the degree of effectiveness varies. Support of the political leadership, civil society, and local elites is essential to make a public hearing successful (Islam et al. 2018). Public hearings empower citizens with information by removing asymmetric information and thus provide people with a better bargaining position than before. Thomas (2014) reported public hearing in India as an important means and helpful device to mobilise and give voice to marginalised people those often unaware and remain silent regarding their rights. A group of people in such a hearing generates collective pressure on government officials to address the complaints raised by the aggrieved complainants (Ahmed 2017). According to the World Development Report 2017, public hearings can attain three critical conditions: (i) transparency, which makes information available, (ii) publicity which makes information accessible and (iii) accountability which makes information actionable. Public hearings have been proved effective to fulfil the three critical conditions for bringing accountability in public offices through citizen engagement

(Ahmed 2017). According to Baker et al. (2005), the success of a public hearing depends on several critical factors that include effective notification of the public prior to the hearing, proper planning and facilitating the meeting, and conducting effective follow-up.

If complaints are resolved, complainers trust in the effectiveness of public hearings would be increased. The study of Alam et al. (2017) found an encouraging picture regarding responses made by concerned public authorities. According to the survey (Alam et al., 2017), the majority of the complainers (78.0%) got a commitment to address their complaints during the hearing sessions. About one-third of the complainers (27.2%) said they got solutions to their complaints afterwards, and around one-tenth (14.0%) were under process. However, more than half of the complaints (59%) remained unsolved till the survey period. The complainers got solutions because of measures taken by concerned authorities. The survey findings of Alam et al. (2017) revealed instances where complainers got back bribe money paid to certain public officials. However, Alam et al. (2017) also reveal that many complainers experienced post-hearing difficulties. According to the survey, 43% of complainers faced difficulties when they again approached for services from those institutions.

Some scholars describe public hearings as a weak method of citizen participation. Cole and Caputo (1984) studied public hearings in the American context as a mechanism of citizen participation. They found that although the mechanism aimed at changing governmental behaviour so that public institutions respond to peoples' needs and refrain from abuse of power, it had little effect on the pattern of such behaviour. According to Bawole (2013), the public hearings and other citizen engagement processes in Ghana are also rhetoric and ornamental; those are done to meet legal obligations rather than actively engaging the local community to solicit inputs from them. Agencies do public hearings to comply with the law. These are done late in the policymaking process as a formality to satisfy minimum legal requirements (Buttny 2010). Thus they are mainly ceremonial rather than substantive events (Topal 2009). They can have important issues for citizens, but they are not enough as mechanisms of citizen participation (Checkoway 1981). Bawole (2013) argues that government agencies lack social legitimacy and trust to be

acceptable in the communities. Actively engaging and involving local communities in the decision-making process may improve their image.

The ACC's public hearings have also experienced several constraints, including inadequate budgetary allocation and logistical supports to arrange a public hearing and lack of follow-up and supervision to resolve the complaints (Alam et al. 2017). Effective administrative actions, monitoring and supervision, are needed to ensure internal control. Instead of treating these as single events, ACC must develop a built-in mechanism to follow up on decisions taken during a public hearing (Alam et al. 2017). Otherwise, public hearings may lose credibility and public trust. Based on the response from the follow-up public hearings, the ACC can arrange dialogue and open discussion with public offices to improve service delivery through system improvement and business process reengineering (Ahmed 2017).

The public hearing is a necessary form of public input. It provides citizens with an opportunity to share their thoughts on a policy matter (Reilly 2018). The public hearing is considered a social accountability tool to improve service delivery and prevent/combat corruption by ensuring accountability of service providers. Citizens, aggrieved by decisions of service-providing offices, attend such public hearings to lodge complaints with the organisers expecting remedies. These arrangements attempt to bring accountability in public offices through citizen engagement. These events empower citizens because they remove the asymmetry of information that exists between the service seekers and the service providers, which helps service seekers with a better bargaining position. The organising authority invites relevant public officials of an administrative unit to face the citizens of the same locality. The system allows the citizens to question their officials face to face regarding their grievances while seeking services from the public offices. Although studies reveal a little contribution of public hearings as a method of citizen participation, Cole and Caputo (1984) concluded that one main goal of citizen participation is making all levels more accountable and more responsive in bureaucratic and administrative activities. Their study concluded that participation in public hearings might bring positive consequences for the participating citizens—a more informed citizenry.

Public officials sometimes indulge in corruption because of their self-interest. Supervisors sometimes fail to detect those deviances for the information asymmetry among them. Thus, social accountability tools can help reduce information asymmetry between policy-makers or supervisors and public officials so that policy-makers can detect public officials' deviances and thereby make them accountable.

The objectives and nature of public hearings are not always the same. It is not always used as an accountability tool. It is not always applied to reduce the grievances of aggrieved citizens. It is sometimes arranged to consult with citizens to address an important social issue. For example, public hearings were conducted in the UK to take citizen's opinions to support and develop lay people in public health roles (South et al. 2012). In Moscow, Russia, a public hearing was held to reach a consensus in addressing an urban planning issue (Pavlycheva 2017). In general, a public hearing has been proved as one of the effective tools practised worldwide to convalesce goods and services from a decline by building accountability of service providers through civic engagement. Nevertheless, its effectiveness and impact on bureaucratic accountability have not been studied well.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

This research proceeded with a promise to fulfil three specific objectives. The first one promised to explore the nature of the complaints registered with the ACC and voiced in public hearing sessions. The second objective was to describe the consequences of the public hearings on the expectations of the complainants. The third objective was to see the effects of public hearings on bureaucratic accountability. These objectives of the study required it to follow an interpretative research design. Therefore, the methodologies involved in in-depth interviews were the main tools for data collection and data interpretation. Two categories of respondents were the research population: i) complainants who attended a public hearing session and shared their grievances and complaints; and ii) officials from the offices both against that complaints were lodged, and that organized the public hearings. For the first objective, the researchers employed qualitative interviews with the participants of public hearing sessions. This tool was intended to extract the expectations of the service seekers and citizens. For the second objective, the interviewees were further asked to describe their experiences after the public hearing and until the date of their interviews. Complaint details included the causes of the origin of the complaints and their solutions. Data received from the complainants and the officials were juxtaposed for further analysis to meet the third objective.

### **3.2 APPROACH**

The research followed the grounded theory strategy in the inductive approach. This strategy of research allows the researcher to collect and analyze data concurrently. The unit of analysis was the individual respondents. Views of the respondents were coded and grouped into categories considering the meanings of the data. The researcher presented

the findings in themes and interpreted the data with supplementation of evidence in quotes from the interview transcriptions. Data analysis followed the strategy of back and forth. The analysis of the initial few transcriptions produced a set of themes and subthemes, which were later modified with the further analysis of additional interview transcriptions.

### **3.3 PUPULATION AND SAMPLE SIZE**

The study population constituted the participants of the public hearing sessions organized by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), the officials of the offices against which grievances were raised, and the officials of the ACC. Any citizen who participated physically in a public hearing session and voiced his/her grievance was considered a participant. The researchers collected the lists of the participants of selected public hearing locations from the ACC. They counted the number of participants in each selected location. The public hearing locations that were selected for the study are described in table 3.1. The research carefully considered the geographical coverage of the country in selecting the public hearing locations. The same table also shows the location-wise number of complainants who registered their names with the ACC to participate in public hearings, the number of complainants who participated in the public hearings, the number of complainants whose contact cell phone numbers were available in the ACC lists, the number of complainants whose telephone numbers were dialled and the status of the dialling, and information about the interviews conducted in each location.

Table 3.1 shows that 334 complainants had registered their names with the ACC to participate in public hearings in the ten public hearing locations. In the actual public hearings, 276 complainants (participants) were present and voiced their complaints. The ACC lists of public hearings contained the contact cell phone numbers of 220 participated complainants. A single row of the ACC lists listed more than one name and telephone number in some cases. Each group of such complainants registered its complaint against a single authority or person. In each of these cases, the group of names was considered one complaint and the telephone numbers one contact. In some other cases, a single person lodged complaints against more than one office. In these cases, the complaint



**Table 3:1 Location of Public Hearings and Sample Covered by the Study**

Public Hearing Location	Number of Complainant (R-P-C) <sup>a</sup>	Telephone Number				Interview		
		Dialled	Refused an Interview	Switched Off	Other Causes <sup>b</sup>	Number	Length (H:M:S) <sup>c</sup>	Word in Transcript
Bancharampur, Brahmanbaria	22-18-13	8	0	1	1	6	1:30:29	6366
Borhanuddin, Bhola	28-28-18	8	1	0	5	2	0:43:43	2347
Chhatak, Sunamganj	44-23-23	12	2	3	2	5	1:14:23	4915
Cumilla Adarsha Sadar	18-18-14	6	1	1	1	3	1:02:38	4052
Daulatpur, Kustia	31-31-18	14	3	6	1	4	1:35:41	6210
Gangachara, Rangpur	46-46-41	31	5	12	11	3	0:45:59	3577
Godagari, Rajshahi	44-38-35	13	4	3	0	6	0:50:57	3359
Jashore Sadar	44-33-22	12	4	3	0	5	2:01:43	4925
Rupsha, Khulna	18-18-17	8	1	1	0	6	1:02:55	3356
Savar, Dhaka	39-23-17	13	4	4	2	3	1:09:00	1838
<b>Total</b>	<b>334-276-220</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>12:02:28</b>	<b>40945</b>

Notes: <sup>a</sup> R-P-C = Registered-Participated-Contact cell phone number. The second column (R-P-C) presents three figures. The first figure indicates location-wise number of complainants who registered their names with the ACC before holding a public hearing. The second figure indicates the number of complainants who actually participated in the public hearing sessions and voiced their complaints. The third figure indicates the number of participated complainants whose contact cell phone numbers were available in the ACC lists.

<sup>b</sup> Other causes included, (i) did not pick up a call, (ii) did not attend public hearing sessions, (iii) wrong numbers, (iv) the complainants passed away.

<sup>c</sup> H: M: S = Hour: Minute: Second.

that was listed first was counted. Out of the available contact numbers, 125 phone numbers were dialled. This dialling constituted 57% per cent of the contact cell phone numbers available in the ACC lists. Twenty-four of the contacted persons did not agree to give an interview. Thirty-three cell phone numbers were found switched off. Some other phone numbers rang but did not pick up the calls. Some respondents said that the numbers were wrong, while others said that the complainants had passed away. Nevertheless, 43 complainants (participants) were reached and interviewed. This number meant that 34% of the dialled numbers agreed to give an interview. The total length of these interviews was 12 hours, 2 minutes and 28 seconds. The average length of the audio of each interview was around 16 minutes and 48 seconds. The total number of words in the transcriptions of these interviews was 40,965. Besides the public hearing participants, service providing officials and ACC officials from five of the ten public hearing locations were interviewed to validate the findings generated from telephonic interviews with the complainants.

### **3.4 DATA COLLECTION**

Each location-wise list collected from the ACC integrated district offices provided each participant's name, address, and contact cell phone number. These lists also contained anonymous complainants or complainants without cell phone numbers. In some cases, the contact details and, in some other cases, the cell phone numbers of some participants of public hearings were not mentioned in the lists. Such lists also contained contact details of persons who registered with the ACC for participating in public hearing sessions but did not turn out to voice their complaints in the hearings. The persons who voiced their complaints in a public hearing session having their cell phone numbers in the ACC lists were eligible for an interview. The research emphasized two criteria in selecting the respondents for an interview from each location of public hearings. One of the criteria was the diversity of complaints, and the other was interest in complaining. The research has given preference to choosing complainants having complaints with different offices in a particular location. Interviewees were chosen considering different categories of complaints from each location. In other words, complainants having

complaints against different offices were given a priority. The other consideration—interests in complaining—referred to whether the complainants raised their voices against public or individual problems. The research preferred complainants having individual problems.

The researchers had first developed an interview checklist addressing the specific objectives of the study. One of the researchers conducted the first three interviews. After conducting each of these first few interviews, the researcher reviewed the checklist and modified it each time. Thus, the checklist was readied to conduct interviews in different locations by trained research assistants. The first three respondents were reached using their cell phone numbers mentioned in the documents collected from the ACC integrated district office. An appointment was agreed upon with each of them. The researcher went to the preferred locations of these interviewees and conducted the interviews. Except for the location of Savar Upazila of Dhaka district, interviews with the complainants of the public hearings were conducted over cell phone considering the ongoing pandemic situation of the research contexts. The researchers and the research assistants conducted these telephonic interviews using the modified checklist. Besides the topics stated in the checklist, intensive probing was used to get meaningful information from the interviewees. Interviews were conducted from March to July 2021.

There were some difficulties in reaching out to the targeted respondents. It was mentioned earlier that contact cell phone numbers were not available in the case of some respondents. The researchers selected the respondents to be interviewed considering two criteria mentioned earlier as well. The difficulties were with reaching out to the respondents using the available cell phone numbers. Some cell phone numbers were unreachable, and some respondents did not agree to give an interview. Therefore, the subset of selected interviewees, chosen from a particular list, needed modifications, fulfilling the stated criteria, when cell phone numbers were unreachable, or the contacted respondents regretted giving an interview. The second column in table 3.1 shows three figures for each interview location—the first is the number of complainants who registered with the ACC to complain in the public hearings through the voice of mouth. The second figure is the number of complainants who voiced their grievances in each

location. The third figure indicates the number of the complainants whose cell phone numbers were available in each list.

Samples for the study were decided following theoretical sampling. Data collection from the samples proceeded until the researchers' understanding of reaching a saturation point was achieved. The research initially aimed at studying 24 public hearing sessions of the ACC organized at the field level covering the geographical spread of the country. Two Upazila-level and one district-level public hearing sessions from each of the eight administrative divisions of the county were planned to cover following the non-probability sampling technique. In reality, due to the Covid-19 pandemic situation, these targets were not fulfilled. Table 3.1 shows the actual number of locations covered by the study, which is smaller than what was aimed at. Apart from the complainants who participated in public hearing sessions, face-to-face interviews with service providers and officials of the ACC integrated district offices relating to five of the ten interview locations were conducted. These face-to-face interviews were designed to validate some critical findings of the study. Five critical issues from five locations were chosen for validation. The validation process cross-checked the roles played by the complainants, service providers and the ACC officials. Secondary sources of information, including documents on public hearings of ACC integrated district offices, were reviewed.

### **3.5 DATA PROCESSING AND ANALYSIS**

It is stated earlier that the research followed the grounded theory approach in collecting and analyzing data. The grounded theory follows a concurrent data analysis process—collecting and analyzing data at the same time. It has a distinct data analysis process. The coding of collected data plays a central role in the grounded theory data analysis process. The process starts with initial coding or open coding of the interview transcripts. These open codes are abstract concepts having their roots in the collected data. Then relationships among the open codes are looked for, which is called axial coding or intermediate coding. The data analysis process then employs selective coding, which categorizes the abstract concepts. Research in this approach aims to identify a core category that encapsulates the process involved in the categories and sub-categories

(Birks and Mills, 2011). The analysis is done concurrently. Therefore, analysis of one interview data leads to subsequent interviews allowing the researcher where to go and whom to interview. Thus, the research used verbatim transcriptions of the interviews conducted for this study. This requirement needed the interviews to be recorded. The transcriptions prepared in this way were subjected to the data analysis process outlined above, complying with the ethical requirements of social research.

The telephonic interviews were recorded and transcribed. In the transcription making process, the cleaned verbatim technique, also known as intelligent transcription, was used, wherein unnecessary words were excluded without changing the meaning of the speech. In this transcription process, the gist of the speeches was sustained while the emotional and irrelevant components got omitted. Nevertheless, the meaningful words got verbatim transcriptions. The number of interviews with the public hearing participants is given in table 3.1. The same table also shows the location-wise duration of the interviews and the number of words in the transcriptions. After the initial analysis of the first few transcriptions, the broad categories of the interview data were identified and classified thematically. As more and more interviews were conducted and their transcriptions made, the broad categories got modifications based on the emergent new data and the meaning thereof.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

This research attempted to build a grounded theory on the accountability effect of the ACC's public hearings by attaining three specific objectives. The first specific objective was to explore the nature of the complaints made to the public hearings. The second objective was to describe the effects of public hearings on meeting the expectation of the public hearing complainants. In other words, how public hearings acted in resolving the complaints lodged in the public hearing sessions. The third objective was to describe the public hearings' effects on bureaucratic accountability. The three broad headings of this chapter address these three objectives. Analyses under the three broad headings expand in subsections that emerged through the coding process. The first section describes the expectations of the public hearing participants (complainants) in three subsections. These subsections look at the diversity in the complaints and their spread on people. The second section describes the effects of the public hearing on fulfilling the expectations of the complainants. These effects are discussed in eight subsections, some of which have their subsections. The third section analyzes the bureaucratic accountability effect of the public hearing in two subsections. These subsections juxtapose bureaucratic accountability with the social power structure and the empowerment feelings of the public hearing participants.

### **4.1 NATURE OF COMPLAINTS**

Every complainant attended a public hearing session to share some problems he/she had experienced. The problems were rooted in public service delivery. Therefore, citizens' expectations from public hearings were about correcting something that went wrong in service delivery. The expectations varied regarding their benefits' confinement to the individual complainant or spreading over the general public. Some participants in the public hearing sessions raised concerns that were not their individual problems with their service providers. Instead, they raised problems that affected many people. In other

words, these problems were of the public interest category. Therefore, solutions to these problems would serve the interests of the state and the ordinary people. On the other hand, many people attended the public hearing sessions with their individual problems. Therefore, solutions to these problems would serve the individual interests of the people who raised them in the forum. Therefore, the expectations from public hearing sessions were classified as public interests and individual interests. This section begins with a subsection describing the diversity of complaints registered with the ACC officials and voiced in the public hearings in the ten study locations. Then, in two subsections, it describes the expectations of the complainant interviewees in terms of public and individual interests. The subsections narrate the categories of the expectations. They depict that some complainants sought remedies for their individual problems, while others complained to draw the government's attention to public problems.

#### **4.1.1 Diversity in Complaints**

Citizens who registered their problems with the ACC and who attended public hearing sessions had diverse complaints. This subsection first presents the complaints made by the registered complainants categorising them according to their offices. Before attending a public hearing session to voice grievances, citizens must register their complaints with the ACC officials. Not all the citizens who registered their complaints attended the public hearings. A significant number of registered complainants refrained from attending the public hearings. Therefore, this subsection also presents data on the absentee complainants. Then it categorises the complainant interviewees in terms of the offices they complained against.

Table 4.1 shows an office-wise number of complaints registered with the ACC in all ten study locations. It lists the offices in descending order of the number of complaints made against them. The first ten offices where the citizens expected intervention of the public hearings were land, health, police, education, sub-registrar, social service, electricity, UNO, PIO, and settlement. Some other 30 offices were included in the list. Citizens lodged complaints in all the ten locations against land, health, and sub-registrar's offices. Education related complaints were lodged in nine locations. Some people registered their

complaints against some individual persons also. It implies that the citizens' expectations from the public hearings included interventions in the affairs of the offices and individuals.

The documents collected from the ACC had information about the absence of registered complainants on five of the ten public hearing locations. An examination of the documents revealed that a good number of registered complainants remained absent in public hearings. In these five locations, 193 complainants had registered their names with the ACC to attend public hearings, but 58 complainants (30%) had not participated in the actual public hearings. Table 4.2 shows a location-wise list of absentee complainants. Fear and trust might have been critical factors that kept them away from participating in public hearings. This extrapolation was made from the talks with the complainants, who were approached but denied an interview. Although the complainants who avoided giving interviews did not mention the fear factor as a factor for not agreeing to give interviews, the interviewers could sense the presence of this factor in them. For example, interviewers wanted to conduct interviews in person at the convenient time and locations of the complaints, but they did not agree to give an interview. Some complainants told over the telephone that they would not talk about the public hearing issue. Some complainants said that their problems were solved and would not talk about that issue.

An ACC official interviewed in a district-level office said that some local critical factors worked behind the non-participation of complainants in actual public hearings despite being registered. According to his observation, around one-fourth of registered complainants did not participate in actual public hearings. Around half of the absent registered complainants did not participate due to a fear factor. These categories of complainants suffered from uncertainty over what would happen to them if they had complained. They remained fearful about the actions of the offices against that they would complain and the influential local people who are connected with the complainees' offices. The same ACC official said that the other half of the absentees of the registered complainants did not attend public hearing sessions because their complaints did not have sufficient evidence or objective reality.



**Table 4:1 Location-wise Number of Complainants Registered with the ACC for Complaining in Public Hearing**

Office	Bancharampur Brahmanbaria	Borhanuddin Bhola	Chhatak Sunamganj	Cumilla Adarsha Sadar	Daulatpur Kustia	Gangachara Rangpur	Godagari Rajshahi	Jashore Sadar	Rupsha Khulna	Savar Dhaka	Total
Land	5	3	9	6	8	6	8	2	6	17	70
Health	3	3	7	1	1	3	4	1	4	14	41
Police		1	2	1	2		1	17			24
Education	3	2	2	1	6	4	1	3	2		24
Sub-Registrar	2	1	2	1	1	3	1	1	1	8	21
Social Service		2		1	1	1	11	1	1		18
Electricity	1		4	3	1	2	1	1	4		14
UNO	1	4	4				3	1			13
PIO	2	3	2		1	1	3				12
Settlement		6			1	1		1			9
Other 30 offices	5	3	12	4	9	25	11	16	0	0	88
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>334</b>

Notes: (a) Education office includes primary education office, secondary education office, and educational institutions.

(b) The other 30 offices include local government entities such as Union Parishad and municipalities, offices of the deputy commissioner of a district, livestock, accounts, election, fisheries, passport, Local Government Engineering Division, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority, Janata Bank, Barendra Multi-Development Authority, family planning, roads and highways, Ansar-VDP Unnayan Bank, Bangladesh Customs, Bangladesh Telecommunications Company Limited, Islamic Foundation, Directorate of Posts, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority, gas transmission and distribution, Water Development Board, forest, Upazila Engineer, cooperatives, Rajshahi Agriculture Development Bank, consumer rights protection, education board, women affairs, lawyers association, and some individuals. In the public hearing of Gangachara Upazila of Rangpur district, 21 similar complaints were lodged against the youth development office of the Upazila, which was unusual in the study. Instead of presenting these complaints as a separate category, this number was included in the 'other 30 offices' category.

**Table 4:2 Location-wise Number of Registered and Absent Complaints**

Office	Banchampur Brahmanbaria		Chhatak Sunamganj		Godagari Rajshahi		Jashore Sadar		Savar Dhaka		Total	
	Registered	Absent	Registered	Absent	Registered	Absent	Registered	Absent	Registered	Absent	Registered	Absent
Land	5	0	9	2	8	0	2	0	17	6	41	8
Health	3	1	7	5	4	0	1	0	14	6	29	12
Police			2	0	1	0	17	4			20	4
Education	3	1	2	0	1	0	3	0			9	1
Sub-Registrar	2	1	2	1	1	0	1	0	8	4	14	6
Social Service					11	6	1	0			12	6
Electricity	1	0	4	2	1	0	1	1			7	3
UNO	1	0	4	2	3	0	1	0			9	2
PIO	2	0	2	0	3	0					7	0
Settlement							1	1			1	1
Other 30 offices	5	1	12	9	11		16	5			44	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>58</b>

The experiences of some interviewees substantiated the observations of the ACC official. A complainant's underage son was arrested by the police and put in jail on a terrorism case after making a complaint to a public hearing against some police actions (Interview 20). A land office harassed a service seeker for more than a year as he complained in a public hearing against that office (Interview 13). A complainant had to say sorry to a village meeting for complaining to a public hearing because the influential local people asked him to do so (Interview 7). Another ACC officer from a different district shared his experience about the harassment of complainants. When a complainant went to an office after complaining to a public hearing, the service provider of that office said, "go to your father whom you have complained to" (Interview with an ACC officer). He further said that some offices that hold power did not want to cooperate with them in solving problems. These offices did not want to reply to the letters of the ACC integrated district despite repeated requests. Those letters sought progress report on public hearing decisions. This interviewee explained that the senior colleagues (civil servants) of the non-cooperating offices hold decision-making positions in the ACC.

#### *4.1.1.1 Land-Related Complaints*

Most of the complaints that were raised in the public hearing sessions were about land-related services. The complaints included corruption of the officials of land offices and not serving the service seekers timely. Some respondents complained about recording land in the name of some other persons depriving the genuine owners with the help of some officials (Interview 2, Interview 5, Interview 10, and Interview 33). In Interview 2, the land was mutated in the name of a fake owner through forgery of signatures of the original owner and the Assistant Commissioner (AC) of the land office of an Upazila. In Interview 5, the AC was reported to hold files of the complainant for a long time. Interview 10 complained that he was excluded from the ownership of ancestral land through corruption. An uneducated service seeker (Interview 13) of an Upazila land office visited the office for two years to correct a mistake made by land officials. The mistake involved the numbers of his two plots wrongly written in his land record. He visited the land office for two years, requesting the officials to correct the mistake.

Instead of correcting the mistake, the officials harassed him. Explaining the cause of this complaining, he said:

The officials made a mistake. I did not make any mistake ... I had to spend my hard-earned money visiting the office for two years (Interview 13).

The respondent of Interview 18 had bought some 55 decimal agricultural land in 1983. A different person did a fake deed of six decimal out of the 55 decimal land from the seller's sister and utilized the land for ten years. The genuine buyer filed a case and won it. However, the surveyor of the land office did not issue an order for the collection of land tax from the genuine buyer. Therefore, the genuine buyer had to complain to the public hearing.

Demanding illegal money from service seekers of land offices was another category of complaints (Interview 23, Interview 24, Interview 26, and Interview 36). A journalist complained about corruption in his Upazila land office (Interview 23). He said, "The land official took 900 taka against a land tax of 195 taka". There were other complaints about taking money additional to government rates from people by land officials. A complainant (Interview 36) told that an assistant land officer claimed from him 4,500 taka. In comparison, the government rate for a mutation was 1,150 taka and a land tax of 50 taka totalling 1,200 taka only. It was only after complaining to the public hearing that he could pay according to the government rates. This respondent was a freedom fighter, and greedy land officials did not spare him.

The respondent of Interview 20 reported a different type of land-related problem. The problem involved not the land office but the police office. According to the interviewee, around 40 families had been living on leased land from a genuine owner. They were living there for generations covering around 120 years. These families were evicted by some influential people with police help, although a case was ongoing with the district judge court. The respondent complained to the public hearing against the 'illegal' eviction by the police department.

There were some other land-related complaints against the office of the Upazila sub-registrar (Interview 1, Interview 9). The complainants voiced against the corruption of this office. Their complaints were public and not individual ones. In Interview 1, the respondent said that the sub-registrar, in collaboration with the deed writers, would manipulate the categories of land to reduce its price and then take illegal money from the buyers and sellers of the land. This manipulation would deprive the government of revenues. In Interview 9, the respondent complained that the sub-registrar in his Upazila would take illegal money from land buyers for registration, which was a few times higher than the government rates. He said, “Every buyer of land knows that he has to pay a few times the government rate. It is a national problem happening everywhere” (Interview 9).

#### *4.1.1.2 Health-Related Complaints*

Health service-related complaints constituted the second most dominant category among the interviewed complainants. These complainants came to the public hearing sessions with different types of health service-related complaints. These complaints ranged from bad behaviours of health officials to the negligence of the doctors to their duties. A complainant (Interview 3) reported in a public hearing session about the unprofessional behaviour of a dentist. This complainant, the mother of a minor boy, took the child to a dentist of a public health complex for tooth extraction. The child had to be given an injection of a local anaesthetic to numb the area from where a tooth was to be pulled out. Seeing the injection syringe, the child was afraid, and the doctor tortured him mercilessly before the mother. It was an unprofessional behaviour of a doctor, and the mother complained about it.

Another health service-related complaint item was about the negligence of the doctors of the public health complexes to their duties (Interview 11, Interview 14, and Interview 29). Health officials, particularly the chief medical officers of an Upazila health complex, would remain absent in their workplace (Interview 11). According to the same respondent, the doctor would do private practice at his private chamber during his duty hours (Interview 11). This same respondent alleged that the doctors of the health complex would refer their patients to a divisional medical college and hospital even though the

patient could be treated in the local Upazila health complex (Interview 11). In Interview 14, the respondent said that the doctors of a district hospital would give remote dates of operation to their patients irrespective of the seriousness of their condition. What is more, the operation dates were not coordinated well. This respondent said, “It happens that the scheduled doctor to do an operation is not on duty on the operation date or assigned with a different task” (Interview 14). Another respondent alleged, “The doctors gossip together and feel annoyed when we call them” (Interview 29). Another dimension of the negligence of the health officials was keeping the health complex unclean (Interview 11, Interview 22, and Interview 29). In Interview 22, the respondent also said about the prevalence of brokers on the compound in addition to the dirty environment, “This Upazila health complex remains under filthy environment and is full of brokers” (Interview 22).

The more serious allegation from the complainant of Interview 22 was the use of unauthorized persons by physicians in as serious medical works as doing surgery. The allegation was that the doctors engaged cleaners of the hospital in surgical operations. The interviewee said the following:

Two persons are appointed in the hospital as sweepers. They would assist the doctors of the hospital in surgical operations. Now they do these operations themselves. It has not been a year when they (cleaners) did a cesarean surgery, and the patient died. A case has been filed against them in the police station (Interview 22).

A different type of complaint about health-related services was made by Interview 15. The man in the interview wanted to use the ambulance service of an Upazila health complex for taking his seriously ill father to the capital city for better health care. The health officials did not provide him with the service. He had to hire a microbus instead of an ambulance because, at that time, there was no other source of getting an ambulance. Nevertheless, his father died on the way to the capital city. Later, he used the ambulance service of the health complex to take his maternal aunt to the capital city. This time the driver charged him as per his (driver) wish and did not give him a receipt of the money he charged. He said the following:

The Upazila health complex ambulance is used to carry patients to Dhaka for better treatment. We have used that ambulance to carry our patient with another patient. The driver had charged us additional money. There should be a chart of fare for using the ambulance as it is a public hospital. I requested a money receipt for my payment, but the driver refused to do so. He charges as per his wish, telling about different ruses. Some private ambulance services are available now, which were not in the past. There was no alternative to the ambulance service of the public hospital (Interview 15).

#### 4.1.1.3 Education-Related Complaints

Education-related complaints involved bad practices of the teachers of educational institutions and corruption of officials of education offices (Interview 6, Interview 7, Interview 8, Interview 9, Interview 16, and Interview 31). In Interview 6, the respondent complained to the public hearing about corruption in a secondary education office of a district. This complainant was a journalist. He said the following:

Four teachers were promoted (by the authority). That number was increased to twenty-four through forgery of signatures of higher authority. My complaint was about that matter. I made the complaint based on the collection of appropriate information (Interview 6).

A similar corruption problem of another education office was raised in a public hearing session by a former teacher of a *madrassa*—a religious school for Muslim learners (Interview 7). A few teachers of the *madrassa* would not take part in teaching. However, they would draw their salaries every month in collusion with the institution's principal and the concerned education officials of the government. These teachers would remain in their homes in the district headquarter, depriving the students of an Upazila-level *madrassa*. They would conduct their sessions by some under graduate-level students. The complainant expected the teachers to conduct their sessions with the students.

In Interview 31, the respondent, a teacher by profession, was made a victim of corruption. He was against a corruption nexus between the education officer and the accounts officer of his Upazila. For that reason, they froze the teacher's salary. He described the following:

Even I was not paid my salary and bonus in the Eid of one Ramadan. Therefore, I got involved in an altercation with the education officer. I was standing on the truth. At one stage, sir (education officer) wanted some bribe from me. I told him, 'sir, it (bribing) conflicts with my principles. I cannot compromise this with you. Please, do not ask me to bow down to my principles'... Then he asked to give him even if it was a little money. I told him, 'I cannot give you even one taka.' Then he said, 'Your bill will not pass. You are an odd person in the society'. Nevertheless, I had confidence that I would be able to do something (Interview 31).

A guardian (Interview 8) complained against a school's teachers who would compel the school's students to participate in coaching classes. These compulsory classes were extra to the regular ones. The teachers would charge the students extra money every month in addition to the regular fees. The complainant called these extra classes 'coaching business.' He was a sufferer of this 'business' because his daughter would study in that school, and he had to pay extra money every month. Moreover, he also experienced the 'bad behaviour' of the school's headmaster. Making the complaint, he expected an ending to the coaching business as well as the wrong behaviours.

A community leader (Interview 16) voiced an education-related problem in a public hearing, which involved the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh (IFB) office. The IFB implemented a mosque-based mass and child literacy programme in selected mosques. Each Imam of these selected mosques received a monthly salary. The supervisor of the local IFB office did not deliver the monthly salary of the Imam of a mosque. The local community leader raised this issue in the public hearing. As a result, the Imam received his unpaid salary in one month of the complaining.



In Interview 9, the respondent shared an unusual complaint. It was against the sellers of children's books who would charge the buyers 3 to 4 times their original prices. He said:

The price of an elementary book is 20 to 25 taka. However, they (shopkeepers) sell at 3 to 4 times higher of the original price. In other words, they charge 80 to 120 or even 125 taka for a book whose price is 20 to 25 taka (Interview 9).

#### *4.1.1.4 Electricity-Related Complaints*

Some of the respondents complained about the services of the rural electrification office (Interview 4, Interview 7, Interview 12, Interview 27, and Interview 35). These complaints included unusual electricity bills, demanding illegal money, not delivering the desired services. Often bills were delivered to clients of electricity showing more than actual consumption. In interview 4, the respondent said that the office would serve them with electricity bills not prepared on actual metre reading. The officials would write metre readings without inspecting the metres. Moreover, they would claim money showing problems with the metres, "A metre reader demanded twenty thousand taka from my neighbouring house to install a new metre showing problems in the current one" (Interview 4). Another respondent said, "They insert metre reading as per their wishes. When we go to them for services, they demand extra money" (Interview 7). A complainant said, "I complained because my home electricity bill was shown more than what was regular" (Interview 12). Even a disconnected metre got an unusually high bill, "Suddenly, I got a bill of twelve thousand taka (though) the metre had no connection (to electricity)" (Interview 27).

In Interview 35, the respondent said that he requested his lineman to shift his electric metre from one wall to another. For that service, the lineman demanded ten thousand taka from him. Although the public hearing told the lineman to shift the applicant's metre, it was not implemented. The respondent said, "If they (officials of rural electrification board) do not listen to the words of administration (ACC), will they listen to us" (Interview 35)? The lineman further cautioned the respondent that nobody else

could help him (the client). The respondent further added, “He (lineman) told me ‘I alone work in this area. You will not get a single benefit if you go elsewhere (for a remedy)’” (Interview 35).

#### *4.1.1.5 Social Security-Related Complaints*

A few interviewees shared their grievances that relate to social security benefits (Interview 21, Interview 25, and Interview 32). The respondent of Interview 21 reported that he was entitled to government social security benefits as a disabled person. He was enlisted as a beneficiary of getting corrugated iron sheets for his house. But the project implementation officer (PIO) deprived him of his benefit. He complained to the public hearing that the PIO misappropriated his social security benefits. Similarly, the father of a disabled child had applied for disability allowance (Interview 25). But the social service office did not provide him with the allowance. This respondent said, “The age of my daughter is 16 years. She is disabled. I applied to the social service office for disability allowance. But she was not getting the allowance” (Interview 25).

In Interview 32, the respondent reported a different problem. An educationist had established an orphanage and secured an annual fund of eighty-six thousand taka from the local social service office. After the death of the educationist, the management of the orphanage would collect the fund from the social service office but not spend the same for the orphans. Moreover, the people involved in the management would engage the orphans at their personal service. As a result, the orphans left the orphanage. However, the management continued to draw the money from the office and misappropriate it. The respondent demanded an investigation into the matter.

#### *4.1.1.6 Complaints against Law Enforcement Administration*

Two respondents among the interviewees of this research reported problems that could be aligned with the police and the general administration of the administrative units (Interview 20 and Interview 30). In Interview 20, the respondent asserted that her family and some other 30 to 40 families lived in a place for generations. She said, “We had homes there for 120 years” (Interview 20). However, an influential local person, by

giving money to the police, she alleged, got them evicted by the police department. After the eviction, her elder son, sitting in his secondary school certificate (SSC) examination at that time, was arrested, and a false case was filed against him. She requested the police to spare the son for his last two remaining examinations, but he was not spared. In Interview 30, the respondent said that their Upazila had a border with India. Therefore, illicit drugs were prevalent in the Upazila. The respondent complained about the inaction of the law enforcement agencies.

#### *4.1.1.7 Postal Service-Related Complaints*

A citizen complained against the corruption of a postmaster of a local post office in buying and selling the national savings certificates (Interview 17). One of the avenues to selling and buying the national savings certificates of the government to and from the citizens was the post office. The accused postmaster would charge a certain amount of money each time a citizen would sell or buy national savings certificates from his post office. However, this service was free of charge. The corruption news was published in few national dailies, but the corrupt official continued his illegal activities without any hindrances. The complainant was a journalist, and he brought the corrupt behaviour of the postmaster to the notice of the public hearing.

#### *4.1.1.8 Banking Service-Related Complaints*

A service seeker of a public sector bank lodged a grievance of a different kind (Interview 19). A service seeker of the Rajshahi Agricultural Development Bank took a loan from the bank. He had to keep his land record (deed) with the bank as security on the loan he took from the bank. Later the government remitted the type of agricultural loan the debtor took from the bank. As a result, the debtor went to the bank to get his land record (deed) back, but the bank did not give him the record. Instead, the bank wanted illegal money from the debtor for returning his land record. Being helpless, the debtor complained about the bank's illegal demand in the public hearing.

#### *4.1.1.9 ACC Local Committee-Related Complaints*

The respondent in Interview 28 said that he complained in the public hearing against the negligence of the chairperson of an Upazila level corruption prevention committee. He said that the chairperson and his son-in-law had opened a non-government organization (NGO) in the Upazila named Janata Co-operative Society. That NGO took deposits from people promising them lucrative monthly interests. He told the following:

My main complaint was against the chairperson of the corruption prevention committee so that he is relieved from his duty. The cause is that he and his son-in-law took one lakh or two lakh taka from each of the around 500 unemployed youths to give each of them a job in their NGO. Now they are unemployed. The son-in-law is hiding in Dhaka for three years now. The depositors did not get their money back (Interview 28).

#### **4.1.2 Public Interests**

The concept of public interest is used here to mean the intent of a complaint that affects the interest of the common people. In other words, this type of interest is not limited to an individual's benefit. It goes beyond one's personal benefit. Some people attended the public hearing sessions with issues that affected the interests of the state and the ordinary people. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors moved the complainants who raised public interest issues in the public hearing sessions. The intrinsically motivated citizens voiced people's sufferings being driven by their conscience. They considered the action of raising common issues in public hearings as a noble responsibility. On the other hand, the extrinsically motivated citizens shared issues of common interest being instigated by others. The intrinsically motivated complainants were self-starters, while other persons had inspired the extrinsically motivated complainants.

In Interview 14, a Union Parishad chairman made a complaint to a public hearing session against the poor health service of a public hospital. He brought the issue to the notice of the authority from his intrinsic feeling. He said the following:

I made the complaint from a feeling of my duties and responsibilities. I needed to make the complaint as a fellow citizen of this country to

safeguard the rights of ordinary people. I expect that if more people voice against the unjustness of society as I do, society will see more progress. If anyone else had made the complaint that I did, he would have been in harassment. As I am an elected representative, I did not face any problem (Interview 14).

In some cases, the complaint appeared to be inspired by organizers of public hearings. These people appeared to have sort of connections with the organizers of public hearing sessions. Sometimes, the organizers encouraged them to raise issues in the public hearing sessions that are of public interest. For example, one participant (Interview 1) came up in a public hearing session with a corruption problem in a sub-registrar's office. His school friend, who worked in the Anti-Corruption Commission, encouraged him to raise this problem. The corruption in the sub-registrar's office involved collusion between deed writers and the officials of the sub-registrar's office, showing a distorted land-use pattern in papers, which was contrary to the actual landscape and took illegal benefits from the distortion. For example, land tax for agricultural land was higher than gardens. During the transfer of land, the sellers and buyers would present the agricultural land as gardens in collaboration with the sub-registrar. This distortion would reduce the land price and the land transfer tax in government documents. In contrast, the actual transaction would take place at a much higher rate. Therefore, the government would get less revenue from this type of dealing. The respondent said:

The tax on agricultural land is higher than a garden house. They would register agricultural land as garden houses through compromising. This compromise would benefit the sub-registrar and the deed writers and undercut government tax (Interview 1).

This activity showed a low price of the land to be transferred and a lower amount of land tax to the government. In contrast, the actual payment of the land price by the buyer to the seller remained high. In return, the sub-registrar would take illegal benefits from the sellers and buyers. The interviewee said, "The deed writers and the sub-registrar would benefit, and the government would lose revenue" (Interview 1).

The expectations from situations like the above included stopping corruption and the resultant loss of government revenue. The people who raised these types of issues in a public hearing could be considered conscious and responsible citizens of the country. They were committed to their duties as citizens. If this was the case, the citizen in the Interview 1 should have been concerned about the effect of the public hearing after raising the corruption issue in the public hearing session. The public hearing, in this case, was held in September 2015, and the complainant was interviewed in March 2021. In more than five years, this complainant had visited the accused office once only. Therefore, the conscious citizen argument could not hold in this particular case.

An injury to the feeling of a service seeker made by a public service provider through his behaviour cannot be remedied. These injuries happen when service providers behave unexpectedly with the service seekers. The wrong behaviours cannot be reversed. In this situation, the expectation of complainants becomes good behaviour from public service providers to all service seekers. In Interview 3, a service seeker had an experience similar to this situation. She took her child to an Upazila health complex to remove a tooth. The doctor had to push an injection in the jaw of the child before removing the tooth. The child got frightened seeing the long needle of the injection. Rather than persuading the child, the doctor beat him mercilessly, holding the child's hair in front of the mother. The mother was hurt by the doctor's behaviour delivered to her child. She thought that a doctor might not behave with a child in the manner she had witnessed. She raised the doctor's behaviour to a public hearing session seeking a change in the behavioural pattern of the doctor towards a child patient. She said, "I wanted that no one should be treated in the way my son was. After complaining, they (the health officials) told me that this would not happen again" (Interview 3).

The public interests of the complainants were in addressing either corruption to save public money or local problems. Highlighting corruption in land registration (Interview 1), education (Interview 6, Interview 7), post office (Interview 17), rural electrification (Interview 23), and social service (Interview 32), the complainants demanded remedies to the problem. These respondents pointed to the loss of government revenues, illegal expenditure of public money, and sufferings of service seekers.

Demands for solutions to local problems included those of health complexes (Interview 11, Interview 14, Interview 22, and Interview 29), deceiving local people (Interview 28), the prevalence of illicit drugs (Interview 30), and occupying a road by a powerful individual (Interview 34). Most of the public interest problems were about health services and land registration. A respondent explained the cause of his public interest complaint in the following words:

I expected that an investigation would be done to identify how 20 more teachers were promoted through forgery of signatures in the place of the original four promotions. These illegally shown promoted 20 teachers would get their increased salaries from the government revenue. I complained so that this does not happen (Interview 6).

#### **4.1.3 Individual Interests**

Public hearings attracted more people with individual interests than public interests. Citizens who voiced their individual problems with their service providers and solutions to these problems would address the interests of the individual complainants is termed here as individual interests. The most dominating category of individual interest was found in complaints about land-related problems. All respondents who complained against the rural electrification service had individual interests in solving their individual problems. The citizens who were interested in solving their individual problems wanted solutions that might benefit other people also.

Interview 2 was an example of the dominant category of land-related problems. This respondent was a service seeker of an Upazila land office. He faced the problem of his land being registered in the name of another person by forgery of signatures of both the genuine landowner and the assistant commissioner of the local land office. Some staff members of the land office were involved in the forgery. The genuine owner had filed a case in the land office to get back his land, but the case was quashed, showing him absent in hearings of the case. The fraudster was an influential person who grabbed the land record file from its owner with the help of gangsters. The landowner was frustrated to recover his land. At this stage of his frustration, a public hearing session was held in his

Upazila. He raised the issue in the public hearing session with the hope of getting back his land, and his hope was fulfilled in just two months. The Anti-Corruption Commission, the organizer of the public hearing, ordered an inquiry into the forgery allegation. The inquiry found the allegation true. The land was mutated in the name of the original owner in two months.

The complainants who participated in public hearings to get remedies to their individual problems sometimes had broader interests. They expected to have their problems solved and actions from competent authorities capable of stopping the future generation of similar problems. Some remedies sometimes were to their dismay, in any case. Although their personal problems were addressed, the real solutions to the problems at their origin were not addressed. A client of a rural electrification office made a complaint to a public hearing session about his electricity bill that was much higher than his actual consumption of electricity. The public hearing ordered his electricity bill to be corrected. The rural electrification officials adjusted his extra bill with his next month's electricity consumption. Thereby, his problem was resolved. Nevertheless, this was not his only expectation. He also expected a remedy to the origin of the problem:

“I expected that the officials who prepared electricity bills without checking metres would be punished so that they get a lesson and do not make the same mistakes in the future. However, this did not happen as if they did not have accountability” (Interview 12).

There were other examples of interests in solving individual problems but, at the same time, expecting benefits for others as well. In Interview 36, the respondent complained to the public hearing against a local land official for demanding illegal money from him for a service. He could get his service done at the government rate of fees after complaining to the public hearing. He said, “They (officials) were compelled to take the just fee from me under pressure from the public hearing. I wanted this legal right to be applicable to all” (Interview 36).



## 4.2 EFFECTS OF PUBLIC HEARINGS

The public hearing is a tool to achieve a goal. Not being involved in the debate over the semantics of ‘effects of public hearings’, a simple understanding of the concept would refer to the achievement of the intended results of the tool. Therefore, examining the intended results of the public hearing can provide an appropriate vehicle to the understanding of its effects. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) published guidelines in 2016 to steer its public hearing sessions systematically. Giving reference to the ACC Act 2004, the guidelines stated that the ACC could take any measures in preventing corruption. Therefore, the ACC intended to organize one public hearing in a month in each district and Upazila to ensure the proper delivery of services by the public offices to the citizens and sustain and enhance the standard of integrity and values among the public servants (ACC 2016). So, the stated goals of the ACC’s public hearings give reference to two significant criteria that can be used to measure the effects of public hearings. One criterion is proper *delivery of services*, and the other is sustaining and enhancing the *standard of integrity and values*.

In delivering services to the service seekers, the public service providers follow the rules of the government. These rules determine the entitlement to a service of an applicant and the process of delivery of the service to the applicant. A deviation can happen in either of the steps. The standard of integrity and values of a public servant in delivering a public service is also determined by the rules that determine entitlement and the delivery process. In other words, the two criteria converge on one point—pursuing the government’s rules in public service delivery. Therefore, if a public servant fails to observe the set rules in public service delivery, a grievance may arise. Suppose such a grievance is reported in a public hearing session. In that case, the effect of the public hearing will lie in alleviating the grievance. In other words, when a public official does not follow the rules knowingly, he behaves unexpectedly. So, the effect of the public hearing lies in correcting the behaviour of the public officials where they have behaved wrongly and preventing the occurrence of such wrong behaviour in future service delivery. This behavioural change constitutes one facet of the success of public hearings. Another and related facet of it will be drawing the attention of the aggrieved service

seekers to the public hearing sessions. Therefore, the effectiveness of public hearing will lie partially in its reaching out to the aggrieved citizens and taking them on board in the hearing sessions.

This section describes the findings of the research about public hearings' effect on the status of the expectations of their participants. These effects are analyzed in several subsections. The first subsection looks at the publicity of public hearings. The publicity activities are crucial because the public hearing was a new concept in the research context. Little publicity may suppress the effect of public hearings. The second subsection focuses on the behavioural change of public officials regarding their relationship with their clients and their attitudinal change as a result of the public hearing. The third subsection discusses the state of the solutions to the problems of the respondents. This subsection also discusses the unfulfilled expectations of the respondents. The fourth section discusses how the public hearing enhances the respondents' confidence level. Some complainants did not pursue the solutions to the voiced problems in the public hearing, and some complainants had faced hazards as an aftermath of their complaining. These two issues are analyzed in the fifth and sixth subsections, respectively. The last two subsections—seventh and eighth—under this broad theme describe the respondents' perceived effectiveness of the public hearings and the limitations of this tool.

#### **4.2.1 Outreach of Public Hearings**

Reaching out to the sufferers of maladministration and informing them about a would-be-held public hearing session is interpreted in this report as a factor affecting the effectiveness of public hearings significantly. The concept of a public hearing was not well known to the people of this research context. Popularizing the concept among the people could make them aware of utilizing the event before it occurred. This research was interested in knowing how the interviewees came to know about the public hearing session they attended. As the findings of this research, stated in a later section, reveal, the citizens and service seekers considered the public hearing forum the only available tool to hold the bureaucrats accountable. Wider publicity of a to-be-held public hearing session

may attract the most aggrieved citizens to the event and improve governance by holding the disintegrated officials accountable. Several means were identified in the research by which the interviewees knew about the public hearing event. These means were connections with the officials of the ACC and its local committees, connections with the local civil society organizations (CSOs), journalism, publicity activities of the ACC, which included miking, use of posters and banners, official source, word of mouth, and accidental notice of unusual activity.

The ACC's outreach to the aggrieved citizens had been limited. Although most of the interviewees (around 53 per cent) had known about the public hearings through the publicity campaign of the ACC, only a few people were exposed to such publicity. The campaign included announcements through loudspeakers; use of posters, banners and notices; and the ACC officials' personal contact with aggrieved citizens. These publicity activities were carried out in Upazila office compounds and Upazila bazaars. The respondents who claimed to know about public hearings through the campaigns of the ACC were either visiting the Upazila office compounds for some reason or in the Upazila bazaars for some reason. The ACC had tried to draw the attention of aggrieved citizens and service seekers to raise their voices in public hearings through personal contacts. However, only a few respondents from the sample interviewees reported that they were invited to the public hearing sessions to lodge complaints by personal contact from the ACC officials. Thus, the vast majority of the rural people who frequently seek different service categories from the Upazila-level offices had been out of the publicity campaign.

Many respondents accidentally came to know about the event of the public hearing. They either were visiting some offices or came to the bazaar for some reason. Thus, they accidentally met the ACC officials or saw their banners or posters. Some respondents reported that seeing some crowd, they approached them and came to know about the arrangement of a public hearing. For example, the complainant of Interview 15 one day noticed a group of people around a table in front of the Upazila complex. He asked the crowd about the gathering and then came to know about the event. He said, "I knew about the public hearing from the people sitting around the table, and I registered my name for submitting a complaint" (Interview 15). This interview revealed that the

complainants who attended the public hearings might not constitute the core group of the aggrieved citizens or service seekers. In other words, many more aggrieved service seekers might have been outside the reach of the publicity of the ACC.

A community leader (Interview 16) who complained against the IFB official for non-payment to the Imam of a mosque of salaries for five consecutive months for implementing the mosque-based child and mass education programme of the government came to know about the public hearing by chance. The respondent elaborated how he knew about the public hearing:

I went to the UNO office with an application to interfere in the non-payment case so that the IFB supervisor makes the payment. I found the ACC officials in the UNO office, and they advised me to come to the public hearing session the next day. I also noticed some posters with information about public hearings (Interview 16).

A respondent (Interview 34) who knew about the public hearing by chance told that had he not been in his Upazila land office on the day he visited the office, he would have been out of the hearing, and his problem would remain unsolved. The respondent of Interview 22 also came to know about the public hearing by chance. He knew about it when the event was going on. The following is how he described his encounter of the event:

I went to the Upazila for some reason. Then I saw the public hearing going on there. I asked them if I can raise my complaints ... Then I instantly filled in a form and submitted it. Thus, I was allowed to speak at the event (Interview 22).

People's curiosity also led them to know about the arrangement of the public hearing. The respondent of Interview 31 had noticed some people making a stage. Out of curiosity, he approached them and asked about the event. Then the people told him about the public hearing. He said, "I could know about the holding of public hearing from my eagerness" (Interview 31). The man was delighted to know about the event. He further added, "I was looking for such an event to lodge my complaint" (Interview 31). This

interviewee was a victim of a corrupt public official and had suffered a lot. His complaint to the public hearing gave him great relief from his sufferings.

Banners hung above roads, posters and notice pasted on walls, leaflets distributed among citizens by the ACC officials played a good role in attracting people to public hearings. The ACC officials distributed leaflets among the citizens. One respondent said, “I was sitting in a shop in our Upazila bazaar. I saw the ACC officials distributing leaflets on public hearings and inspiring people to participate in the event” (Interview 7). A freedom fighter who complained to the public hearing against an assistant land officer for corruption said, “One day I went to the Upazila freedom fighter’s office, and I found a notice. When I asked people about it, they told about the to-be-held public hearing” (Interview 36).

People also knew about public hearing sessions through word of mouth. A complainant said: “I cannot remember exactly how I knew about public hearings. As I am a chairman of a Union Parishad, somebody might have told me about this” (Interview 14). A respondent (Interview 35) said that he could not remember how he knew about public hearings. Many respondents said that wider publicity could have drawn many more aggrieved citizens to public hearings. An interviewee said, “If broadcasting through loudspeakers is made in the localities, it will have an impact on the common mass” (Interview 30). Many more respondents emphasized wider publicity about the public hearing to draw the attention of aggrieved citizens.

#### **4.2.2 Bureaucratic Behavioural Change**

In some cases, the opportunity to complain to the public hearing improved the relationship between the service seekers and the service providers. This improvement in the relationship occurred through a change in the behavioural pattern of the service providers. The public hearing effected this change in the behaviour of bureaucrats in a positive direction. The change was imposed on the bureaucrats, and it had a cut in their corrupt benefits. Therefore, a possibility always remained there of reverting to the dishonest behaviour if incentives for such behaviour remained. The interview data unveiled different types of change in bureaucratic behaviour. One type involved

extending good behaviour towards service seekers. Another type involved eliminating intermediaries or brokers between service seekers and service providers. Nevertheless, there were examples also that indicated a deteriorated relationship.

The respondent in Interview 8 reported that his relationship with the teachers of a school had become cordial after he complained to a public hearing session. His daughter was a student in that school, and he did not receive good behaviour from the school's teachers. After he had complained against the coaching behaviour of the teachers, they started to show their good behaviour to him. The behavioural change was a result of mutual interest. The complainant and the complainees had a stake in developing a good relationship. The former's stake was his daughter's involvement in the school. The latter's stake was in the withdrawal of the complaint by the complainant. The interviewee said:

I withdrew my complaints on the humane ground as my daughter studied in that school, and it was a prestige issue for them (teachers). That resulted in a good relationship with them compared to before ... The complainees said sorry to me (Interview 8).

In the context of this research, the relationship between the service seekers and the service providers, in the case of some offices, was mediated by the presence of intermediaries. Corruption happens through intermediaries. Sometimes, corrupt officials nurtured these middlemen. The nexus between the middlemen and a section of the service providers created a barrier against establishing a direct linkage between the service seekers and the service providers. Elimination of the intermediaries helped reduce corruption in some cases. According to an interviewee (Interview 1), the public hearing effected the elimination of the middlemen in the case of a sub-registrar's office.

The respondent in Interview 1 reported to a public hearing session the practice of deed writers and sub-registrars of distortion in land-use patterns at the time of registration of land transfers for their personal benefits. This practice deprived the government of revenue. The interviewee claimed that a change in the behaviour of the public officials took place. According to his perception, the prevailing corruption situation changed

within a year of holding the public hearing, “The system is good now. It is better than before” (Interview 1).

The above assessment of the respondent was based on one visit he made to the sub-registrar’s office. According to him, discipline was back to the office because service seekers were required to exchange papers with the sub-registrar through a sliding service window, which barred proximity between them. He said, “Previously, there was a dominance of the leaders of the deed writers (middlemen). Now, it is not there, vanished completely” (Interview 1). Therefore, he found the public hearing to be effective. He said, “It (public hearing) should continue. If this system continues, no one would be able to do corruption despite his will to do so” (Interview 1). The behavioural change in the eyes of this respondent was in the form of connecting the service provider (the sub-registrar in this case) and the service seekers systematically—the service provider received papers through a sliding service window from the service seekers—and removing the role of the intermediaries, i.e., the leaders of the deed writers.

Some other respondents also reported about the change in the behavioural pattern of their service providers. However, this behavioural change was temporary only. In Interview 36, the respondent said that the public hearing changed the behaviours of the officials in the positive direction for some time only. He said, “Service seekers did not face harassments for two months or need not bribe public officials after the public hearing” (Interview 36). Another service seeker (Interview 27) of an REB office said that, after the public hearing, the officials apologized to him for their rude behaviour in the past. He said:

The REB officials have said sorry to me after the public hearing. They did not create any problem after that. Later, whenever I have gone to their office, they have served me with honour (Interview 27).

The complainant in Interview 3 observed that the change in the service providers' behaviours was temporary only. The complainant visited the Upazila health complex several times since she experienced the unprofessional behaviour of a dentist to her child. She noticed some changes in the health facility compared to the earlier time. These

changes were in the decoration of the health complex and in the behaviour of the health officials:

I worked in the emergency unit for three months after the public hearing. I found them (officials) welcoming. When a patient came (to the emergency unit), they would run (to the patient). There was development (in behaviour) in some departments, while the others remained the same (Interview 3).

According to this complainant, the public hearing had some effect on the doctors' behaviours. The hospital authority would organize a meeting every month and ask the service seekers if they had any complaints. Their behavioural change was an effect of the public hearing. She commented:

It (public hearing) should be held regularly. Otherwise, people will be neglected. Now the officials are aware that the patients can complain. As a result, they now think that they are accountable too (Interview 3).

She said that she had gone to the hospital a few days before she was interviewed. The hospital situation was not as good as it was just after the public hearing.

However, some respondents also reported counterproductive behaviour after they complained to the public hearing. In Interview 13, the respondent made a complaint against the bad service of a land office. He shared the frustrating experience he gathered after making the complaint. The complainant was not aware of the public hearing. When he was on the office premises, a person wanted to know if he had any problem with the land office. Then the person invited him to the public hearing session to lodge his complaints, "A public hearing will be held. You will come there, and your problem will be solved" (Interview 13). Accordingly, he attended the public hearing and shared his complaints with the organizers. However, after the hearing, when he went to the land office, they neglected him more than before. He stated the following:

After the public hearing, when I went to the office, they told me, "You have complained against us in the public hearing. Why have you come here? You go to the ACC. They will solve your problem." I realized that after complaining to the public hearing, I became insulted. The public



hearing told me that my problem would be solved. But they did not keep their promise (Interview 13).

### **4.2.3 Solution to Problems**

#### *4.2.3.1 Addressing Grievance*

The complainant in Interview 2 said that he saw two faces of the bureaucracy. When his land was grabbed through forgery of signatures of him and the assistant commissioner (AC) of the local land office, he filed a case with the same office for a remedy. Some staff members of the office were involved in the forgery. Even his case was quashed, showing a cause of his absence in hearings though he attended all hearings. This annulment also happened due to a trick played by some staff members of the land office. Nevertheless, the same office acted promptly to overturn its earlier behaviour as an effect of the public hearing. The ACC ordered an inquiry into the allegation of the forgery of signatures. The inquiry was done quickly, which proved the allegation, and the land was registered in the name of its genuine owner. About the effectiveness of the public hearing, the sufferer commented, “It (public hearing) benefited people so much. Such public hearings should be held in regular intervals in every sector” (Interview 2).

Most complainants reported that their problems were solved after complaining to the public hearing sessions. In some cases, the solution came very quickly. One complainant (Interview 8), who had complained against the ‘coaching business’ of a school, compared the speed of solution with electric current:

The complaining to the public hearing acted like an electric current. Measures were taken instantly that day, and the coaching business was closed from the next day ... I also withdrew my complaints in response to the teachers’ requests. Then my relationship with the teachers became good (Interview 8).

Another respondent, who made two complaints about the non-attendance of teachers in an educational institution and preparing electricity bills without reading metre reported quick action on his complaints, “In the first week (of complaining) no action (on the

complaint) was noticed. Then I went to the UNO. After that the solution came within 4 or 5 days” (Interview 7).

Some respondents reported that the problems they raised in the public hearings were addressed temporarily. The scenario returned to the previous condition quickly. The respondent in Interview 22 had complained about the dirty condition of a hospital. He described the temporary nature of the solutions to the problem in the following words:

The toilets and wards were cleaned the next day of the public hearing. The officials started to use aprons (previously, they would not use aprons in hospitals). The garbage on the hospital compound was removed and cleaned. A campaign like this was administered. This campaign ran for two or three months only. Later the condition returned to the previously practised one (Interview 22).

#### *4.2.3.2 Unfulfilled Expectations*

Around one-third of the respondents reported that their expectations were not fulfilled from the public hearings. These respondents attended public hearing sessions mostly with their individual problems, which were not solved till the date of their interviews. Most of these unmet expectations were laid with the land office (Interview 5, Interview 10, Interview 13, and Interview 33), rural electrification office (Interview 35), law enforcement administration (Interview 20), and banking service (Interview 19).

In Interview 13, the respondent complained against a land office for not correcting a mistake done by the officials. The officials harassed him for complaining to the public hearing. When he went to the land office after he had complained to a public hearing, the land officials told him, “Why have you come here? You go to the ACC. They will solve your problem” (Interview 13). Ultimately, he could get his land record corrected with the help of a third person one year later. In interview 35, the respondent complained that the rural electrification officials did not give him electricity connection to his home because of his bad relations with the officials. The public hearing issued an order in favour of giving electricity connection to the complainant’s home. However, he did not get the connection even after more than a year had passed. He said,

I did not get justice. Till now I do not have electricity connection at my home. I have become tired of visiting the offices frequently. They are guilty, but I am suffering (Interview 35).

Some public interest issues were not solved, which contributed to the non-fulfilment of expectations as well. For example, a local journalist of a western district of the country made two complaints on public problems. One problem was against charging by the concerned sub-registrar's office a few times more than the government rates for land registration. The other complaint was about selling textbooks at a rate a few times higher than the original price. The complainant said that neither of his complaints was addressed. He shared his following observation about the results of his complaining:

No result has happened. What was before is going on. Instead, the intensity has grown. The (illegal) charge for land registration is now more than before. The price of books has also increased than before. Their business has increased (Interview 9).

A similar result happened in Interview 14, who made complaints against the poor health service of a public hospital. He expected that the organizers would form an investigation committee upon his complaint. Such an investigation would unearth the problems underlying the poor health service and take appropriate measures so that the service seekers get a sigh of relief. However, the result dismayed him: "We could not see any light of hope till now" (Interview 14).

#### **4.2.4 Complainants' Confidence**

The public hearing installed in the aggrieved citizens a degree of confidence that there were forces behind them to take care of their grievances. It provided them with courage and honour. It gave them their rights back to them. The public hearing helped them to be aware of laws supporting the citizen's rights. The service seekers at the field-level offices were helpless. They were harassed, but they could not go anywhere to register their grievances. They were afraid to speak against the public officials, and the public hearing became able to remove their fear. The public hearing sessions acted as a morale booster

for the helpless citizens. An aggrieved citizen (Interview 16) who got the benefit of public hearings said:

We never thought that the high officials of the ACC would come to a place like our Upazila, and we would be able to participate in it (public hearing). Many people participated in it, and they became happy. We had a public hearing here that none of us ever expected. If such public hearings are held on a regular basis, the compressed corruption will be exposed. In other words, citizens will be able to express their grievances. This will benefit the citizens (Interview 16).

The respondent of Interview 21 told how public hearing benefited them, “We are becoming aware, learning about the law, and getting courage from public hearings”. He also added that the public hearing gave their rights back to them, “We are getting our rights”. This same respondent referred to being honoured by the public hearing, “The public hearing has honoured me. It let me sit in the front line and listened to my voice” (Interview 21). Another respondent expressed his feelings of confidence-building in the following words:

I could not even imagine it (effectiveness of public hearings). I was one hundred per cent sure that participating in the public hearing would be meaningless. I have seen that offices do not work without money. We need to spend 50 taka just to take a signature on a document. Otherwise, the officials do not sign (documents). I have seen it in the land office. Later on, when I found that a job is done (as a result of the public hearing), I got confidence that money is not needed to get a job done (in public offices). I got my trust back (Interview 34).

After getting benefits from a public hearing, one respondent said with his enhanced confidence, “If someone does corruption, and it is reported to the higher authority, the chance of getting justice increases a lot” (Interview 36). He further added that people got hassle-free services for two months from the public offices without spending additional money as a result of the public hearing. At the same time, he also expressed sorrow that the corrupt official he complained against was not punished.

#### 4.2.5 Non-Pursuance of Remedies

It is found that the complainants who raised public problems in the public hearing sessions did not pursue solutions to the problems. These complainants did not have any incentives to pursue their complaints. Incentives come from personal benefits. Those who voiced public interests in the public hearings did not have any personal benefits in pursuing the remedies. Some of the participants who voiced their personal problems did not have personal benefits in pursuing remedies because such remedies would benefit the next service seekers. Fear of harassment appeared as one of the causes of the non-pursuance of complaints. One complainant (Interview 9) reported that he did not pursue the authorities' actions towards solving the problems he raised out of fear. He explained the cause of his fear in the following words:

I became afraid after complaining. How should I pursue solutions? Custom officials were collecting information about me: who was the person, what he does, and how much income he earns. Then I became afraid. I might have been in trouble if I had pursued the problems I raised. That is why I remained silent (Interview 9).

The non-pursuance of remedies also appeared to be a result of being hopeless. Although these complainants argued that they were well-wishers of ordinary citizens, they did not leave traceable records by pursuing their respective causes. One such complainant (Interview 14) said that he was invited by the authority to meet them against whom he made his complaints. It appeared that he also expected the authority to call him again to inform him about the measures taken: "I did not get any news on my complaint so far" (Interview 14). A respondent (Interview 29) complained against the negligence of doctors but did not follow what happened after the complaining. He said, "Actually, I cannot tell about this (what happened) because I do not go there often" (Interview 29). This respondent was interviewed 16 months after he had made his complaint, but he did follow up his complaint.

In Interview 15, the respondent complained against the ambulance service of a public health complex. However, he did not pursue the remedies suggested in the public

hearing. The untold reason was that he did not need to use the ambulance service frequently. He needed this service twice—when his sick father and his maternal aunt were needed to take to the capital city for better treatment. As those events were over, he did not find any incentive to pursue the remedies. This mentality is evident in his comments: “In the public hearing, the doctors of the hospital were told to take some specific steps. Nowadays, I do not go to the hospital. Therefore, I cannot tell you whether any changes have taken place. I do not have any connection with the hospital anymore” (Interview 15).

#### **4.2.6 Hazards of Complaining**

Making complaints in public hearing sessions was not risk-free. Complaints in public hearings caused public shaming of the persons against whom complaints were made. Therefore, the complainees might cause some injury—mental or physical—to the complainants. Most interviewees reported that they did not face any problem with making complaints in public hearing sessions. In Interview 8, the respondent said that he had no problem with complaining before the public hearing. None caused any problem even after making his complaint. However, the complainees expressed their sorrow to the complainant and requested him to withdraw his complaints:

The complainees expressed their sorrow to me after I had complained. They requested so that I withdraw my complaints. They were teachers. They requested me. So I withdrew my complaints on humanitarian grounds. To err is human. Later I did not face any problems (Interview 8).

Another respondent (Interview 17) reported similar social pressure. He complained to the public hearing against the corruption of a postmaster who would take illegal money from the buyers and sellers of national savings certificates from his post office. The complaineer postmaster was at the end of his public service tenure and would retire from his service soon. The ACC started preparation for filing a case against the postmaster following the public hearing complaint. Then social pressure began to come to the complainant to withdraw his complaint. The postmaster used the local Member of the Parliament and other relatives to persuade the complainant. He also tried to give the

complainant threats through some local people by giving them money. The interviewee said, “I faced social pressure for six months” (Interview 17). Many humanitarian grounds were raised favouring the request for withdrawal of the complaint. The postmaster had four daughters, and one of them was disabled. The respondent further added, “I had to withdraw my complaints from humanitarian consideration. I was emotionally blackmailed. I could not ignore so many requests” (Interview 17).

Nevertheless, there were some cases where the complainees tried to cause psychological injuries to the complainants. The volume of the injury depended on the power position of the players in the local context where the public hearing was held. Sometimes, the complainant felt unprotected from situations where a powerful complaineer tried to create a counter-narrative to humiliate the complainant. A complainant faced a situation like what is described above:

After making my complaints in the public hearing, the accused teachers took some students by their side. They brought out a procession against me, announcing that my complaint was false (Interview 7).

One of the accused teachers was involved in politics and held a position on a local committee of the political party in power. The teacher utilized his power-play to injure the complainant psychologically and was successful to some extent. The complainant had to say sorry to a meeting of the local guardians:

The local guardians organized a meeting, and I told them sorry for making my complaint. The local guardians asked me why I had made complaints in the public hearing without discussing the complaint with them (Interview 7).

Apart from psychological hazards, some complainants reported physical assault and cancellation of benefits as counterproductive results of complaining in public hearings. For example, in Interview 10, the respondent reported the occurrence of assault on him. The complainant reported that his stepbrothers assaulted him for complaining to a public hearing session, “My brothers harassed me, beat me for complaining” (Interview 10). About the cancellation of social benefits, a local community leader reported such an example. The respondent in Interview 16 voiced in a public hearing the issue of non-

payment to the Imam of a mosque of salaries for five consecutive months. The Imam would get this salary for implementing a mosque-based child and mass education programme of the government. The complainant reported that the mosque-based child and mass education centre of their mosque was cancelled after the complaining. The complainant added the following:

We have tried to include our mosque anew as a centre for the mosque-based child and mass education programme. The IFB local office had given us commitments in this regard, but we did not get the centre back (Interview 16).

The respondent in Interview 20 reported a different type of harassment. The interviewee had complained against the eviction of her from her residence by police. The police, after the public hearing, filed a terrorism case against her son. He was appearing at his secondary school certificate (SSC) at that time and arrested the boy. She said, “He (son) had only two exams left. I fell at their (police) feet and requested to let him finish his exams. But they did not listen to me” (Interview 20). The boy had to be in jail for some days. She compared her harassment with what happens in wartime: “As the administration does whatever it likes at the time of a war, they have tortured us like that. I have faced this myself. We had to tolerate this in silence” (Interview 20). A district-level officer of the ACC said that complainants reported being picked up by police after complaining to public hearings against them.

Another respondent in Interview 22 faced another type of hazard after complaining to the public hearing. He complained that the local food officer did not purchase paddy from the farmers at a price fixed by the government. Then the food officer and some other people tried to persuade him (complainant) by offering money to withdraw his complaints. However, he did not withdraw his complaints.

An unknown fear hunted some complainants for some time after complaining to the public hearing. The complainees, in these cases, were influential actors in society. They were parts of the power structure of the social world with different degrees of power. The complainants, on the other hand, were weaker compared to the complainees.



Moreover, the members of the society sometimes discouraged the social voices against corrupt behaviours instead of encouraging them. The respondent in Interview 29 said, “After I made the complaint, some people told me that I should not have told these” (Interview 29). Another interviewee said:

I have been under some mental pressure after making the complaints. Some officials were angry with me as I made complaints against them. They did not do anything against me till now. Nevertheless, I feel some mental pressure from my inside (Interview 28).

#### **4.2.7 Perceived Effectiveness**

One respondent described the effectiveness of public hearings in these words, “I could not have understood that it was possible to solve some problems instantly on the land of Bangladesh if the public hearing were not held” (Interview 32). Participants of public hearings believed that if complaints were made with evidence, it would work effectively. Mere complaining without evidence would not work. They also believed that if public hearings were held regularly, corruption would vanish from the country. A participant commented the following about the effectiveness of public hearings:

If anyone participates in public hearings, they should complain supported by proper evidence. Complaining without proper evidence will not bring any results ... If public hearings are held in every district regularly, corruption will reduce substantially ... The more frequently public hearings are held, the better for the country (Interview 8).

The public hearing was commonly described as ‘a good initiative’ of the government by the interviewees. A complainant (Interview 7) who made two complaints in a public hearing found the tool to be the most effective one. The effectiveness of public hearings was found in several dimensions of the process of management. One dimension was *the quickness* of the solutions. The respondents noticed that the same service was delivered within the shortest possible time after complaining to the public hearing compared to the usual length of the time in getting a public service. Another dimension of the effectiveness was *acceptance* by the officials of the directions given by

the ACC officials. The respondents found that the complainee offices readily accepted the decisions of the public hearing in the majority of the cases. According to Interview 7, complaints raised in public hearings got a 'quick solution', and all officials 'accepted the judgments of public hearings'. The same respondent found yet another dimension of the effectiveness of the public hearing, which was a *realization* of mistakes by the public service providers. He said that the complainees could “understand their mistakes” through public hearings (Interview 7). However, this realization might not have the same degree and duration across the board. Another respondent (Interview 16) described the realization dimension using a different term: *awareness*. This respondent believed that problems laid in all the veins of the public offices. He further added that public hearings made the officials ‘aware of their actions’ regarding the problems of their offices.

The vital component of an accountability relationship is the fear of being answerable by an actor to a forum. The concept of the public hearing is built on this argument. The respondent of Interview 16 also believed that the public hearing had installed a feeling of fear in the minds of the public officials. In the absence of a public hearing, the service seekers did not have any opportunity to raise their voices against the public service providers. The public officials had always been the powerful actors to the service seekers. The public officials also considered the service seekers a weaker party in the provider-seeker relationship. The introduction of the public hearing changed this perception. The tool reversed the calculation of power in the relationship. The all-time-fearful service seekers got their power back through the public hearing. The aggrieved service seekers raised their voices in the public hearing sessions without any fear in their minds. The respondent of Interview 16 claimed that the audacious behaviour of the ever-fearful service seekers made the service providers fearful of the public hearings. Another respondent (Interview 11) considered public hearing as a *panacea*. Perhaps these comments did not apply to all contexts of public service delivery. Nevertheless, they indicated the average strength of public hearings. The interviewee in Interview 11 made the following comments:

I think public hearing is much effective in maintaining transparency in the offices of public administration ... It is a panacea for all sorts of diseases of

public administration. If it is held regularly, citizens and the government will benefit from it (Interview 11).

The respondent in Interview 9 made two complaints of the public interest category in a public hearing session. However, he did not get any results after complaining. Nevertheless, the complainant believed public hearing to be effective. Although his complaints were not addressed, he still believed that the public hearing session was helpful because it provided him with a forum to speak about corrupt practices. This opportunity of expressing grievances was where his satisfaction laid. In his own words:

The public hearing is an exceptional initiative and, of course, is a good initiative. My problems were not solved, but I could raise them in a forum organized by the ACC. That was a big gain for me. That is why it is a good initiative, although someone may not get the desired results (Interview 9).

Expression of grievances in the public hearings was regarded as a kind of relief by some other respondents. Moreover, a respondent brought the issue of shame in the effectiveness of public hearings. According to him, the public hearing gave shame to the corrupt officials. The following excerpt is taken from his interview:

Some aggrieved and hopeless citizens can get a sigh of relief by talking to public administration officials. It provides a scope to speak against corrupt officials. The corrupt gets shame in front of the people present there, and some actions are taken (Interview 5).

Another respondent added a different term to describe his satisfaction. He said that the public hearing provided consolation if it could not address a problem. The following were his words:

If public hearings are organized, citizens get benefits from it. Citizens get consolation at the least. So far, I have seen, it is effective. I went to the land office as well. The quality of their work has improved” (Interview 19).

In the eyes of some respondents, the public hearings did not impact the service delivery process of public offices. According to a complainant (Interview 15), organizing public hearings was a good initiative of the government because it served the interests of the ordinary people. At the same time, he believed that if the public servants did not work properly even after public hearings were held, then the tool would not be effective. That needed a cultural transformation in the public servants. This respondent shared his following observation about the effectiveness of public hearing in his Upazila:

I receive services regularly from three offices of my Upazila. These are land-related, health-related, and electricity-related services. The public hearing has not impacted any changes in these offices. I can tell you about a few offices where corruption has increased. I have not seen any impact of the public hearing in this Upazila (Interview 15).

The above observation of Interview 15 was at a confrontation with that of Interview 16 and Interview 17; both of these additional interviews were from the same public hearing location. According to the respondent of Interview 16, “Now I hear and see that public services have become good after the public hearing was held” (Interview 16). This interviewee opined that the public hearing was necessary because it made the Upazila level public officials responsive to the service seekers. The service seekers’ sufferings were reduced. He added, “Many people voiced their problems in the public hearing in addition to me. They also got remedies to their problems” (Interview 16). The respondent in Interview 17 made similar claims. He said, “I did not think that I would get such (positive) results from the public hearing. I got results much more than what I expected”. According to him, the public hearing recorded all complaints and brought the complainers to book.

Although some respondents reported that their complaints were not addressed, they recognized the benefits of public hearings. The respondent in Interview 28 made several complaints in a public hearing session. One of his complaints was against the chairperson of the Upazila corruption prevention committee. When this respondent was asked about his assessment of the effectiveness of the public hearing, he said that it was a

showcasing event, and it had no effect. Despite his harsh criticism of the public hearing, he recommended its frequent arrangement:

The result is zero. However, the initiative of public hearings is good if we consider the totality of it. It is for the welfare of the citizens, although the public hearing could not bring any welfare to us here. Nevertheless, it is, undoubtedly, a good thing. The public hearing provides a necessary forum for the common mass to lodge their complaints. The more frequently it is held, the more people will become aware and be benefited (Interview 28).

Some respondents expected public hearings to be organized in open spaces, “It would be better if public hearings are held in the open field allowing people from all walks of life to participate in them” (Interview 22). He thought that if wider publicity were done, more people would take part in public hearings. They would rise and raise their voices. He added, “Many people want to rise against maladministration, but they cannot do so because of a lack of a convenient environment” (Interview 22).

#### **4.2.8 Limitations of Public Hearings**

Public hearings could not address some concerns of the citizens that were raised in the forum. After listening to the citizens’ problems, the ACC gave directives to concerned local authorities to address the problems. These citizens shared in the public hearing sessions the problems they had with some public offices. Some citizens brought to the officials’ attention problems that were not an individual’s problems but were problems of the ordinary citizens and thereby were of general category. Some other citizens raised their individual as well as public problems. Most interviewees reported that their problems were addressed and solved by the concerned authorities upon directions from the ACC—the organizer of public hearing sessions. Nevertheless, some interviewees reported that the concerned authorities did not address their problems. These citizens attended public hearings as a last resort to the ACC, and they had high hopes in the agency. They were somehow helpless in the power play of society. This section analyses a few of the problems that the public hearings could not solve due to some limitations of the organizer.

Two limitations of public hearings were evident in the research. Firstly, some complainants needed advisory services to frame their complaints appropriately, which the ACC could not provide. Secondly, the ACC could not materialize some of its decisions taken in the public hearing sessions due to its organizational weaknesses. Many complainants were illiterate and poor. They did not have sufficient knowledge about how to frame a complaint correctly. For example, a complainant's actual problem was with a settlement office that did not include his name in the ancestral land records after his father's death. However, the complainant lodged complaints against the local land office. Therefore, this complainant could not benefit from the public hearing. The organizational weaknesses of the ACC originated partly in its limitation of resources, mainly human resources and partly in the structural power position of its environmental actors. The existing workforce of the ACC and financial and other logistic endowments appeared insufficient to take adequate care of public hearing issues besides its routine works. Some actors (offices) did not implement the decisions of the public hearing, and the ACC appeared to accept the status quo.

Around one-third of the respondents reported that their expectations from the public hearing were not fulfilled, while one-fourth commented that their expectations were partially fulfilled. Only one-third of the respondents whose expectations were not fulfilled believed that the public hearing was not effective. Even some of the respondents whose expectations were not fulfilled believed that the public hearing was effective in their eyes. These respondents made this comment not based on what they gained individually from the public hearings but on the average gains received by the public.

The public hearings could not solve mainly land-related, individual problems (Interview 5, Interview 10, Interview 20, and Interview 33). Another problem of the individual category was related to the REB (Interview 35). The rest of the unresolved problems were of the public category and mostly related to the health service. One of the few unsuccessful land-related complainants was with the respondent in Interview 10. This complainant was the only son of the second wife of his father. The first wife of his father had three sons and two daughters. According to the complainant, his stepbrothers were rich, but he was a day labourer because they deprived him through a conspiracy of

his share in his father's property. He was a legitimate heir to his father's all properties. His father was a rich man. He said:

My father has properties in Chhatak bazaar equivalent to 2-3 crore taka.

After my father's death, I am also an heir, but my stepbrothers have erased my name from the proof of inheritance document (Interview 10).

This complainant's stepbrothers were trying to sell a property of this father, and he requested the local assistant commissioner of land not to sign a land document that did not include his name. Nevertheless, the land official did not pay heed to his request. He complained to the public hearing session about this problem. However, the public hearing could not solve his problem. Being hopeless, the respondent said, "Allah will do justice" (Interview 10).

The respondent in interview 20 was evicted from her house who had been living on leased land for a long time. She said, "We had homes there for 120 years, and we had been living there for generations" (Interview 20). The respondent said that some influential local people evicted them with the help of the police. The respondent complained to the public hearing against the forceful eviction from their ancestral homes associated with a death threat. The decision of the public hearing regarding this grievance was, as was revealed from the ACC documents, that the police super and the deputy commissioner of the district would take coordinated decisions. On the interview date, the respondent said, "No results were made after the complaining. We are floating on the street" (Interview 20). The respondent in Interview 33 complained that a purchased land was mutated in another's name by the local land office. The public hearing documents of the ACC revealed that the hearing directed a review of the application of the complaining. For that matter, the application was to be sent to the additional divisional commissioner of revenue of the concerned division through the assistant commissioner of the local land office. The respondent said, "The public hearing was not effective in my case" (Interview 33).

The respondent in Interview 35 complained to a public hearing that a lineman of the REB demanded twenty thousand taka for transferring an electric metre from his old house to a newly built one. The respondent wanted a receipt of the money demanded by

the lineman, which the lineman refused to give. The lineman then disconnected the electricity connection to the home of the respondent and quarrelled with him. The respondent complained against this behaviour of the lineman. The public hearing asked the assistant general manager of the REB to establish an electrical connection to the respondent's house, and the local UNO was asked to monitor the development. However, till the date of the interview, the respondent did not get an electricity connection.

Apart from the unresolved grievances, some respondents pointed to some other limitations of public hearings. These limitations included time duration and locations of hearings. One respondent indicated political influence in limiting the effectiveness of public hearings. Some considered the period spent for a public hearing session very short. One respondent said the following about the period of a public hearing session:

It would be more effective if a public hearing session is held for long hours. The 2-3 hours are inadequate for listening to the complaints against all the offices. Many people were enlisted but could not tell about their complaints. Only a few got the chance to tell their experiences. People would get satisfaction if they could express their say in an extended public hearing session (Interview 17).

Public hearings at the Upazila level were organized generally in a closed room. The event was mostly held in the Upazila auditorium. This facility could accommodate only a limited number of people. Some respondents considered the space to be inadequate to allow participation of the mass. One respondent said, "Public hearings should be held in a place so that ordinary citizens can easily be present there and participate in them" (Interview 22). Citizens preferred open spaces for public hearings to make their access to the event unhindered and keep it open to all. The respondent in Interview 22 further added, "It would be better if public hearings are held in the open field, allowing people from all walks of life to participate in them" (Interview 22). The respondent in Interview 29 indicated that political influence was a limitation of public hearings. He said, "Political matters are involved here. The politicians are all—they are contractors, they are all" (Interview 29).



### **4.3 PUBLIC HEARINGS AND BUREAUCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY**

Data presented in the previous section give the public hearing's impression of bringing in bureaucratic accountability in the field-level public administration to a large extent. The public hearing was considered by the aggrieved citizens an oasis in the desert of maladministration. Most respondents described the public hearing as effective to a range of degrees. Surprisingly, some respondents claimed that the public hearing did not solve their grievances, yet they described the forum as effective. These citizens were happy to express their grievances in the hearing sessions. They considered this expression of grievances as a kind of accountability. Speaking against a powerful bureaucracy of the misdeeds of its members by the all-time neglected citizens was an accountability opportunity for them. This section analyses the public hearing's effect on bureaucratic accountability from two aspects. The first subsection analyses how the public hearing had responded to the asymmetric power structure in the society in addressing the grievances of citizens of different power positions. The second subsection analyses the citizens' perspective of accountability brought in by the public hearings.

#### **4.3.1 Power Structure**

Power dynamics of the stakeholders of the public hearings determined their accountability effects. In most cases, the ACC emerged as the sustainer. Nevertheless, in a few cases, the other actors exerted their power. The event of a public hearing provided an opportunity to the aggrieved citizens to lodge complaints against maladministration. However, in some cases, addressing the complaints appeared to be contingent upon the power positions of the complainants and the complainees. The power structures in the society enable people of different classes to have power of different magnitude. The interview data revealed that the people who were connected to the orbits of the power structures in the society were mainly attracted to the public hearing sessions and got their grievances addressed. Therefore, the powerless could avail less of the mechanism's benefits. The respondent in Interview 41, whose grievance was not addressed by the public hearing mechanism, said, "The public hearing is not for the poor, it is needed for the rich. They only listen to (but not act upon) the voice of the poor" (Interview 41).

Power positions impacted bureaucratic accountability from two perspectives—one was the citizens' trust in the ACC's protection of their interests, and the other was the ACC's intention and ability to overcome the bureaucrats' resistance to serving the public interests.

Many citizens registered with the ACC to share their grievances in the public hearings. However, a good number of them refrained from participation. Some other citizens who had participated in the public hearings did not agree to give an interview. A fear factor worked behind their decisions. Even the respondents who participated in an interview were afraid, considering their power position in society. For example, a complainant (Interview 3) was an NGO official working in an Upazila of the Dhaka district. Her boss encouraged her to raise the experience she gathered in a hospital in a public hearing session. Nevertheless, she was frightened after lodging her complaint. An unknown fear would hunt her that someone could harm her child as the child would remain at home alone when she would go to her office. She was not a local resident. After the public hearing, the hospital authority called her, but she did not meet them out of fear. She was concerned about her child's security. She said, "After the hearing, some people indicated to me and said, 'this lady took part in the hearing and made a complaint'. This made me frightened much" (Interview 3).

In some contexts, the public hearings changed the existing power structure between the service seekers and the service providers. Theoretically, the citizens are the owners, and the public officials are their servants. The public officials get their salaries from the citizens' taxes. However, practically, when the individual citizens visited the public offices for services, the service providers exerted their power as if they were the owners or the principal. The citizens were helpless. During public hearings, the citizens found the public servants as their agents. A complainant described his observation:

During the public hearing session, the public officials did not show their power. They were found to be fearful. They also tried to provide services to the citizens properly for some days (as a result of public hearings) (Interview 11).

Corrupt land officials of an Upazila recorded a piece of land of the respondent in Interview 2 in the name of another person through forgery. The public hearing overturned the land office decision and returned the land ownership to its genuine owner. Such actions from the public hearings enhanced citizens' trust in the public hearing's ability to establish bureaucratic accountability. A respondent expressed his beliefs about the public hearing, "If public hearings are frequently held, citizens will become aware, and the public officials will not do corruption in fear of public hearings" (Interview 4). Another respondent added about the power of public hearings, "It (public hearings) allows to speak against corrupt officials and they get public shaming" (Interview 5).

The public hearing's intention and ability to make the bureaucrats' accountable faltered in a few cases of complaining (Interview 10, Interview 20, and Interview 35). Considering the social contexts, these complainants represented the powerless ordinary poor citizens of the country. The respondent in Interview 10 was deprived of his right to his father's land property despite his repeated requests to the local land office. He was a poor man. After the public hearing, he was advised by the deputy commissioner of his district to go to the civil court for addressing his grievance. He said, "I can earn only three to four hundred taka a day by selling my labour. I could not manage money to run a case in the court" (Interview 10). He wrongly complained against a land office while the wrongdoer—a settlement office—remained unaccountable. The public hearing could not give him his right to his father's property. In contradiction, the respondent in Interview 2 was a rich man and was associated with the local CPC. Concerning his land dispute, the public hearing could overturn a wrong decision of a local land office by ordering an investigation and returning his land ownership to him. In Interview 20, the public hearing asked the local police and general administration to address the problem of the respondent that was not observed. In the case of Interview 35, the public hearing asked the local administration to oversee an electricity connection to the complainant's home. However, the connection was not given till the date of the interview with the respondent.

### 4.3.2 Accountability Opportunity

In the absence of an effective accountability framework, the citizens took the public hearing as an opportunity of holding corrupt bureaucrats accountable. Accountability was not a regular phenomenon to the citizens. There was no functional mechanism before them where they could share their grievances. The aggrieved citizens could not hold the bureaucrats accountable when the experience of harassment took place regularly or irregularly. The harassed service seekers found the public hearing as an oasis in the desert of unaccountable service providers. An aggrieved service seeker expressed his feeling about public hearings in the following words:

I did not have any idea about where to tell (about corrupt behaviour of public officials). When I learnt about this public hearing ... I thought I should not miss this opportunity (to hold corrupt officials accountable). I had the belief to get a good result from the public hearing (Interview 7).

Citizens as the principal did not get the opportunity to hold the public servants accountable. Public hearings brought this opportunity to them. This mechanism made the citizens feel like the 'principal' and the public officials felt like the citizens' agents. Public hearings provided citizens with the feeling of the principal, "I got the honour a citizen should get from them (the officials)" (Interview 11). A public servant is paid from the taxes of the citizens. However, when these citizens visited the public servants to get a public service, they were harassed in most cases. The service seekers did not get honour from the service providers. In most cases, the service providers exerted them as the principal. Their behaviour appeared to be as if they were doing a favour to the service seekers. The expression given by Interview 11 bears testimony to this fact.

The public hearing gave sufferers a little sigh of relief from the anguish they bore with them. The mechanism of the public hearing could not address everyone's complaints. Nevertheless, it provided a forum where aggrieved citizens could evaporate the compressed feeling of dissatisfaction stored within them. Therefore, even the expression of a complaint, disregarding the subsequent actions on it, gave the

complainant some degree of satisfaction. It released his dejection and gave him a sort of serenity:

I do not have a complete perception of the effectiveness of a public hearing. However, I can tell you that the complaint I made is not addressed yet. Nevertheless, the tranquillity that I have received from the public hearing is that I found a platform to lodge my complaint. I found this platform in the public hearing to expose my complaint. I got a sort of serenity from this event. I did not get anything more than this (Interview 14).

The public hearing neutralized the elements in society that supported a corrupt nexus and barred citizens from speaking against them. Some respondents indicated a political power-base of these influential elements. A respondent said, “There are some political matters involved here. They are contractors. They are all” (Interview 29). Another respondent told of being rebuked by local guardians for complaining to the public hearing without consulting them (Interview 7). The public hearing provided the risk-takers courage to be outspoken:

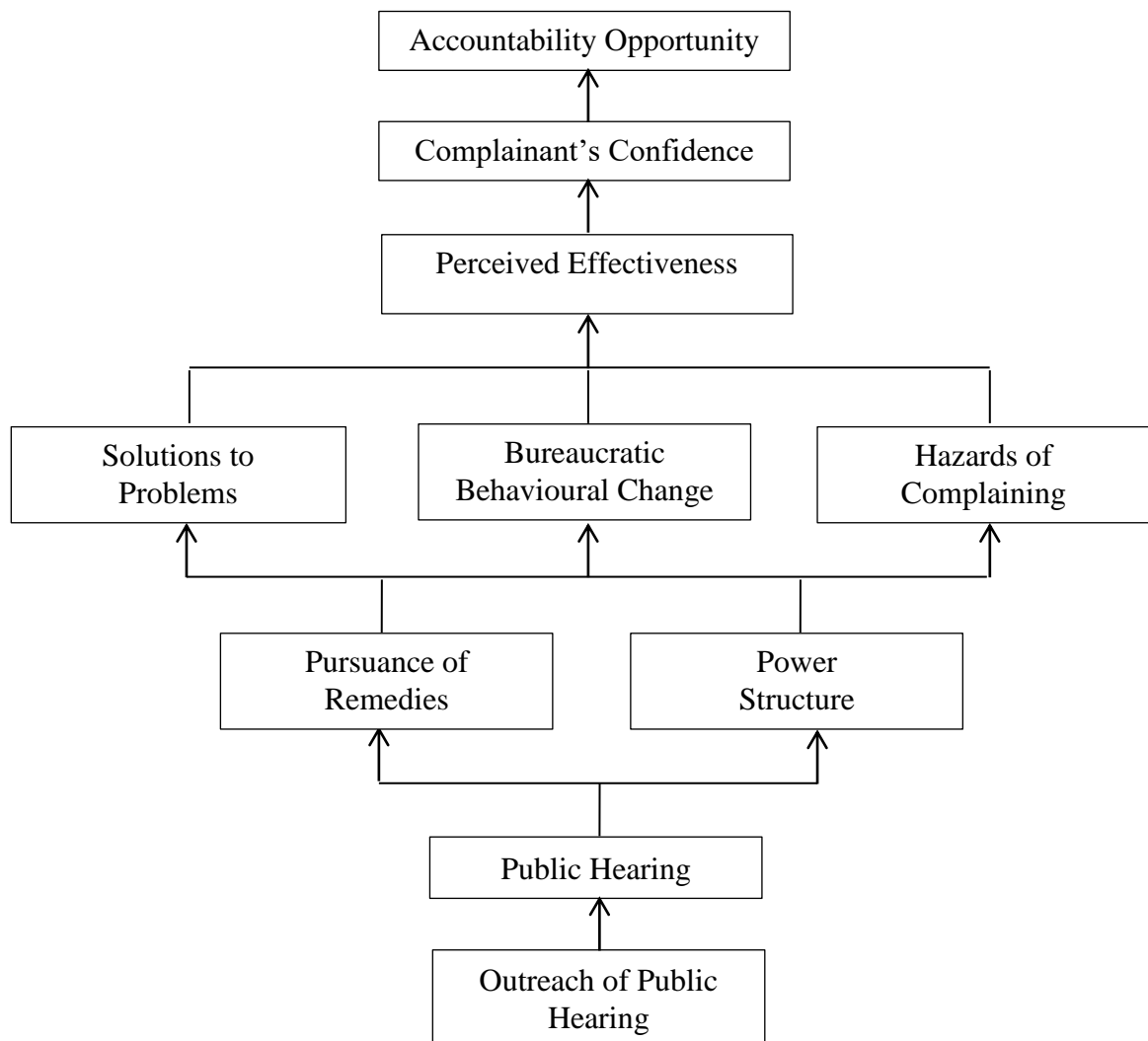
We have many people in our country who hide grievances within themselves. They cannot open up because of fear emanating from society and influential people. People can open up fearlessly in public hearings (Interview 32).

Another dimension of the public hearing was that it had shattered the belief in the invincibility and unaccountability of the corrupt officials. There had been a lack of an effective accountability mechanism in the field-level bureaucracy. The government introduced a grievance redress system (GRS) which was non-functional at the field administration. Therefore, the bureaucracy at this tier had enjoyed the freedom of being unaccountable. Only the public hearing had been an exception. One respondent said the following:

The public hearing creates a forum for accountability. In the absence of a public hearing, there is no place for accountability. Now they think that they will be made accountable if they commit corruption. The offices are

made accountable before the citizens. I like this aspect of the public hearing” (Interview 27).

A grounded theory research aims at identifying a core category through data analysis that explains the phenomenon under the study. This research reached ‘accountability opportunity’ as the central category of the accountability effect of public hearings following the preceding findings. Its relations with the other categories are shown in the following figure:



**Figure 1 Grounded Theory: Accountability Opportunity**

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explored the accountability effect of the public hearings of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) in the field-level public bureaucracy of Bangladesh. Specifically, it explored the nature of the complaints people lodged in public hearings, described the consequences of complaining to the public hearings, and how they affected bureaucratic accountability. Generally, public hearings have been described as a tool for citizen participation to get public input in development planning. Very few authors, such as Islam et al. (2018) and Thomas (2014), have mentioned the mechanism as a tool for accountability. Both the sources indicated the creation of a ‘counter public sphere’ through public hearings. However, the sphere may only provide a platform for the forum, and the actors may remain absent. The actor—forum interaction of the accountability relationship may remain absent in such spheres. Therefore, the forum does not get an opportunity to ask questions to the actors and get answers to their questions. In the meaning of a counter public sphere, these public hearings only create indirect pressures on the actors to improve performance because their performance information is exposed in the hearings.

The ACC’s public hearings represented a proper form of accountability where citizens raised issues of their grievances and complaints, and the relevant public officials responded to them. The citizens raised diversified complaints in these hearings. The respondents of this study complained against land, health, education, electricity bill, social security, law enforcement, postal, banking, and even ACC local committee-related services. Most respondents complained about the corruption of the public officials in getting public services and demanded an end to the corrupt practices. The majority of the respondents demanded solutions to their individual problems. Nevertheless, some of them raised issues of public interests. Some of the public hearing participants with public interests in their voices were self-motivated and self-mobilized citizens. However, few of

them were motivated and mobilized by other people. Both of these groups had a common cause for the greater community.

The ACC used different techniques to attract citizens' attention to its public hearings, including miking, posters, and banners. This publicity was limited to the core of the headquarters of the district and Upazila administration. People living in the vast hinterland of a field-level administrative headquarter remained uninformed of the public hearings. Therefore, these publicity means were not enough to reach the vulnerable groups who were regular sufferers of maladministration of the local bureaucracy. Participation in the public hearings was limited by people who lived in the vicinity of the event's locations. The study of Alam et al. (2017) also identified this limitation of the ACC's public hearings. Apart from the ACC's endeavour of reaching out to the citizens to inform them about the public hearings, citizens came to know about the events through other means. These means included their connections with the officials of the ACC and its local committees, the local civil society organizations (CSOs), journalism, official source, word of mouth, and accidental notice of unusual activities, for example, preparing a pandal for a public hearing.

The public hearing had temporarily effected an improved relationship between the service seekers and the service providers. This improvement came in the providers' respect for the seekers, the ceasing of demanding bribes in exchange for services, and the elimination of the intermediaries between the service providers and service seekers. The impact of the public hearings could not last long. The tool successfully created temporary pressure on the field-level bureaucrats to perform expectedly. When the bureaucrats realized that the public hearing was not a regular phenomenon, they reverted to their usual practice. For example, in one study location, the public hearing was held in 2015, and no hearing was held since then. As a result, the initial perception of being subject to inevitable accountability faded from the minds of the service providers when they realized that the next round of the public hearing was uncertain. Moreover, the public hearing also effected a deteriorating relationship between the providers and seekers in some cases. The service providers misbehaved and declined to provide services to the



seekers because they had complained to the ACC. There was no mechanism for reporting this revenge by the service providers so that their interests get protected.

The service seekers received their expected services without harassment, although this positive change in the service providers' behaviour was temporary. It implies that the public hearings had a positive impact in improving the public service delivery at the field-level bureaucracy. This positivity of the impact was possible because of the mechanism's success in making the field-level bureaucrats accountable. Nevertheless, some complainants' grievances were not addressed. The ACC asked the local administration of the public hearing locations to address most of the reported complaints. In the unsuccessful cases, the local administration did not turn up with a proactive attitude to the ACC's call. On the other hand, the ACC did not adequately follow its directives so that the complainants get results. The ACC officials' compromised commitments and lack of sufficient follow-ups due to its organizational weaknesses contributed to the unresolved status of a few of such complaints. Alam et al. (2017) reported a lack of sufficient human resources, budgetary allocation and logistics of the ACC.

The public hearing helped increase the confidence level of the service seekers in some critical aspects. They were not aware of their rights to hassle-free services and the relevant laws protecting the rights. There was a firm belief in the service seekers that getting public services without money was not possible. Alom (2021) found that the Upazila level service seekers did not want to complain against their service providers, fearing reprisal from them. Moreover, the same study reported that the government system of complaining, which included a grievance redress mechanism, was non-functional at the Upazila level. Therefore, they did not have trust in the public offices. The mechanism of public hearings produced the reverse findings of Alom (2021). This mechanism enhanced the service seekers' confidence that the public officials were subject to accountability.

Some respondents did not pursue their complaints after complaining to the public hearings. A lack of interest in pursuing the complaints and some dubious actions from

some public offices contributed to the non-pursuance of complaints. Non-pursuance happened more with complaints that were of public interests, and the complainants did not find any benefits in pursuance. Therefore, a lack of personal benefits was a significant factor in not following the remedies to a complaint. Although the mechanism of public hearing helped enhance the confidence of most service seekers, complaining also generated fear in some cases. Some service seekers did not pursue solutions to the problems they raised in public hearings because they were afraid of being put in difficulties by public officials.

Complaining to the public hearings brought some hazards to some complainants in the form of social pressure and psychological injuries. The power holders in society did not come out to protect the rights of their fellow members in society when the service providers of the public offices violated these rights. Contrarily, the same power holders were out when the complaints were made to the public hearings about the non-fulfilment of rights. The power holders had an interest in maintaining the status quo. On the contrary, the public hearings struck the status quo. The power holders questioned why the complaints were made without consulting them beforehand. Therefore, pressures came to the complainants to withdraw their complaints. Once a complaint was recorded in the public hearings, some officials were in disgrace, and departmental actions were made possible against them. Respondents also reported physical assaults. Sometimes, counter-narratives were made to neutralize the complaints. The public officials cut social benefits and brought counter-allegations against the complainants.

The public hearing was generally described by the respondents as an effective tool to make the public officials accountable. The officials realised that the ever-fearful service seekers could be audacious and dare to complain against them. It happened in many cases. The tool's effectiveness was evident in the acceptance of the decisions of the ACC by the officials against whom complaints were made. The officials quickly resolved the problems of the service seekers after the public hearing. In the absence of a functional hierarchical accountability mechanism, the respondents of this study described the public hearing as a panacea for all sorts of diseases of the field-level bureaucracy. The service seekers of the field-level bureaucracy had been so harassed that even expression of

grievances in the public hearing was considered the effectiveness of the tool. They had no place to share their sorrows, and the public hearing made it possible. The mere disclosure of the complaints before the public was considered its effectiveness because this activity mobilised shame to the corrupt public officials. The mechanism provided a suitable environment for aggrieved service seekers for complaining.

The public hearings had been able to bring the powerful field-level bureaucracy under an intermittent accountability mechanism. The hearing studied in each location was held once only. Therefore, the accountability effect of the mechanism was temporary. Although the accountability was short-lived, it was effective even though it could not resolve some of the grievances reported in the public hearings. The public hearing event brought the service providers and the service seekers face to face on the same platform. The service providers could express their grievances in the face of the service providers fearlessly. The service providers had to respond to the allegations instantly before the public. This answerability was unique to the service seekers. They never got an opportunity to ask questions to the service providers eliciting an answer to their questions except for the public hearings. Irrespective of the solutions to the problems, the mere expression of grievances in a forum attended by the service providers was a kind of accountability to the service seekers. The public hearing's accountability strength moulded into the relational power positions of the different actors of the accountability relationships. Citizens having a better connection with the power structure of society were better served by the accountability mechanism than the marginalized poor citizens.

Aggrieved service seekers from the field-level bureaucracies participated in the ACC's public hearings, where land, health, education, and electricity-related complaints dominated. In the research context where the state agencies were unwilling to listen to citizens, formal institutions of accountability were weak, and the process that engages citizens with the state were absent, the aggrieved citizens viewed the public hearings as a saviour. It bolstered their confidence and enhanced trust in the accountability mechanism. The intermittent nature of the hearing event improved relationships between service providers and service seekers temporarily only. The positive change in the behaviour of the field-level bureaucrats faded when they sensed the occasionality of the accountability

event. There had been some other limitations in the system. The publicity was limited to the vicinity of the public hearing locations. The vast hinterland of the field-level bureaucratic headquarters remained out of the publicity of the event. The citizens who voiced public problems in the hearings did not pursue remedies. Personal benefits had been a factor for pursuance. Some complainants faced social and bureaucratic hazards after complaining to the public hearings who remained out of the ACC's protection. The relative power positions of the different actors of the accountability relationship unreasonably affected the outcome of the public hearings. The powerful reaped benefits from the accountability mechanism while the vulnerable and the poor were deprived of it in a few instances.

This research contributed to the accountability literature by examining the accountability effect of public hearings. The public hearing was described in the past research as a tool for getting citizens' input in government decision-making. Studying the mechanism as a tool of accountability was largely ignored. This study found the ACC's public hearing mechanism as an effective accountability tool with some contextual limitations in the cases of some vulnerable and poor members of society. In the absence of an effective formal accountability mechanism, the ACC's public hearings served the interests of aggrieved service seekers from the field-level bureaucracies to a great extent. The ACC needed to strengthen the mechanism by addressing several issues. Firstly, publicity of the public hearings needed broader coverage so that the entire population of an administrative unit knows about the events. The public hearing was a new concept to the people. They needed to be familiarized with the effectiveness of the accountability tool. Citizens who participated in the event had been introduced to its benefits. Secondly, the frequency of holding public hearings needed to be increased. The bureaucrats positively changed their behaviours towards the service seekers after holding the event. However, they reverted to their usual practices as the event was not held anymore. Thirdly, the ACC needed more and intense follow-ups on the decisions regarding the vulnerable and the poor. Public hearings' decisions for the vulnerable and the poor were not implemented in a few cases. Future researchers can do in-depth studies on why and how certain decisions of public hearings in favour of the vulnerable and the poor remained ignored.

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## APPENDIX: INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

গণশুনানীতে অভিযোগ উত্থাপনকারীর জন্য প্রশ্ন/চেকলিস্ট:

- ১। আপনি গত .....তারিখে .....(স্থানে) অনুষ্ঠিত গণশুনানীতে অংশ নিয়েছিলেন। আপনি কিভাবে উদ্বুদ্ধ হয়েছিলেন গণশুনানী অংশ নেয়ার জন্য (কিভাবে জেনেছিলেন গণশুনানী সম্পর্কে)।
- ২। সেই গণশুনানীতে আপনার পক্ষ থেকে একটি অভিযোগ ছিল। সেই অভিযোগ সম্পর্কে একটু বলুন (কী অভিযোগ ছিল)।
- ৩। গণশুনানীতে আপনার যে অভিযোগ ছিল, সেটার ভাগ্যে কী ঘটেছে?
- ৪। গণশুনানী থেকে আপনার কী আশা / প্রত্যাশা ছিল? অনুগ্রহপূর্বক একটু ব্যাখ্যা করে/বিস্তারিত বলুন।
- ৫। গণশুনানী থেকে আপনার যে আশা / প্রত্যাশা ছিল, তার কতটুকু পূরণ হয়েছে?
- ৬। আপনার সমস্যা সমাধানে কত সময় লেগেছে (যদি সমাধান হয়ে থাকে)?
- ৭। অভিযোগ করতে আপনার কোনো সমস্যা হয়েছিল কি? উত্তর হ্যাঁ হলে, কীরকম সমস্যা হয়েছিল?
- ৮। অভিযোগ করার পর আপনার অভিজ্ঞতা কী? কোনো সমস্যা হয়েছিল কি? উত্তর হ্যাঁ হলে, কীরকম সমস্যা হয়েছিল?
- ৯। গণশুনানীর কার্যকারিতা সম্পর্কে আপনার উপলব্ধি/মূল্যায়ন কী?
- ১০। গণশুনানী কার্যকর/উন্নত করতে আপনার মতামত/পরামর্শ কী রকম?