government accountability is the oversight and control of the executive branch of the municipal authority by the council.

This type of accountability is particularly non-existent at the urban local government levels in Bangladesh. In particular, the current structure of municipal governance mixes executive and legislative powers by making the chairman the head of the municipal council. Thus, the chairman can overrule the majority of the council's decisions. The municipal council needs to play a leading role in budgetary decisions and overseeing municipal finances and operations.

No town planning: Unfortunately, urban planning has never received adequate attention from planners and policy makers in Bangladesh. As a result, preparation and implementation of a city master plan and development plans are assigned to pourashavas as an optional function. But pourashavas seldom prepare master or annual development plans. Instead, they generally prepare a list of projects, which neither evolves out of community consultation nor reflects the community's felt need.

It is also noted that there is no functional database for local government, which might help guide overall planning and development; so, planning activities take place without benefit of key information. The creation of posts for pourashava-level town planners is extremely urgent in view of the deteriorating environmental conditions in the towns and city's of Bangladesh.

Role of pourashava in poverty alleviation: Unlike rural areas where local bodies are directly involved in poverty alleviation programes (e.g. RMP, VFG, Food for Work etc.) urban local government is not mandated to play a role in urban poverty alleviation. One example of such rural-oriented thinking can be seen in the secondary education sub-sector, in which the Female Secondary School Assistance Programme and the Monthly Pay Order system have done much to boost access, particularly for rural girls, but have failed to address the realities of the urban context.

A 2007 World Bank report highlights the severe deterioration of quality of life in urban areas, which jeopardises the efforts of Bangladesh in achieving her Millenium Development Goal targets.

It proposes to tackle the problems of urban residents directly through a range of measures, including improved incentives for poor children in metropolitan areas to go to schools, replication of effective water and sanitation service delivery models, and reduction of air pollution. These problems must be addressed through ways that increase the accountability of urban government officials.

Unlike rural areas where local bodies are directly involved in poverty alleviation programes urban local government is not mandated to play a role in urban poverty alleviation.

Autonomy of pourashava: Pourashavas are autonomous and independent in many ways, but in reality, their effective autonomy is limited. The administrative operations of urban local governments are subject to the rulings of the central government. In practice, pourashavas have limited flexibility in the daily implementation and management of their budgets. Revised budgets require approval of the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives, a process which is time consuming.

Moreover, the current legal framework for pourashavas does not provide scope for considering alternative approaches to service delivery, through privatisation or the participation of NGOs. Alternative options must be considered for improving the provision of municipal services and for achieving efficient resource allocations.

Political will and municipal reform initiatives

The national constitution and government planning contains provisions for strong local government; yet, in the absence of a strong political will, implementation is stagnated and the system remains centralised. As a result, most of what the constitution prescribes for local urban government has not happened.

A thorough review of governance and management aspects of municipalities suggests that there is a patron-client relationship between government and local bodies which hinders the process of staff recruitment and development of skilled staff, timely delivery of services, and effective implementation of development projects.

The issue of urban local governance presents a peculiar and frustrating paradox in Bangladesh. The most crippling problem faced by the urban local government is the absence of a sense of urgency to reform it. Unlike union parishads, there is a perception gap to view the municipal institution as a facilitator of poverty alleviation. It is seen that the government lacks