

Grievance Redress Mechanism of the OMS Program in Bangladesh: Rhetoric and Reality

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh has been addressing chronic poverty since 1971 through social security programs, primarily in rural areas. This study aims to assess the Grievance Redress Mechanism of the OMS program in this country. This study employed a qualitative methodology and an exploratory research design. A total of 20 in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with carefully selected beneficiaries, while 10 key informant interviews (KIIs) were carried out with program administrators, local vendors, and community leaders to gather primary data. Secondary data were gathered by analyzing government reports, research articles, and reports on the Grievance Redress Mechanism of the OMS program. The study found that the method is not being effectively implemented since the beneficiaries are unable to comprehend the instructions due to the lack of clarity in the online system. Moreover, the beneficiaries' apprehension towards the corrupt officials and the merchants' affiliations with political elites deter them from expressing their grievances against them.

Keywords: Open Market Sale (OMS), Grievance Redress Mechanism, Social Protection

INTRODUCTION

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights safeguards food security on a global scale as a fundamental requirement for subsistence and well-being. The state must protect the right to food through legislative measures (ADB, 2010). Constitutional provisions, guidelines, statutes, and protocols globally protect food security without any discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, language, religion, political beliefs, or social background. Since gaining independence, Bangladesh

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has been providing subsidies to promote food production under several regimes (Mechlem, 2014). Devastating natural disasters, including floods, cyclones, landslides, and river erosion, have a negative influence on crop productivity and cause great suffering for the people (Zaman and Amir, 2012). Thus, due to the scarcity, food products have become more expensive, depriving people of basic needs like food, which has forced the government to fund social safety net programs for the vulnerable members of society.

OMS is the most extensive Social protection program in Bangladesh's urban areas. The Government of Bangladesh allocated BDT 1019.86 Crore for the OMS program in the 2021/22 fiscal year (MoF, 2023). This universal program is operated through geographical targeting and anyone can get access to get from these services. To implement the program, the government focuses on 'pockets of poverty' or 'poverty hotspots' rather than the poor themselves (Tabassum, 2016). The OMS is a relatively old social safety net program of the government of Bangladesh through which the Ministry of Food has been delivering rice and flour to many urban households at a substantially subsidized rate; people can purchase rice and flour for 20% to 30% of the current market price (Eusuf, et al, 2020).

Later, to overcome these food challenges, the government introduced the OMS for providing subsidies in food production (Jaim et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the distribution and quality of food grains raise concerns about the effort's success. The nutritional value and quality of the distributed food grains have raised concerns, indicating issues with program implementation and monitoring (Dorosh and Shahabuddin, 2002). The OMS program faces several hurdles that hinder its effectiveness in delivering services. Significant challenges in poverty and inequality reduction, as well as community risk management, hinder the execution of projects (Ferdous, 2014). Policy shortcomings, a lack of integration and coordination, political instability, corruption, and fiscal limits exacerbate the complexities of the situation (Sarker and Nawaz, 2021). Moreover, the recurring problems encompass a scarcity of resources, inadequate oversight, and ineffective methods for addressing grievances (Sifat, 2021).

The grievance redress mechanism is an integral part of any country's public administration system that aims to increase administrative justice (Mashaw 1983). This is a systematic and community-centered approach for receiving, assessing, and addressing complaints or criticism (CAO, 2019). Bangladesh has established an institutional system to address service seekers' complaints at governmental offices since 2007, with revised rules released in 2018 to ensure a formal mechanism for complaint resolution (Alom, 2021). Although governments

are extensive, they only sporadically and rarely coordinate these networks. Consequently, the establishment of the system must be a well-coordinated and constitutionally significant undertaking that is not completely recognized (Sueur, 2012). In addition, numerous studies investigating national and subnational GRMs in the areas of social protection (Vij, 2013; Robinson, 2014; Seth, 2020), policing (Kruks-Wisner, 2021), education (Bhattacharjee and Mysoor, 2016), and public services (Teeffelen and Baud, 2011; Chakraborty et al., 2017; Marathe et al., 2016).

This mechanism is critical in public service because beneficiaries' demands vary, and because of the hierarchy and specialization within public law, public officials have different levels of jurisdiction (Varun, 2013). Moreover, this possesses the capacity to enhance governance by promoting fairness and inclusivity. They have the ability to transfer power to those who lack it by granting them the authority to voice their grievances and address their issues (Barca, 2016; Kotagiri and Morel, 2018). However, GRMs often focus on addressing concerns related to a specific set of needed tasks, rather than covering all possible complaints about a program. Exclusion from specific programs is a common complaint in social assistance programs, and a number of grievance redress mechanisms (GRMs) have dealt with a large number of complaints on this issue (Gazdar and Zuberi, 2014; Shelley, 2015; UNICEF, 2015). Although these methods were extremely efficient in detecting corruption, there was no indication that they truly prevented it, as this mechanism wasn't given enough attention in assessments of social protection programs like OMS (Afridi and Iversen, 2014; Babajanian, 2015; Ayliffe et al., 2017; Mirzoev and Kane, 2018).

Grievance Redress Mechanism in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, most of the public service delivery systems like OMS were corrupt which would hinder the overall development of the country (Mahmud et al., 2008). In addition, the country has the lowest ranking when it comes to measures of governance and corruption. The majority of individuals in this country perceive corruption as a detrimental societal occurrence (Monem and Baniamin, 2017). Consequently, the idea of good governance is a necessary precondition for sustained economic growth as food security has been recognized as a key element in the country's socioeconomic development and stabilization (Kashem and Faroque, 2011; Asadullah and Chakravorty, 2019). Transparency can be ensured by promoting openness and unrestricted dissemination of information concerning government policies, initiatives, and projects (Biswas and Rahman, 2018). Thus, the grievance redress mechanism is introduced in the all-public

service programs. Therefore, all line ministries have implemented a grievance redress mechanism since 2008, reducing public grievances and improving public sector service delivery. This manual system speeds up citizen complaints and improves government answers. This is feasible thanks to the Cabinet Division's strong monitoring and coordination (Mohapatra, 2016). Focal point authorities coordinate operations, urge quick action, resolve issues, and report complaint resolution monthly. Additionally, there has been a longstanding recognition that the efforts of many ministries and organizations in Bangladesh, including NGOs, should be synchronized in order to establish an integrated Grievance Redress Mechanism that enhances the effectiveness and efficiency of grievance resolution for the public (Shelley, 2018).

The Cabinet Division of the Government of Bangladesh has authorized the Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC) to form a technical committee. The committee's purpose is to evaluate and enhance the current GRS software, utilizing advanced technological architecture and automation features for the benefit of the citizens (Alom, 2021). It is anticipated that this initiative will enhance the effectiveness of the numerous measures implemented by different ministries and field level offices to tackle public complaints (Pande and Hossain, 2023). If someone wishes to file a complaint against any certain issue, then he or she first needs to visit the grievance redress portal. Three distinct options appear, asking beneficiaries to provide suggestions or file any complaints, with the final section displaying the status of the complaints. The beneficiaries are required to select the "file a complaint" option, which will determine the type of complaint. There are three types of complaints: citizen complaints with identity, officials' complaints, and unanimous complaints. Citizens must first register an account, and then log into the account, which will offer a form to submit a grievance. A confirmation message will appear, containing a pin number that will provide a tracking number via SMS on the phone. After filing the complaint, the beneficiaries can view it on the dashboard. However, the purpose of this study is to analyze the processes implemented by the OMS program in Bangladesh to assess the grievance redress mechanisms. This study outlines a set of policy recommendations aimed at improving the grievance redress mechanism.

Theoretical Framework

This study used the grievance redressal system model to evaluate the grievance redress mechanism of the OMS program in Bangladesh developed by Rana, et al. (2015). A grievance redress procedure is an integral component of any public service system. In this system, beneficiaries can complaints about the problems

regarding the sale of products and concerns about the refusal of document or certificate returns and irregularities in the service process (Prajapat et al., 2018). The redressal of grievance is seen as a criterion for assessing the effectiveness of any public services like OMS. Moreover, this system is considered as an essential component for basic fairness in any public service. However, many countries lack adequate grievance and complaint resolution processes for fundamental service delivery, and these issues merit additional study, research, and support (Varun, 2013).

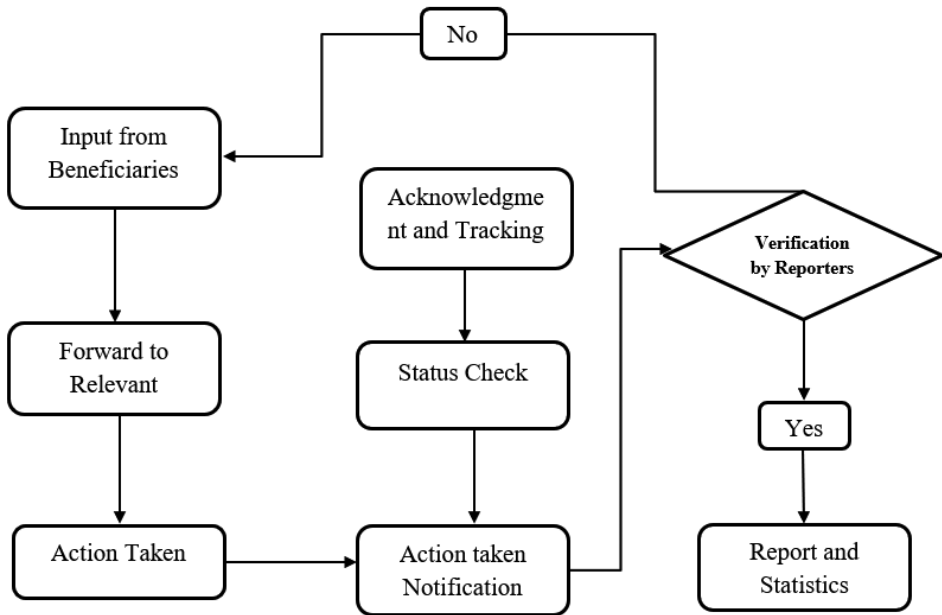


Figure 1: Generalized model for grievance redressal (Rana, et al., 2015)

Effective grievance mechanisms are crucial for public service delivery as authorities and vendors often delay processes due to a lack of understanding, resulting in the sufferings of the beneficiaries (Chander and Kush, 2012). The grievances are handled in different ways in terms of encountering conflicts of interest, and pursuing tough processes. Furthermore, beneficiaries lack proper knowledge and rarely have access to and understand the process of submitting grievances to the authorities of the OMS program (Gulati and Suresh, 2021). This model is used to investigate the majority of comprehensive descriptions of formal complaints channels in India (Seth et al., 2021) and numerous case studies were identified in various countries including China (Chen, 2016; Göbel and Li, 2021), the Philippines (World Bank, 2014), Indonesia (Siregar et al. 2017; Mahendra

et al., 2014), Bulgaria (Dimitrov, 2014), Pakistan (Gazdar and Zuberi, 2014), Ethiopia (Randolph and Edjeta, 2011), and Kenya (Feruglio and Misoi, 2017). In Bangladesh, this model is used by Alom (2021), to investigate the experience of service seekers of field-level officers, Chowdhury (2023); on strengthening the grievance redress system and Himel and Chowdhury (2021); on the E-Government procurement in the local government.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the grievance redress mechanism of the OMS program. Dhaka, located in the middle part of Bangladesh, functions as the capital of the country. This service was provided by 118 OMS shops and 70 OMS trucks in Dhaka city during the 2022/23 fiscal year. Each shop sells 3000 kg of rice and 2000 kg of flour daily, excluding weekends, while each truck sells 1500 kg of rice and 1500 kg of flour (MoF, 2023). An average of 160,000 people receive the OMS service daily in Dhaka. Therefore, the study purposively selected Dhaka as their study area. The period of data collection was February 2022–May 2022.

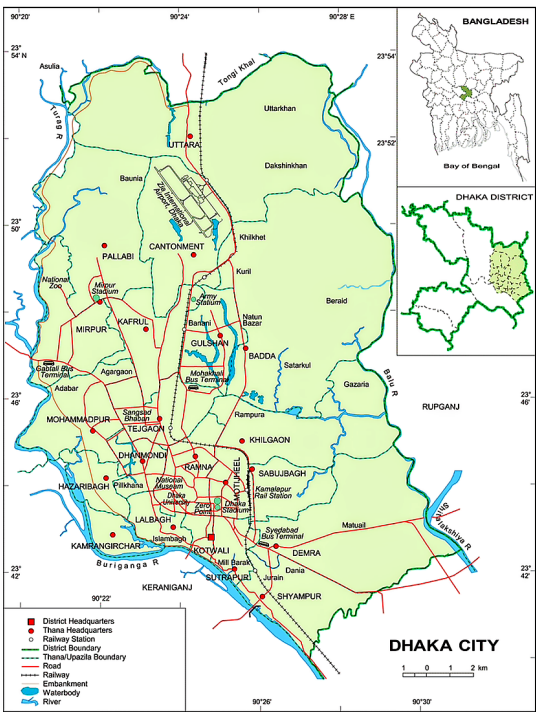


Figure 2: Dhaka City Map

The primary data were gathered using the purposive sampling technique, which guarantees the inclusion of a wide range of stakeholders, such as beneficiaries, program administrators, local dealers, and community leaders. Additionally, it enables us to identify participants who possess expertise in the field of OMS program service. This study aimed to perform a total of 30 In-depth interviews (IDI). However, after completing 20 IDIs, the data consistently came in a similar pattern. A total of 20 in-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire to gather qualitative data. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions that aimed to obtain thorough comments from the beneficiaries evaluating the rhetoric and the reality of the grievance redress mechanism of the OMS program. In addition, 05 government officials from the Ministry of Food, as well as 10 other important stakeholders including journalists, academicians, local leaders, and NGO activists, were interviewed as part of the Key Informant Interview (KII) process. The average duration of each interview was 30-40 minutes. Two respondents declined to continue the interview citing time constraints, which accounts for nearly 5% of the total respondents. Four additional participants were interviewed to verify the accuracy of the material and investigate developing patterns. Data was collected from different sources, such as government agencies, selling sites, and community organizations. The objective of this method was to improve the ease of use for participants and promote open and productive discussions regarding the program's service delivery. Data collectors discouraged the presence of nonparticipants in order to ensure the smooth participation of respondents and the privacy of information. The interviews were captured using audio recordings and field notes, with the participants' cooperation. Field notes were given to the participants to verify the accuracy of the information and provide supplementary details. This study also examined content pertaining to social safety net programs and OMS, which offer valuable insights into various facets of socio-economic policies, government interventions, market dynamics, and their effects on different stakeholders. The analysis was based on government reports, published journal articles, NGO reports, and reputable websites. The qualitative data collected from the interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis. As part of this method, the interview transcripts were thoroughly analyzed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and categories. The text fragments were categorized using data coding, and these codes were then organized into broader themes to summarize the findings of the study. The data gathering process adhered to ethical standards and utmost

care was taken to guarantee the anonymity of the respondents. The research was granted ethical clearance by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Exeter [ERC/07/2022].

Findings and Discussion

Bangladesh established a grievance redress mechanism in 2008 with significant support and advice from several donor organizations. In 2011, a web-based complaint handling system was created and put into service (Hudson and Winters, 2017). The grievance redress mechanism, which includes all government ministries, directorates, departments, and agencies, was updated and made more effective in 2015. Under the direction of the prime minister's office, financial backing from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and technical assistance from the Access to Information a2i project made this implementation possible (ADB, 2010). However, an automated grievance redress mechanism is still missing from field management due to engagement of general people. The way in which beneficiaries view and use this mechanism is a major determining factor (Hossain & Pande, 2023). This study found that the digital grievance redress mechanism is not helpful for general beneficiaries, since the majority of beneficiaries of social safety net programs, such as OMS, are members of lower socioeconomic classes, they typically lack the information necessary to comprehend the instructions. Furthermore, beneficiaries with low levels of education have a tough time handling the online filing process since they are not proficient in technology. Thus, lack of openness and accountability impedes the success of the OMS initiative. Since the food directorate has never before taken exceptional action against these dealers, a number of anomalies and corruption by dealers in the running of OMS stores have also come to light. As a result, the grievance redress mechanism is not gaining popularity among the beneficiaries as they aren't being able to adopt the initiative.

Concerning the OMS program, the Ministry of Food (MoF) is accountable and always takes care of the complaints that are lodged by the beneficiaries. Beneficiaries used the traditional technique of filing complaints prior to the digitization of the process of filing complaints on websites. At present some complaints are being filed through traditional methods and most of the complaints are being filed through online methods.

Table 1: Grievance redress mechanism report (July 2023 to December 2023)

Months	Total Complaint			Sent to Higher Authorities	Resolution of the Claim
	Through Website	Traditional Method	Self- reported Claim		
July	5	0	0	0	4
August	5	0	0	1	3
September	6	0	0	0	5
October	4	0	0	0	5
November	1	0	0	0	1
December	0	1	0	0	0

Source: Ministry of Food (2024)

The table above displays that the beneficiaries’ complaint rate is extremely low. A total of 16 complaints were submitted on the Ministry of Food’s website in the past six months, providing a concise overview of the situation. Urban regions have a significant number of beneficiaries of the OMS program who are extremely dissatisfied with the procedures. However, they are not inclined to file a complaint because they do not comprehend the instructions for submitting grievances online.

This study also finds that the majority of beneficiaries of the OMS program are not interested in filing a complaint against the authorities who are responsible for delivering the OMS products in trucks or shopping centers. The vast majority of the time, local dealers are the closest friends or relatives of the community leader or government authorities who instilled fear in the minds of the people who benefited from their actions. A beneficiary stated that

I never tried to file a complaint against the dealer.... he is a close relative of the local Ward Commissioner (IDI Participant 3, Personal Communication, May 24, 2024).

The beneficiaries of the OMS program in the urban areas are mainly transient population, rickshaw and cart pullers, daily wage earners, dockworkers, retail workers, small-scale traders, street vendors, and manual laborers involved in construction, agriculture, private enterprises, poultry and dairy farming, and transportation. As a result of their lack of education, the majority of them belong

to the lowest socioeconomic class and do not possess the necessary educational qualifications. Consequently, they lack the ability to utilize the correct protocol for filing a complaint against the authorities. Furthermore, persons who share their characteristics are acutely aware that the government, as well as other public institutions inside the nation, are plagued by corruption. Furthermore, they believe that no punitive measures would be taken against the dealers and merchants who engage in corrupt practices. As a result, they lack any inclination to file any grievances against the corrupt officials for any cause. Hossain and Pande (2023) also showed that most of the beneficiaries are not aware of the entitlements and the anticipated outcomes of government initiatives. They also lack assistance from the public service sector that makes them ignored about the procedures of filing grievance (Hossain and Pande, 2023). On this point a beneficiary stated that

We are uneducated and belong to the lower class of society.... we don't possess any idea of filing complaints online against the corrupted dealers and local level officials

(IDI Participant 7, Personal Communication, May 23, 2024).

The beneficiaries are consistently given the chance to express their grievances to the appropriate authorities. Inside the delivery van, there is a telephone number available for instant communication. However, this study shows that the number displayed on the delivery vehicle is not functioning. Most of the time, recipients faced difficulties in contacting the authorities due to the line being consistently engaged or intermittently inaccessible.

The number printed in the banner for grievance redressal at the delivery truck is always found busy or off. So, it's totally worthless...

(IDI Participant 16, Personal Communication, May 26, 2024).

The Cabinet Division is responsible for supervising the Grievance Redress Mechanism, which is an internet-based platform designed for the submission and resolution of official and public issues. Users, whether anonymous or registered, can submit complaints through this web-based online system. Additionally, the system offers comprehensive tracking of the complaints from start to finish. This study finds that such an initiative aimed to bring accountability and transparency to the public service program. The beneficiaries are now able to file complaints on the online based websites. They do not need to go the office and submit any manual complaints that may endangered them by revealing the identity of the beneficiaries. However, the present redress mechanism in the public service programs like OMS is trying to gather people's perception regarding the program.

Moreover, the numerous social media platforms are helping authorities to lessen the higher level of corruption and bringing some sorts of accountability. When asked about this issue, a government officer replied that

Yes... some sort of accountability has been brought under the new grievance redressal mechanism.... Especially applying online would bring the local anomalies directly under the surveillance the top administration of the food ministry.... Moreover, social media platforms like Facebook posts also bring some sort of accountability to the local officials and dealers in serving their day-to-day duty in selected points

(KII Participant 5, Personal Communication, May 25, 2024).

The findings of this study also indicate that the inherent flaws of the existing system constitute a significant barrier, which will lead to an increase in the expenses incurred by social security programs in order to accomplish this goal. The public service sector has introduced the grievance redress mechanism to ensure transparency in the delivery process by reducing corruption. In order to effectively address the issue of food insecurity, this system can provide an effective solution to the OMS system. Several irregularities and corruption by government officials and dealers in the operation of the OMS program have been very common, necessitating a strong grievance redressal mechanism (Rahman, 2012). The mechanism involves providing feedback and offering incentives to stimulate responses, aiming to enhance transparency and accountability in public services such as the OMS program (Post and Agarwal, 2012b). Furthermore, the monitoring system, rethinking the strategy, and having enough budget for sustainable social protection are required to ensure a strong grievance redress mechanism. Masud-All-Kamal and Saha (2014) also suggested that it is crucial to decrease system leakage and enhance targeting in order to maximize the benefits of the social safety net programs that are currently in place (Kamal and Saha 2014). A strong grievance redress mechanism is a great rhetoric that can guarantee a better quality of public services, such as OMS, by ensuring transparency and abolishing corruption in such public programs. The authority needs to put the grievance redress mechanism into practice, seeing this as a strategy for gathering public opinion, improving initiatives, reducing corruption, and improving the performance of public service programs like OMS in this country (Randolph and Edjeta, 2011; Aiyar and Walton, 2015; Jenkins and Manor, 2017).

Conclusion and Policy Recommendation

Bangladesh is plagued by widespread hunger and poverty, affecting more than 10 million individuals who are unable to buy an adequate amount of food due to urban poverty (Panday, 2020). Despite encountering challenges in execution for more than four decades, social safety net programs, public food distribution, and the OMS initiative have effectively enhanced food security for the impoverished urban population. Each urban region exhibits unique variances and disparities in the implementation of the OMS program. The lack of a monitoring and evaluation framework in the OMS program further hampers its effectiveness. The country's public sector has established grievance redress mechanism, but these procedures are not effectively applied in the OMS program due to a lack of proper monitoring, the pervasive absence of the rule of law, accountability, transparency, and the current political economy of the country. The study's findings suggest that the grievance resolution process in the OMS program should be reevaluated and redesigned to improve its overall structure. The study's findings resulted in the creation of this recommendation, which asserts that the language of the grievance resolution process must be strictly followed in practice. Due to the government's constrained resources, it is critical that all participants in the OMS program exercise the highest degree of prudence in safeguarding the system. Based on the previous discussion and the previously mentioned study's conclusions, the following suggestions are made to ensure the Grievance Redress Mechanism is implemented successfully:

Single registry MIS: Authority should use the single registry management Information System (MIS) in order to efficiently execute the grievance redress mechanism program.

Strong monitoring and evaluation: Monitoring and assessment enhance the authority's capacity to promptly take action and ensure that those responsible are held accountable.

Instant feedback mechanism: The beneficiaries of the benefits become frustrated when they do not receive any feedback. In light of this, the quick feedback system is an absolute necessity.

Helpline Service: The administration should promptly develop a helpline service to enable beneficiaries to report any instances of corruption.

Simple and Clear Instruction: As most of the beneficiaries aren't able to understand the instruction properly, the instruction must be clear, specific and simple.

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