National integrity strategy implementation in land administration to prevent corruption in Bangladesh

Nurul Huda Sakib1 · Mujahidul Islam1 · Md. Foysal Jaman Shishir2

Received: 14 September 2021 / Accepted: 5 April 2022 / Published online: 14 April 2022
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

Abstract

Corruption in land administration is one of the challenges in implementing the national integrity strategy (NIS) in Bangladesh. Citizens visiting the Land Office have reported many instances of unpleasant experiences. In response to these issues, this study attempted to investigate the challenges of NIS implementation in land administration and possible solutions. Based on in-depth interviews with citizens and public officials, as well as document analysis, the study found that the NIS has helped to modernize land administration in recent years. The Bangladesh government, with the help of young land administration officials, has undertaken several measures to resolve this crisis. However, the improvement in service delivery is, in some ways, nominal compared to the volume of corruption in land administration. The likely reason is the nature of the country’s societal patterns. In practice, local and administrative politics continue to have a significant influence. Therefore, despite good initiatives and appropriate measures, land administration officials have failed to implement the NIS properly. Several other problems are making NIS implementation challenging, such as the lack of skilled manpower and technical support, the tendency to break rules, and other forms of corruption discussed in this study. However, the study found that an alternative approach, namely, “local solutions for local problems” could have more success than the NIS approach. Therefore, this study argues that dynamic, sustainable, and corruption-free land administration in Bangladesh requires a combined approach involving local solutions, innovation, and NIS implementation.

Keywords NIS · Local solutions · Land administration · Corruption · Bottom-up approach

* Nurul Huda Sakib
nhsakib@juniv.edu

1 Department of Government and Politics, Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka, Bangladesh
2 Department of Political Science, Islamia Government College, Sirajganj, Bangladesh
Introduction

Land administration plays a fundamental role in a functioning government’s policy implementation. Policies passed by government in parliament and its policy hub are then implemented by executive branches through various ministries and departments with help from field administrators. Bangladesh is a populous but geographically small country with about 147,570 square kilometers of territory. By the end of 2021, it is estimated that the population of Bangladesh will be almost 165 million. In addition, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has reported that Bangladesh has the lowest land-to-man ratio in the world (FAO 2016). The Bangladesh economy is largely reliant on land-based agronomy. Therefore, the land is considered the prime earning source of the Bangladeshi people who depend on the land for their livelihoods. Hence, land has always been not only an essential part of this country’s socio-economic attributes, but also a source of conflict and corruption (Talukder et al. 2014). It has been assessed that almost 80% of legal disputes in rural territories in Bangladesh are linked to clashes over land (Hossain 2015). Therefore, greater awareness and prompt action are needed in land administration at the field level to solve disputes and clashes.

However, systematic corruption in land administration is a significant concern in terms of the functioning of the government’s policy. Bangladesh’s existing land management system is full of ambiguity and suffers from outdated methods and inappropriate policies, making the system ineffective. This has impeded people’s livelihoods, with broader, more serious consequences. For example, inappropriate land management policy and inept administration could lead to the loss of foreign investors who demand government cooperation and undisputed land in which to invest (Hossain 2015). Therefore, taking into consideration the existing land administration system and this scenario of corruption in the land sector, it is evident that the system cannot keep up with the pace of rising demand in Bangladesh’s land market. Challenges causing malfunction in the existing system, such as inadequate and inappropriate land records, obsolete land management systems, and incompetent administrative personnel, are factors responsible for generating corruption in the land sector (Kafi and Haque 2018).

In 2012, the Bangladesh government adopted the national integrity strategy (NIS) to promote good governance. Subsequently, the government began to focus on NIS implementation in various pillars with pillar-specific indicators and visions. The government started to organize seminars, workshops, and training on the NIS for government officials. Officials also began to convey government initiatives to the grassroots level to promote these strategies. The re-organization of the entire land administration led to a massive shift. Over the past few years, land administration in Bangladesh has had many changes with some positive outcomes. Despite this, Bangladeshi citizens continue to suffer. Why is this? What are the challenges in this sector? These issues need to be investigated. Therefore, using land administration as a case, this study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of implementing the NIS, the challenges in its implementation, and alternative approaches for achieving a sustainable solution to land administration in Bangladesh.
Literature review

Land provides humanitarian assistance and, at the same time, expedites activities necessary for one’s livelihood. In many developing countries, land is the symbol of power to people in both urban and rural areas (Masum 2017). Hence, corruption around the world is most often related to land corruption. Studies suggest that sustainable urban planning requires proper land allocation and management (Chiodelli and Moroni 2015). On the one hand, growing urbanization and development projects require appropriate monitoring by the authorities while, on the other hand, projects need access to undisputed land which is scarce in many developing countries.

Therefore, an appropriate land management structure is considered vital to curb land corruption. Babalola et al. (2018) expressed the view that developing countries need to move on from traditional land management systems by installing a unique and technology-laden system to meet their own needs. They proposed principles for land administration, related to the land management paradigm, which involve people and institutions, rights, restrictions and responsibilities, and land administration that is sustainable with dynamic processes, technology, spatial data infrastructure, and measures for its success that can be applied to all countries. Land corruption is considered one of the most intractable policy problems in developing democratic settings worldwide; hence, modernizing the governance system is essential to curb land corruption (Williamson et al. 2010). Shawkat Ali (1981) provided a detailed analysis of land administration in Bangladesh and recommended modernizing this administration to achieve good governance.

In another study, Huque (2011) found the field level to be influenced by extra authoritative, political, and social variables, such as procedural deferrals; an assortment of errands, choice examples, and conduct; communication from the official government chairman; dual loyalty of authorities; lack of offices to satisfy family obligations; lack of connection to major urban habitats for wellbeing; and lack of instruction from the administration.

Ahsan and Panday (2013) argued that the key to achieving the legislature is coordination between the field organization’s various offices. Their finding suggests that casual correspondence between the field organization’s various offices noticeably impacts on coordination. Unfortunately, this is not the case in land management in Bangladesh where the Ministry of Land (MoL) and the Ministry of Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs (MLJP) are responsible for land administration and management. Poor coordination between these two ministries is one of the reasons for rising land disputes and corruption (Islam and Lee 2016). Hassan (2015) argued that corruption-free land administration requires a strategic and tactical systems-level framework and an effective public service delivery model to promote good governance. Similarly, Choudhury et al. (2011) offered a new modeling technique that presents data for the current land management system through a user-friendly and digitized map-based system. They showed that the current problems haunting the country are the result of a poor and opaque land management system.

A web-based land management system would create transparency and increase the efficiency of the current land management system, allowing for wonderful
visual presentation of maps and an easy searching facility. These authors proposed that the current paper-based data and maps of land administration be replaced by digital versions to make it easier to search for and retrieve land data. Their research suggested that land administration is pivotal, with corruption and misappropriation of power in land administration being a critical issue. These studies did not emphasize land administration as a case nor did they separately narrow down the scope of research in this context. These studies have not focused much on deliberate land mismanagement by the authority (where ex-ownership of land is often maintained by unregistered documents) in the rural part of Bangladesh. This loophole leads to politically powerful and influential people illegally taking control of land. Therefore, in the current study, by using land administration as a case, we aim to investigate existing loopholes and to find possible solutions by enhancing the capacity of both legal and institutional frameworks.

Unpacking the national integrity strategy

In recent years, the executive branch of the Bangladesh government has operated both top-down and bottom-up approaches to providing public services. These approaches have had different levels of success and limitations that vary between urban and regional areas. However, when considering the administrative, political, and economic structure in developing countries, most scholars advise following bottom-up approaches as they have shown encouraging impacts on curbing corruption. Hence, donor agencies from different countries are eager to promote bottom-up structures which could fight corruption while, at the same time, ensuring accountability and effective public services in both urban and regional areas. The national integrity system, formed during the 1990s by Pope (2000), is one such structure. Pope (2000) illustrated the structure as an arrangement of “horizontal accountability” which is the key to preventing corruption and ensuring good governance. In addition, government agency structure and governance indicators are indicative of good governance. The Bangladesh government acknowledged this central idea when it formulated its national integrity strategy (NIS), incorporating the idea into its action plan, comprising 16 pillars, in 2012, under the Cabinet Division. Of these 16 pillars, 10 were state components, while the other six were non-state components. Most importantly, the strategy had a strong legal framework and a comprehensive set of goals, strategies, and action plans. These were aimed at the non-government sector to increase the level of independence in performance, accountability, efficiency, transparency, and effectiveness of state and non-state institutions (Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA] 2016) (Fig. 1).

The whole system is operated by the National Integrity Advisory Council headed by the Prime Minister. An Executive Committee (EC) and the National Integrity Implementation Unit (NIIU) help the advisory council (Government of Bangladesh [GoB] 2012). The initiative to install the NIIU was undertaken under the Cabinet Secretary’s supervision, with the NIIU headed by the Administrative Reforms and Implementation Wing’s additional secretary. Senior officials from different ministries or divisions are assigned to shape an Executive Committee which carries out the suggestions and
NIS action plans. The core function of the Executive Committee is to promote integrity and ensure good governance in its respective ministry and divisions. An official is appointed by each ministry and division as an Integrity Focal Point (IFP), with this person maintaining close contact with the Cabinet Division and providing support to the NIS in executing NIS action plans. The Cabinet Division functions as the secretariat for this institutional plan and implements action plans accordingly. The NGO Affairs Bureau and the Ministry of Commerce, respectively, supervise the honesty of practices by NGOs and business associations. “Integrity awards” are given to the civil service, civil society, and non-government sectors for their sincere commitment to fighting corruption and generating trust.

However, it should be noted that only a few countries follow the NIS approach to curb corruption as it is criticized by many scholars and practitioners for not emphasizing cultural distinctiveness. The NIS approach needs to recognize the explicit social difficulties and public heritage of various cultural contexts when urging compelling changes for effective functioning. Brown and Heinrich (2017) and Doig (2006) also raised the question of whether the NIS approach can generate effective results in developing countries, given that the model was created for developed countries. Nevertheless, the NIS approach is having a significant impact on curbing corruption in several developing countries. Therefore, as donor-led projects often impose limitations on the delivery of effective public services in developing countries, such as Bangladesh, this study, drawing evidence from land administration, has attempted to investigate the performance of the strategy. Hence, the study investigates the implementation of the NIS in land administration.

![Fig. 1 Institutional Arrangements for NIS Implementation. Source JICA (2015). C & AG comptroller and Auditor General, NGO non-governmental organization, PSC Public Service Commission](image-url)
Research methodology

This study is based on qualitative data collection using in-depth interviews and official documents. In-depth interviewing is a method widely used in social sciences research (Berry 2002). It can provide a vivid picture of a situation and can allow the discovery of significant insights (Creswell 2012). The nature of the current study required one-on-one verbal interactions with interviewees to clarify questions on many NIS-related issues. Thus, for this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with 75 interviewees who had direct experience with land-related issues and expertise within the land sector. Many techniques are used in qualitative research, but purposive and quota sampling are most widely used in the social sciences (Bryman and Bell 2015). Based on the nature of the research, a researcher prepares different categories and allocates a target number of participants to each one (Robinson 2014).

The current study categorized the targets for in-depth interviewees into significant groups, namely, government officials (Assistant Commissioners [Land]) in eight districts in Bangladesh, academics, researchers, civil society members, and, finally, service recipients. However, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, these in-depth interviews were conducted over the phone or by email communication. Potential interviewees were first sent an email by researchers asking whether they were interested in participating in the research. They were then contacted by email or phone to collect the data. These phone interviews lasted 10–20 min depending on interviewees’ answers. It should be noted that, although interviewing key stakeholders over the phone for 10–20 min was difficult, it was manageable as almost every key stakeholder had to stay home due to the ongoing pandemic. Hence, they had the time; thus, it was comparatively easy to persuade them to participate in the interview.

The service recipient interviews were conducted to understand the dynamics of land administration corruption and how to improve services. Therefore, more than half (40 of 75) of the interviews were conducted with service recipients, to provide an important element in this research. These interviews were conducted in two phases; the first phase was from January–March 2020 (before the COVID-19 pandemic started) and involved visiting various locations in Bangladesh. The second phase was conducted from May to June 2020 over the phone. Interviewees were chosen through Facebook posts, based on their response to the research issue. In addition to in-depth interviews, official documents (mostly in the form of reports, policy documents, contract extracts, and newspaper articles) were reviewed. Social media sources, such as Facebook (the most popular social media platform in Bangladesh), also provided much information regarding cases of the NIS and land corruption. All the data were analyzed through coding and data triangulation to develop a web of meaning.

Corruption in the land sector

In developing countries like Bangladesh, corruption in the land sector is pervasive. In Bangladesh, land ownership has always been a vital component in people’s lives, especially in the rural area where almost 70% of people depend on agriculture,
accounting for almost 65% of employment in the country (Knox 2009). Land is a source of wealth but it also generates conflicts and corruption, the latter being rampant, ranging from changes to property registration or forged titles to land transaction processes which render services inaccessible to people. One World Bank report suggests that it requires, on average, 245 days to register land in Bangladesh. Conversely, it requires only 5 days, 44 days, and 50 days to register land in Nepal, India, and Pakistan, respectively (Islam and Lee 2016). These comparative statistics illustrate how corruption has engulfed the land sector in Bangladesh. The reality is even worse as administrative department staff are often responsible for deliberately making incorrect records, forcing landowners to pay a bribe to have these corrected (Islam and Lee 2016).

People living in both rural and urban areas face corruption in the land sector. The 2015–2016 Bangladesh Citizens Survey (BCS) also provided evidence of corruption in this sector. According to the survey, 69.5% of people believed that the Bangladesh land sector was very corrupt, while 21.9% believed that it was somewhat corrupt. Very few people thought that the Bangladesh land sector was a corruption-free sector. Besides, 74.5% of people thought that people needed to pay a bribe or unauthorized money to receive services from the land sector (Sakib 2018). A recent study conducted by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) suggested that, on average, over 80% of people needed to pay bribes for land registration, changes in land ownership, and land surveys (Barkat et al. 2019). Outdated and inadequate land-related policies and laws are generating a large gap in land management, paving the way for corruption. Land corruption and mismanagement in this sector can cause waste and the misallocation of resources, leading to inequality. A causal relationship has been found between corruption and poverty, with many of the poorest countries being also the most corrupt countries (Rahman and Hossain 2020).

Regarding its ranking, the land sector is the second-most corrupt sector behind law and enforcement agencies in Bangladesh. Land sector corruption has been reflected in various Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) studies. The TIB’s 2012 and 2015 National Household Surveys (TIB 2012, 2015) indicated that 53.4% and 59% of people, respectively, were victims of corruption in this sector. It also suggested that 49.8% and 54.8% of people, respectively, needed to pay bribes to receive services from the land sector. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) also indicated in its 2016 report that, in this sector, people had to pay Bangladeshi taka (BDT) 245,030 million which is the most paid in any sector (TIB 2016). Most households reported that they had faced corruption and irregularities (payment of unlawful money and/or bribes, nepotism, bias, harassment by agents, etc.) when accessing services from land service institutions.

**National integrity strategy (NIS) implementation in land administration: some hopes**

The national integrity strategy (NIS) is a well-documented strategy implemented to uphold integrity from top to bottom levels in both administration and politics. Consequently, some efforts have been made to reduce corruption, with a focus on
public service delivery in the land sector. As NIS implementation is being applied in land administration, some positive changes have occurred to uphold the government’s image. Land administration has promoted several activities to foster citizen-centric services. The most prominent activities are digitalization, automation, and the online banking system. The government introduced a digitalized version of their namjari (land registration) as e-namjari. People can apply for their duplicate namjari online: when the process is completed, they will receive a message to collect their paper from the respective Land Office.

Furthermore, the national land database has been digitalized and searching for information now is less difficult for both the government and Bangladeshi citizens. As a result of these initiatives, many land-related problems can be solved within a short period of time. This also creates the potential to reduce conflict between two parties claiming ownership of a particular portion of land. In recognition of the successful implementation of e-namjari, Bangladesh received the 2020 United Nations (UN) Public Service Award.

At the same time, Land Offices are becoming automated through computer software. Officials have also created Facebook pages and groups for faster and more transparent service delivery. Therefore, Bangladeshi citizens can easily seek the guidance they need from the Land Office and can publicly expose any corrupt staff. In many Land Offices, the Assistant Commissioner (AC) (Land) personally monitors and operates the Facebook page to gain a wider view of their office. This eases the payment process, helps to track transactions, and minimizes fabricated charges.

The NIS has also helped to establish a Citizen’s Charter, honesty boxes, and complaint boxes to provide efficient service and receive citizens’ feedback. It has been observed that people often are required to pay an excessive amount of fees as they do not know the actual fee for the service they are seeking. As a result, some staff and brokers take advantage of this situation. Land Offices now have billboards or charts providing details of the fees for their services. Therefore, people can escape from traps set by brokers and corrupt officials. As one citizen mentioned:

Before, when I used to come to the Land Office, I did not know the fee for any services. As a result, the officials took extra money from us according to their demand[s]. Now we know what services require how much following the Citizen’s Charter and can bargain with the officials. (personal communication, March 7, 2020)

The NIS is also trying to develop public integrity through widening the concept, running an awareness-building campaign, and encouraging the practice of integrity. It is also widely argued that, to promote integrity, behavior needs to change. As one interviewee mentioned, “you can’t change the system unless you change your behavior” (personal communication, March 2, 2020). Therefore, the NIS is also working on behavioral change among the public through many activities.

As Land Offices deal with several activities and people come to these offices with negative preconceptions, many Assistant Commissioners (ACs) (Land) now promote different mechanisms to practice integrity. One such initiative is the “honesty box.” Many Land Offices, with direct monitoring by their Assistant Commissioner (AC) (Land), have set up honesty boxes to promote public integrity. Using the honesty
box, people purchase various documents from the office when no sales assistants are at the service point. Customers purchase stamps and other documents and place the right amount of money in the honesty box. Similarly, the complaints box is a popular choice in these administrative offices as people can drop in their complaints or suggestions while keeping their identity anonymous. Most Land Offices now have a complaints box, which is monitored by their Assistant Commissioner (AC) (Land), through which they can gain a view from the citizen’s perspective regarding land-related services.

The Assistant Commissioners (ACs) (Land) from different districts have organized various awareness-building campaigns so citizens can become aware of the transparency and accountability practice of their offices. In this process, the Zonal Office organizes regular meetings and public seminars focusing on the activities and work in progress of the Land Office. The focus is to increase the morality and efficiency of staff and to ensure that people know about their functions. The Zonal Office also organizes motivational campaigns to encourage citizens to comply with the rules and to maintain papers that are up to date. Land Offices often distribute leaflets, banner festoons, etc., about their activities, people’s rights, and the need to update their papers.

Why is NIS implementation in land administration often a blur?

Despite some positive effects of the NIS, land administration is still unable to operate as a dynamic administration, owing to the volume of corruption. This view is supported by several reasons. The first reason is that, in Bangladesh, political pressure and syndicates in land administration are a common scenario. Land administration works under significant political pressure which comes in various ways. At times, political leaders, brokers, and some corrupt officials charge people by creating a syndicate for simple services. These syndicates maintain a strong network with local politicians; thus, it is difficult for the Land Office to tackle them. Moreover, influential people in land administration are involved in land-related businesses, for example, as the owners of a sandcastle, brickfield, or a char. In most cases, these properties are built on illegal land or without the consent of the government, with valid paperwork not maintained, or other people’s property is forcibly taken. Therefore, people use their patron–client network to resolve their problem through linkages and money. During an interview, an Assistant Commissioner (AC) (Land) mentioned that:

I can give you several examples of political pressure. One of my colleagues, who was making significant steps against a powerful politician involving an illegal sandcastle owner, later transferred from his place. Even when I was taking some actions against [an] illegal structure on government property, I got a [death] threat through an anonymous phone call. These issues are very common in our working procedure. (personal communication, June 14, 2020)

Local politicians also maintain “soft relations” with public officials. They regularly interact and send them gifts and other benefits. Often, they try to develop social
relationships by inviting officials to family gatherings. These types of practices are designed to create a softening in the view of these officials towards these politicians. Therefore, in many cases, public officials remain silent when recommendations come from these politicians. This “soft” pressure is a common practice in the local Land Office. When politicians fail to build a soft relationship with public officials, they tend to use hard skills, such as making threats, creating fear, and forcing a transfer. Thus, officials often think that it is a win–win situation for both parties, as they can more easily earn revenue for the government. Another problem is that some government land is occupied by influential people, but officials cannot allocate cases to the appropriate people due to time limitations. At the same time, they are pressured by the government to increase revenue.

Syndicates also manipulate ordinary service recipients through providing misleading and false information. According to one interviewee:

This is the first time I went to the Land Office. I never thought that I [would] see so many people in a small, tiny office [stuck] together with one another. I was not sure where to go. First, I went to a person who was not interested to talk with me at all. Then I went to another and then another. Suddenly, one person came towards me asking “do I need any help?” I was excited to have someone who was willing to help me. Then he took me to the same officials who didn’t talk to me at all. I got my service within a few hours. But I had to [pay] an extra 2000 TK [taka]. (personal communication, February 20, 2020)

These scenarios still exist in many Land Offices. People who come to the Land Office for the first time frequently experience strain in various ways. Similarly, in the Land Office, brokers often form a syndicate which creates pressure from those allegedly involved in a political network. As a result, at times, it becomes difficult to stop a broker’s activities in the Land Office.

The second reason is the service recipient’s lack of awareness. People often do not raise their voices about corruption and are afraid to use a complaints box. Therefore, people coming to the Land Office have a preset tendency to violate rules and regulations. Most service recipients have not read the Citizen’s Charter and are even reluctant to follow official rules. They are interested in immediately receiving the service as soon as they come to the Land Office. During an in-depth interview, one Assistant Commissioner (AC) (Land) stated that:

Most service recipients are not interested to take information from Citizen Charters or online/social media. They start visiting the office before the specified provided time and fall into trouble with corrupt officials and broker syndicates. (personal communication, June 16, 2020)

Despite explanations on how to apply for services in the Land Office, service recipients are reluctant to submit the required documents as they have a natural tendency to violate rules. They typically think that officials are providing wrong information; therefore, they prefer to go to a broker.

The preset mindset of service recipients also keeps them away from automation and digitalization. At the field level, people who come to Land Offices for
services are either farmers or uneducated and do not know about online services/automation. They are afraid to use these services; they cannot reap the benefits of automation; and they are not able to carry out the task themselves. Therefore, they seek the help of computer shops or a Union Digital Centre (UDC) to access Land Office services. The computer operator (at computer shops) or UDC service providers repeatedly make mistakes due to their lack of land-related training. As a result, these service recipients fail to receive their services on time. One Assistant Commissioner (AC) (Land), interviewed for this study, mentioned that:

Actual service recipients of the Land Office are not receiving the advantage of digitalization/automation. They are afraid of online services and currently consider online services and automation as harassment. (personal communication, June 14, 2020)

Initiatives implemented by Land Offices are also viewed through service recipients’ lack of awareness. Although service recipients are happy to see complaint boxes and closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras being set up by officials to improve the Land Office, in most cases, very few people complain or dare to complain using the complaints box. Land Office employees usually create the perception, that is, a kind of fear, that if service recipients make a complaint, this will cause problems with their services. One service recipient, interviewed for this study, described in detail the harassment they endured:

One day I went to the Land Office to pay my house tax. They demanded BDT 10,000 from me when the total amount of tax is around BDT 600. Then I asked them to give [me] an official calculation breaking down the 10,000 BDT, as per their demand. Then they tried to convince me in various ways without showing the calculation that they have other expenses to do, which is not in the rules laid down by the government. But as a conscious citizen, I knew that there is no extra cost in this regard, so I asked them to do my job with the amount of money set by the government and they were reluctant to do so. As a result, when I tried to make a complaint in the complaints box, they stopped me and threatened me, saying that if they found any complaint against them in the box, I will have to suffer a lot with the issue. So, I stepped down from complaining. (personal communication, June 16, 2020)

The complaints box is located in an open place, visible to all, in the Land Office. If anyone lodges a complaint, Land Office employees see that they have done so and threaten them. Service recipients are also not informed about what action, if any, is taken if a complaint is lodged. Another problem is that service recipients not only do not know what action is taken against the accused if any evidence of corruption is reported in the complaints box, they also do not know whether the contents of the complaints box are reviewed. Therefore, most service recipients think that complaints boxes, CCTV cameras, or other means of curbing corruption are simply lip service.

A third reason is that skilled manpower is rarely available for technical issues. Land-related issues are often complex and, at times for new officials, are difficult
to understand. Therefore, services are often delayed when responding to simple issues. As a result, those in the Land Office workforce move slower than anticipated and, consequently, service recipients suffer from the delay. Moreover, Land Offices have a shortage of staff, as one Assistant Commissioner (AC) Land reported “We don’t have enough staff to cope with the huge workload. Beneficiaries often try to take advantage of the lack of adequate manpower in many of our departments” (personal communication, June 15, 2020).

Staff mostly prefer the traditional way of service delivery. In addition, the government does not offer adequate technical workshops for its staff and, instead, opts to recruit short-term technical operators in Land Offices who are often not sufficiently educated.

These challenges indicate that NIS implementation is often blurred and that massive efforts are needed to make land administration more effective to fulfill the actual goal of the strategy.

Local solutions to local problems: an alternative approach

A local solution for a local problem, or a bottom-up approach, is a concept developed from new public management (NPM) which suggests that a problem should be solved in the local context. Andrews (2013) argued that isomorphism or best practices of problem solutions might not be effective for every context. Therefore, different problems need different solutions. The NPM concept is driven to finding and solving problems at the grassroots level. Evidence from different countries in preventing corruption in various sectors suggests that the bottom-up approach is likely to reduce corruption more than the top-down approach. Similarly, the current study has found that some innovations made by local Land Offices have made a crucial contribution to preventing corruption. These local innovation efforts often drive towards achieving goals even though they do not always align with the code of conduct.

The local innovation process in land administration, in recent years, is largely and notably driven by Sahadat Hossain at Paba in the Rajshahi district. Working as an Assistant Commissioner (AC) (Land) in Paba, Mr Hossain has made some locally based solutions at the Land Office. His initiatives, such as increasing direct public interaction by measures such as sitting outside the office in the yard, as well as the digitalization of records have made significant changes in Land Offices in Bangladesh. Furthermore, his model has been followed in many offices and has received positive results (Sakib 2018). Likewise, the current study has found some alternative approaches to preventing corruption.

Case study 1: relocated sitting arrangements of Assistant Commissioner (AC) (Land)

The most common problem in the land office is the frequent movement of middlemen and indomitable subordinate officials. Syndicates combining middlemen and Land Office officials harass ordinary citizens. When service recipients approach a
subordinate official for any service, employees harass them in various ways and, at times, demand extra money in return for the work done. Therefore, to protect service recipients from such harassment, some Assistant Commissioners (ACs) (Land) have set up their room at the entrance to the Land Office. In this way, service recipients must pass by the Assistant Commissioner (AC) Land’s room first to receive services at the Land Office. During an in-depth interview, one Assistant Commissioner (AC) (Land) stated that:

I sit at the entrance of my office every morning with a table and chair. As soon as service recipients come, I listen to their problem myself and if there is any solution within my control, I solve it myself. Otherwise, I call the concerned official and ask him to solve their problems. When they leave after finishing their work, I ask the service recipients again if there is any problem in doing his job or if any officer has demanded extra money. This has reduced the tendency of corruption among the officials in my office. My office is now 100% corruption-free and I think this action has contributed the most. (personal communication, June 24, 2020.

This approach has also significantly reduced the influence of middlemen in the Land Office. The solution, again derived from Mr Sahadat Hossain, is suitable for the context of Bangladesh (Sakib 2020). The NIS does not provide this type of solution to reduce corruption as they view the Assistant Commissioner (AC) (Land) as exclusive. The Assistant Commissioner (AC) Land should emerge from the traditional bureaucratic ethos and rely on local innovation to solve these problems.

Case study 2: Bhumi Pathshala

Bhumi Pathshala (the Bengali word Bhumi means ‘land,’ while Pathshala means ‘school’) is an innovative approach to raise awareness and directly educate people on land-related problems. It generally occurs in the Gol Ghar (roundhouse) in the Land Office 2 days a week. Some Land Offices initiate schooling to increase citizens’ awareness against corruption. In Bhumi Pathshala, the Assistant Commissioner (AC) (Land) himself teaches citizens about Land Office functions including mutation, registration, withdrawal of records and maps, charges fixed for different services, etc. According to an Assistant Commissioner (AC) (Land), interviewed in this study:

We held hearings 2 days a week for those who come to our office to receive services. Most of the time, the service recipients do not have a clear idea about the dag, khaitan, or the continuity of how his land came to him. That’s why I take the initiative to give them an idea. Before each hearing I spend 30–40 minutes in my office giving them various information about the service, informing them that no extra money is required to avail the services of the Land Office, and answering their various questions. After this session, I periodically call them to the hearing. As a result, people have become much
more aware than before and corruption in my office has been greatly reduced.
(personal communication, June 23, 2020)

The Bhumi Pathshala has had a significant positive response among citizens as they are being empowered. This alternative process of creating awareness has become more effective than traditional workshops and seminars in which most uneducated individuals and villagers are not interested. In contrast, people, while sitting with the Assistant Commissioner (AC) (Land) in Bhumi Pathshala, discuss their problems and complain about corrupt individuals. In return, this instantly reduces problems and helps to gather knowledge about practices.

Both cases described in this study indicate that, rather than sticking with the textbook or the traditional bureaucratic approach, the NIS implementation also needs local innovations in Land Offices as these innovations are making a much better contribution than the NIS guidelines.

**Discussion and conclusion: towards a policy framework**

The NIS is a combination of acts that direct public officials to follow the code of conduct. It is also a process for officials to achieve targets in a specific time frame. As a result, public officials are driven to achieve these targets to fulfill their service goals. One senior official mentioned that being driven towards these goals has both positive and negative effects on public service delivery. The benefits of these activities are that officials look forward to achieving their goals. Many young officials today work in the Land Office and often work competitively to fulfill their annual performance appraisal (APA). They are also keen to achieve an “integrity award” by demonstrating their activities, their problem-solving capacity, and their achievement of targets. Consequently, they frequently organize seminars and workshops, and lease government properties as much as possible to obtain government revenue. Government officials are also now using the “buzz word” Shuddhachar (in Bengali meaning ‘integrity’) in rural Land Offices to promote good practices. The NIS also changes the mindset of Land Office officials. Due to target-based activities, officials now begin their work more promptly, compared to previously. One significant example is the release of mutation papers in 45 days. To some extent, these types of activities are making a contribution to promoting the NIS in the land sector. However, looking at the NIS challenges, the actual goal of NIS implementation is still far from reality.

Nevertheless, the current study has found that the NIS has had some positive effects on Land Offices, suggesting that more NIS activities should be implemented at the field level. However, the alternative approach, that is, “local solutions,” is making a significant contribution to local Land Offices and needs to be given serious consideration as one way to improve land management. These local approaches are more problem-oriented, are based on the local context, and, more importantly, are challenging powerful syndicates by making positive changes. Therefore, this study argues that sustainable land management needs combined efforts to reduce corruption. Many Assistant Commissioners (ACs) (Land) have undertaken various
self-driven initiatives, in combination with the NIS framework, to provide more successful initiatives to prevent corruption and tackle potential challenges. Perhaps the most significant example of these initiatives has been undertaken by the former *Upazila Nirbahi Officer* (UNO) of Paba, a sub-district in the Rajshahi district, initiated by Sahadat Hossain. Generally, in Bangladesh, bureaucrats keep their distance from citizens, due to their colonial legacy. However, Mr Hossain’s problem-centric approach to local solutions has set an example in land administration (see Sakib 2020). His approach can be characterized through Fig. 2 below, with this likely to be a successful approach to preventing corruption and bringing a sustainable solution to land management.

As shown in Fig. 2, although the NIS approach might succeed in preventing corruption, corruption could remain dormant due to local problems, such as political influence and awareness problems. The nature of the problems might vary in different locations. Therefore, the NIS approach, which prescribes solutions in line with the code of conduct or official norms, might not be effective, with public officials often compromising when addressing local problems. However, the concept of developing local solutions to local problems presents an opportunity for a sustainable solution to land administration. Some local solutions to land management, presented as cases in this study, such as *Bhumi Pathshala*, can resolve problems like the lack of awareness or the activities of political syndicates. Sustainable land management thus requires a combination of the NIS approach (which will encourage officials to follow the code of conduct) and a locally driven approach to corruption prevention to meet local challenges.

The NIS is a vivid document for policy implementation in Bangladesh. It offers widespread guidelines for policy implementation. The current study, using land administration as a case, found that combining NIS efforts and local innovation may provide better results in combating corruption in Bangladesh. The findings of this

---

**Fig. 2** Framework of sustainable land administration. Presenting a combination of the NIS and local solutions
study, along with policy suggestions, convey the view that the role of land administration in public service delivery is critical, with much of the government’s image depending on the success of land administration in Bangladesh. Although several critical problems are linked with attempts to achieve success with NIS implementation in land administration, the Bangladesh government should take these policy suggestions seriously and make substantial changes in land administration at the field level. The government should also take more steps to overcome these challenges. For example, adequate, regular, timely, and needs-based training is required for a more dynamic administration. Also, to set an example, the government should take more punitive actions against corrupt officials. One-stop-shop services, more budget allocation to government offices, and more easily accessible old records might also create a sustainable land administrative system, along with following the suggested combined approach.

**Funding** This paper has been developed based on funding from the Bangladesh Civil Service Academy.

**Data availability** The data that support the study’s findings are available from the corresponding author on request.

**Declarations**

**Conflict of interest** No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**References**

Ahsan A, Panday P (2013) Problems of coordination in land administration in Bangladesh: does informal communication matter? Int J Public Adm 36(8):588–599

Andrews M (2013) The limits of institutional reform in development: changing rules for realistic solutions. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Babalola SO, Choon LT, Abdulrahman A, Tata H, Tukka AA (2018) Web design and development for land registration: an online cadastral delivery service in Nigeria. Adv Sci Lett 24(5):3752–3757

Barkat A, Suhrawardy GM (2019) Empowering the poor and marginalized through land reform: CSO land watch monitoring report in Bangladesh 2018. In: Coalition for agrarian reform and rural development (ANGOC) and land watch Asia (LWA), pp 84–104. https://angoc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Bangladesh_Report.pdf. Accessed 18 Feb 2020

Berry JM (2002) Validity and reliability issues in elite interviewing. Polit Sci Polit 35(4):679–682. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096502001166

Brown A, Heinrich F (2017) National integrity systems—an evolving approach to anti-corruption policy evaluation. Crime Law Soc Change 68(3):283–292

Bryman A, Bell E (2015) Business research methods. Oxford University Press, Oxford

Chiodelli F, Moroni S (2015) Corruption in land-use issues: a crucial challenge for planning theory and practice. Town Plann Rev 86(4):437–456

Choudhury E, Ridwan M, Awal M, Hosain S (2011) A web-based land management system for Bangladesh. In: Paper presented at 14th International Conference on Computer and Information Technology, December 22–24, Dhaka, Bangladesh. https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/6164807?reload=true&arnumber=6164807&contentType=Conference%20Publications. Accessed 13 Jan 2020

Creswell JW (2012) Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches. SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks

Doig A (2006) Not as easy as it sounds? Delivering the national integrity system approach in practice—the case study of the national anti-corruption programme in Lithuania. Public Adm Q 30(3/4):273–313
