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The Access to Information Programme

Transforming public service delivery in Bangladesh

Cover photo: a2i

The purpose of this case study is to provide context and analysis about the complexities of scaling social impact in South Asia. It does not intend to serve as endorsement or illustration of effective or ineffective organizational practices. The full series of cases can be found at innovation.brac.net.

We live in a changed and changing world. What citizens want is different in 2014; they demand more, they want things faster; they see that immediate service is possible.

This was how Anir Chowdhury, Policy Advisor to the Access to Information Programme (a2i), spoke of the enhanced awareness of the average Bangladeshi citizens about their expectations regarding receiving services from the government. In this day and age of alternative service delivery options and the nearly ubiquitous presence of digital technologies, citizens are no longer complacent about government services which have traditionally been slow and unresponsive. This change in expectation spoke volumes about Bangladesh as a nation in its early 40s. Like many developing countries, public institutions in general found it difficult to accurately identify the needs of citizens and respond promptly. Overly complicated and circuitous bureaucratic processes, resistance to change by civil service and over-centralization, frustrate citizens in their attempts to avail public services and information. Citizens have to encounter face-to-face interactions with government officials, a process that is intimidating for the less literate and opportune for rent-seeking.

The Access to Information Programme being implemented by Bangladesh Prime Minister's Office, with technical assistance from UNDP and USAID, started in 2007 to improve quality, widen access, and decentralize delivery of public information and services. In partnership with the Local Government Division, one-stop service centres known as Union Information and Service Centres (UISCs) –rebranded Union Digital Centres in August 2014 –were setup in union parishads, which formed the lowest tier of rural local government institutions in Bangladesh. The objective was to address both supply and demand-side challenges associated with delivering and accessing public information and services through the innovative use of information and communication technology.

Accessing public information and services In Bangladesh meant going to a sub-district headquarter 15 km away from the average citizen's home or, the district headquarter over 35 km away and standing in long queues. Rural citizens incurred

Ideas in brief

1   If the right government stakeholders can be appropriately mobilised, then it is possible to bring about positive changes within government. Development agencies are at times too focused on policy advocacy from the outside. There are times where objectives can be accomplished more sustainably by attempting to catalyze improvements and innovations from within. However, that requires developing a guiding coalition of change makers within the government ministries and agencies.

2   The sustainability of many socially important services ultimately relies on institutions that are closest to the people, especially the underserved. So, it is critical to empower them and re-engineer, simplify, decentralize service delivery to make them accessible from there. The innovative use of ICTs can play an empowering role in such endeavors.

3   It's important not to attempt to do everything at once. At the preliminary stages, the initiative needs to focus on securing existential factors – things that are critical to the long-term sustainability of the gains made. So, it needs to prioritise, make progress in phases but always remain opportunistic and ready to embrace serendipity.

Brief descriptions and reasons for engaging the various government stakeholders

Actor	Function
PrimeMinister's Office	• Implements the Access to Information Programme • Bangladesh follows a system of parliamentary democracy where the Prime Minister is the chief executive. It is thus the apex political office and is able to play a critical, catalytic role for large-scale change initiatives.
Cabinet division	• The nerve centre of Bangladesh Civil Service including the field administration which is responsible for most of the service delivery.
Local government division(LGD)	• The ministry responsible for delivering coordinating local government institutions which deliver a large number of services to citizens. • The Union Digital Centres (UDCs) are physically hosted in each of the rural local government institutions coordinated by the LGD.
Union *parishad* Chairman	• Union refers to a collection of villages and union parishad is the lowest tier of the local government system in Bangladesh. • Union parishad chairmen are elected people's representatives. • One of the union parishad chairmen's key responsibilities to their constituencies is to ensure they are able to access and benefit from public services and information. • Without their support and cooperation, the entrepreneurs would not be able to function effectively. • Their help is vital in identifying and recruiting the right entrepreneurs for the UDCs. • Involving them in the entrepreneurs'recruitment process also helps build ownership and accountability on the part of the union parishad chairman with regard to the performance of the UDCs.
Deputy Commissioner's (DC) office	• The Deputy Commissioner's office carries out all government administrative activitieswithin each district. • Creating and maintaining strong linkages with the Deputy Commissioner's office is critical to the functioning of the ISCs.
Bangladesh Computer Council	• It is an autonomous body under the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications, and Information & Communication Technology of Bangladesh and is responsible for formulating and implementing policies to ensure effective and systematic growth of the computer and information technology sector of the country. • It has the necessary expertise, infrastructure and human resource required to equip and train the UDC entrepreneurs on technology issues.

The authority of the PMO is often necessary when barriers need to be crossed or broken down for innovation to happen.

high opportunity and transaction costs, coupled with other contingent liabilities in availing public services such as land records, birth certificates. In addition, they suffered from a system overcrowded by market intermediaries, predominantly men who acted as gatekeepers of public provisions.

The distance to a union parishad office was much shorter, typically about 3 km from an average citizen's home. Each Union Digital Centre had an internet connection and was run by two entrepreneurs under the supervision of a local advisory board headed by the union parishad chairman. They were designed to be self-sustaining, micro-enterprises that offered fee-based access to information and services.
The a2i programme was initially designed as an e-Governance project. Its hosting at the PMO and its partnership with ministries like the LGD and other line ministries allowed it to transform itself into a change management and innovation programme

Selected UISC offerings:

Public services: Online birth and death registration, government form download, applications for copy of landownership documents, public examination results, online applications for passports, university admission, driving licenses, tender information, and utility bill payment.

Private services: IT training, composing-printing-scanning, mobile banking, online job applications and video conferencing.

Local government services: Issuing and renewing trade licenses, holding tax, land ownership and mutation information, approval of building layouts, receiving different sorts of *certificates.*

with a large portfolio of initiatives across many ministries. a2i was also very strategic to form a number of key partnerships with private sector

organizations including civil society. It was these partnerships with public agencies and private organizations that have allowed the amalgamation of public and private services respectively into the one-stop shops called the UDCs.

Designing, prototyping and scaling

a2i facilitated consultation amongst the Local Government Division, large NGOs such as Grameen Bank and BRAC, smaller but innovative NGOs like D.Net, and private sector bodies such as the telcos and the Bangladesh Telecentre Network in formulating the design for the UDCs. These consultations revealed the importance of involving other government stakeholders because public information and services hold high value for the citizens. Thus, the a2i team realised early on that the challenge was to instill a certain amount of ownership in the government establishment but at the same time, not make the programme a part of the government bureaucracy. This was crucial to keeping the UDCs nimble, responsive and innovative. The other key challenge was to keep it sustainable – both financially and socially.

UNDP and USAID, the development partners, also pursued the agenda of strengthening local government institutions, especially the union parishad – the tier of local government closest to the voting public. They had learned from experience that just pushing and waiting for budgetary allocations for the union parishads to be increased, and decision making power to be truly decentralized was not an effective strategy on its own. It had to be supplemented by optimizing the utilisation Of resources and capabilities the union parishads already had. Union parishad chairmen and members were already elected; they already had office buildings and some financial resources in terms of tax revenues and allocations from the national budget. The problem was that the institution was not as effective as it could be with the result that citizens hardly visited the union parishads. They only went there to get birth registration, relief supplies and sometimes to hold shalish – localtrials –for petty crimes or resolving arguments.The idea was to establish UDCs at the union parishad office to provide information and services that people needed. Once that exchange started to take place, improvements in the institution and the services it rendered would follow.

At first we started scaling in phases involving100 or, 200 UDCs. But we realised that at that rate, to get to 4,500 would take over 20 years.We wanted to reach that target within the government's current term in office. So,the strategy was to scale up to the fullest extent through an administrative enforcement. Then, once that was achieved, we could address the particular challenges that arose.

If the UDCs were made a part of the union parishad bureaucratically, then they were going to function like any other government office which were not responsive to the citizens' needs. Which meant that there was not going to be any motivation to provide services that were in demand at the user level. So, inorder to strike a balance, a model where there was a kind of unique partnership between the government, the development partners and also the private sector was designed. To instill and retain government ownership, the UDCs were located inside the union parishad premises. The utility bills were paid from the budgetary allocation for union parishads. In order to make the UDCs effective in serving people with the information and services that they needed and were willing to pay for, the private sector, in the form of UDC entrepreneurs was introduced. In order to promote gender parity, it was also decided that there were going to be one male and one female entrepreneur in each UDC. Initially they did not have to pay for anything. All the investments came from funds provided by the government, local government or development partners. The entrepreneur's job was to publicise the UDCs and run them. So, in order for them to make money, they would have to be innovative and entrepreneurial – there was nothing to stop them from making further investments that would enable them to provide additional services.

The entrepreneurs had to be recruited locally because their familiarity in and knowledge of their communities' needs and level of understanding and comfort with technology was deemed very important for citizens actually coming to the UDCs and using them. Interestingly, it was again the focus on institutionalizing continuous innovation that the programme decided to not design the posts as those for regular government employees. The incentive system for government staff was too rigid to reward them for effectively identifying and catering to the needs of clients.The a2i team and the LGD developed elaborate and clear guidelines for the procedure to appoint UDC entrepreneurs. For the most part, skills rather than local patronage determined appointments. Since good performance of entrepreneurs in terms of service delivery was more important, patronage took a back seat and addressed the critical sustainability question for the entrepreneurs.

Initially, the idea was to setup the UDCs as delivery and access points for information based resources created by a2i. It soon realised that information and services must come from other government offices, NGOs and the private sector. a2i thus soon restricted itself to just guiding and facilitating the efforts to actually establish the centres, develop the policies for running them, appoint the entrepreneurs and build their capacity. a2i made sure that all decision making and the resulting steps were taken by the appropriate government bodies. It thus collaborated with the Local Government Division to sensitise the union parishad chairmen and members, ensure that official government circulars mandating local government institutions and actors (elected and otherwise) to participate were issued and to have them appoint suitable, local entrepreneurs. And the Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC) was asked to train the entrepreneurs on computer literacy.

The UDCs were initially prototyped in two unions of Bangladesh in 2007. The pilot was then expanded to 30 union parishads in 2008 to understand regional variation. Encouraged by the results, UDCs were opened in another100 union parishad in 2009. However, by mid 2009, the target of opening 500 UDCs remained unachieved. There were funding issues which stemmed largely from a lack of political will to take the program any further. The Fortuitous visit of Helen Clark, UNDP Administrator and a close, personal friend of the then hon'ble Prime Minister, to Bangladesh in November that year provided a much welcome breakthrough. The a2i team jumped on this opportunity and proposed the idea of the Prime Minister jointly inaugurating

the 1000th UDC with Helen Clark. Itworked; funds started to present themselves from previously unknown areas and in just four months, the target was achieved. According to Naimuzzaman Mukta, "At first we started scaling in phases involving 100 or, 200 UDCs. But we realised that at that rate, to get to 4,500 would take over 20 years. We wanted to reach that target within the government's current term in office. So, the strategy was to scale up to the fullest extent through an administrative enforcement. Then, once that was achieved, we could address the particular challenges that arose." The a2i team then focused on leveraging the fanfare and media coverage around the inauguration to establish UDCs in all of the 4,545 union parishads of the country.

New challenges revealed and course corrections

The big push to scale up magnified seemingly trivial challenges and revealed weaknesses in the model. Initially, the a2i team focused and emphasized on developing content that the entrepreneurs could then help people access for a fee. The team developed a lot of attractive, animated content on agriculture – like what to do if coconut trees were infected by disease, how to neutralize the pH value of ponds, etc. The team thought that these were big problems that rural people faced and if they could learn about the solutions from the UDCs, they would benefit and be pleased. But people took it more as entertainment rather than a serious service. They were amused since the content was animated but they held no intrinsic value. Meetings and group discussions helped the a2i team realize that most people were already familiar with the problems and knew the solutions. Infact, their own depth of knowledge regarding the issues was far superior.

At first, there were not enough services for the entrepreneurs to make much money. The programme had already lost many prospective entrepreneurs once they realized that the position was not for a government job. The a2i team feared that they could not retain the remaining ones. Another contributing factor to this challenge was that a lot of people got these e-services from the local markets. The busy local markets had shops that had computers with internet connections and people

could pay to have documents composed and check or send emails. Union parishad offices, on the other hand, did not get that much foot traffic.

The a2i team thus figured out that there had to be some very specific services that were only available at UDCs for which people would go there. Only that would make it worthwhile for people to make that journey. And while the team was looking for something like that, the government began a major push for sending semi-skilled Bangladeshi workers to Malaysia. The government made it very cheap to send workers to Malaysia which meant that overseas employment recruitment agencies became very interested. What they needed was finding the right people in the right numbers. It was decided that the application process would be done online and only the UDC entrepreneurs would be authorized to do the registration. It thus became something that would not be available any where else and thousands of interested applicants went to the UDCs. This put the UDCs on the local map and people learned and talked much more about them. By the time the recruitment drive ended successfully, the UDCs had established a presence in people's minds, gained a lot of credibility as well as huge popularity within the government.

a2i capitalized on this success by helping other ministries identify similar services and adding them to the UDCs' portfolio. Thus, services like printing birth certificates, viewing results of which schools qualified to receive 'monthly pay orders' (MPOs) from the Ministry of Education – information which previously could only be accessed in Dhaka, the capital city or the 64 district headquarters –were made available online and allowed sole, fee-based access through the UDCs.

Once people started to see that it was possible to access these services from close to their home, timeliness became the next priority. Otherwise, they would gradually lose interest and the initiative would fail. For example, if the entrepreneur asked the union parishad chairman or the deputy commissioner for a service, some type of information or support but they did not respond. This would leave the entrepreneur helpless. The prevailing archaic public service delivery model posed challenges. Resistance towards change, from the bureaucracy to vested interest groups, was strong. Innovation entailed taking risks and sometimes failing. On one hand, there was little incentive to try new ideas, and

on the other, little tolerance or acknowledgement of failure. Political or bureaucratic connections from the highest levels was of paramount importance in overcoming such bureaucratic hurdles and organizational resistance to change.

Given the a2i team had no formal authority over the ministries, just the sheer volume of such cases necessitated an unorthodox solution. The team started the 'UDC blog', where entrepreneurs would be able to report such cases. The entrepreneur could post a blog stating that she had asked this of this person on this date but did not get a response or there was no progress. Then, the a2i team forwarded such blogs to the relevant secretary or Divisional Commissioner herself. And then almost magically, things started to get done. The field administration started to listen very carefully to what the entrepreneurs asked for. As all entrepreneurs were connected to the blog, it became like a virtual, peer – support community. Very soon, they got to know each other, started sharing success stories and even challenges and how they got around them.

UDCs in Bangladesh are operating under the public-private-partnership (PPP) modality. The private sector is considered a key partner in each of the initiatives undertaken by the UDCs. For instance, mobile banking opportunities offered by private commercial banks through branchless mode of operation, has enabled many UDCs to remain financially solvent. These private banks design training programs for UDC entrepreneurs so that they are equipped to provide the service with adequate skills and knowledge. Such an approach of engaging a gamut of public and private service providers has proven to be of high yield, helping microenterprises draw investment from business communities and public agencies.

Expanding the network to urban areas

In 2013, the a2i team took on the next challenge of opening up Town Digital Centres (TDCs) in urban areas of the country –pouroshobhas (towns or municipalities) and city corporations (major cities),

where 34% of the total population lived. A team consisting of two Bangladesh Computer Council assistant programmers, two focal points from every city corporation and some of the best UDC entrepreneurs was formed to provide training of trainers. The training would be given to selected entrepreneurs from every city corporation and pourashobha who, upon completion of the course, would be responsible for training entrepreneurs in all the wards of their town or city.

The relationship established with the Bangladesh Computer Council as a part of the UDC experience meant that the training team was assembled very quickly. There was good understanding about what the aim was and what was expected of the a2i team to facilitate the scale up.The process of selecting the best TDC entrepreneurs served as a great exercise that both re-energised the UDCs and highlighted the most talented members of the pool. This meant that the finally selected entrepreneurs, who were already exceptional and highly motivated individuals, were rearing to share and exhibit what they had learnt and achieved.

But the training sessions for the local government officials (elected mayors, their executivesecretaries and councilors of the city local government) had not gone very well. Concerns regarding how seriously they were taking the trainings regularly reached the PMO team. And this would prove to be a sign of greater challenges to come. The main cause was that the a2i team had not been able to get an official government notification issued by the Local Government Division that made it legally binding for mayors to contribute and support the entrepreneurs.

The actors on the ground, especially those who were government appointed or elected people's representatives, could not function without the official notification. The letters and guide lines the a2i team sent were informal. The authority to issue such office orders was with the relevant ministries. So, the a2i team needed to draft office orders in consultation with the LGD and get them issued. Though the efforts were worth the while since these office orders were also the most effective way to mainstream desirable changes into the ministry's system and make them part of operational policy; like in so many other countries, Bangladesh's government bureaucracy functioned very slowly. This held up urgent work and created challenges such as the

ones that both the entrepreneurs and the a2i team were facing.

The a2i team tried to make the best of the lull in activities by engaging all the government ministries to identify more services and information that could also be delivered or accessed through the TDCs. It was an effort designed to collect information and lay the basis for work that was not sensitive to political changes. Regardless of which party was in power – or, about to come into power – there were some services and information from each ministry that, if digitized and delivered through the TDCs would be of great benefit to the public sector administratively and of course render them much more accessible to the general public. Once the office order was sent out, progress made through such an activity could help the a2i team fast-track the achievement of many targets and get the programme back on track.

But operationally, the absence of the LGD's official notification created major problems in the field. TDC entrepreneurs were left stranded, some with only an office space to sit in, some even without that, and having no formal source of support. Since the notification was not sent out, the best the a2i team could achieve was to have a verbal instruction given out which, unsurprisingly, failed to have the desired effect.

The Bangladesh Computer Council assistant programmers - who provided the training - started getting calls from the entrepreneurs. Some took personal initiative, visited them and tried to help. Sawkot, the assistant programmer for Barisal district was one of them. There were cases of mayors threatening to fire entrepreneurs on the slightest excuse. Sawkot even participated in some of the shalish (informal trials held by communities) to make a case for the entrepreneurs. But, yet again, the fact that there was no official notification fo rmatters involving TDCs, he was left unheard and at times insulted.

In the mean time, it was also getting hard to retain good entrepreneurs. Unlike the UDCs in rural areas, there were lots of alternatives for bright young people to work and earn in towns and cities.Some of the entrepreneurs took the training and opened their own shops. Of course, the services they provided were entirely commercially oriented.

It was not until June2014 when the a2i team finally succeeded in getting the LGD to send out the official notification to the mayors of the city corporations and pourashobhas.

The a2i team also used similar notifications to get ministries to incorporate other features that would contribute in raising the profile and bolster the sustainability of the TDCs. For example, 'well performing UDCs' was made one of the criteria for rewarding union parishad chairmen. The same criterion was also enforced in order for town and city mayors to get allocations from the national budget. And budgetary allocations for automation of offices went first to towns and cities that had already established UDCs.

a2i in 2014

In 2014, In 2014, nearly four million citizens residing in rural and remote areas availed birth registration, land records, mobile banking, life insurance, digital photography, video conferencing, tele medicine services, information relating to education, employment and livelihood opportunities through the UDCs.

Challenges with the newly established town and city digital centres remained. Since the notification took such a long time to be approved, all of the mayors had to be re oriented about the programme. The team also had to ensure that the mayors and entrepreneurs were taking steps to increase the number of women who came to the UDCs – something that had proved to be stubbornly difficult. But compared to the far bigger obstacles the team had overcome to reach that point, it was confident that it was only a matter of time before they were resolved.

In collaboration with 40 agencies of the government, a2i launched a service portal called 'Shebakunjo' containing process maps and service requirements for over 400 vital services. Permanent Secreataries and heads of agencies have been instructed by the PMO and Cabinet Division to simplify these services and make as many of them as possible available from UDCs and TDCs. When this starts happening

starting in 2015, TDC entrepreneurs would have valuable services to sell, and UDC entrepreneurs would expand their service portfolio further. a2i is providing design (or re-design) support to the various agencies to make their services available from UDCs and TDCs.

Key UISC achievements to date

- 3.91 million (25% female) underserved beneficiaries received livelihood services from over 4,500 UDCs every month

- Online registration for more than 2.2 million potential migrant workers sought foreign employment through UDCs, including 40,000 female migrant workers

- Over 78,000 citizens (70% women) Gained access to mobile banking services and transacted BDT 113million (USD1.39 million)

- Over 45,000 students and youth (70% women) received computer literacy training

- Over 150,000 posts have been published on the UDC blog which is a platform for collaborative problem solving and addressing many administrative issues much more quickly than normal bureaucratic channels of the government.

- Almost all UDCs have their home pages as part of the government mega-portal which receives 1 million page hits per day. These pages were built mostly by the UDC entrepreneurs.

Reflections and closing thoughts

Scaling up requires a careful and thoughtful combination of political will and the ownership of the bureaucratic machinery. Otherwise, any scaling up effort will come to a grinding halt at some point.

Among the many innovations a2i catalyzed within the government of Bangladesh, the UDCs represent the largest infrastructure and human resource network for service delivery to the rural underserved. UDCs, besides introducing innovation into public service delivery, also empowered the local government system. They demonstrated the possibility of delivering public information and services more easily, cheaply, reliably and in a transparent manner. The highest levels of leadership - politically and within civil service –owned the initiative and established nearly 5,000 centres with internet connectivity within three kilometers of all citizens.

A2i combined a bottom-up citizen-centred design with a top-down policy push to create, scale up and now sustain the UDCs. Anir Chowdhury, a2i's Policy Advisor, says on the point of scaling up, "Identification of a problem and the design of a solution must be driven by empathy for target beneficiaries. Otherwise, it will be tantamount to a person with a hammer as a solution looking for a nail as the problem. Scaling up requires a careful and thoughtful combination of political will and the ownership of the bureaucratic machinery. Otherwise, any scaling up effort will come to a grinding halt at some point." Now that the 5,000 centre strong service delivery network has been built, the ministries and agencies are being instructed to re-engineer more and more of their services to make them available at the UDCs. This will enable lower-cost service delivery for the government, reduce time, cost and the number of visits for the citizens and create self-employment for

thousands of micro-entrepreneurs who will act as intermediaries, not to seek rent but to provide a very efficient last-mile service delivery layer. When asked what the a2i team regarded as its lasting impact, Naimuzzaman replied, "The answer is simple: service." The team regards service as the key factor for the sustainability of the UDCs.

References

Information for this case was collected over the course of a year as part of the "Doing while Learning" project. Methods included field visits, regular discussions, logbooks, and analysis of a2i's existing management information system.

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