

In-depth Monitoring of Access to Information (a2i) Programme of Bangladesh Government

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Abstract: ‘Digital Bangladesh’ is an integral part of the Bangladesh Government’s *Vision 2021*. Progress made in bringing government services to the doorsteps of citizen is probably the area where Bangladesh registered most significant progress due to Access to Information (a2i) programme. Vertical (with government ministries and agencies) and horizontal (i.e. with citizens) policy advocacy and development interventions of a2i programme have resulted in a number of citizen-centric e-initiatives and services. The objective of a2i is to make better use of technology to benefit underserved communities, which would increase transparency, improve governance and reduce the hassle of obtaining government services for citizens in Bangladesh. The objective of in-depth monitoring of a2i is to monitor the project in all aspects in collaboration with project personnel and other stakeholders. Stakeholders gave emphasis to include new areas like health, judiciary, land reform, food safety and police services under the purview of a2i. This paper focuses on impact of a2i programme on the society and recommendations proposed based on findings of the in-depth monitoring of a2i programme.

Keywords: Access to Information, e-Services

BACKGROUND OF A2I PROGRAMME

The Prime Minister’s Office of Bangladesh, with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other development partners is implementing the Access to Information (a2i) Programme. The objective of a2i is to make better use of technology to benefit underserved communities, which would increase transparency, improve governance and reduce the hassle of obtaining government services for citizens. The specific objectives of the project are to strengthen existing e-services and launch second generation of integrated, inter-operable e-government applications; to sensitize government officials, training service providers and expanding digital literacy among general public; to forge strong policy and strategy links to ensure implementation of needed legal and regulatory changes in support of the project and to promote delivery of e-services. Initial commencement date of the project was 1 April, 2012 and was expected to be completed by 31 March, 2016. The original project cost was BDT 1853.87 million (USD 23.17 million, 1 USD = 80 BDT). The project has been revised and the expected completion date is 31 December, 2018 with revised project cost of BDT 3454.98 million (USD 43.19 million).

The objective of in-depth monitoring of a2i programme is to monitor the project in all aspects in collaboration of project personnel and possible stake holders. Outcome of the study allowed sponsoring Ministry and Agency to implement recommendations in order to move the project in right track. The specific objectives of the assignment are to review

whether the activities are conducted in accordance with the approved TPP (Technical Project Proposal); review and analysis project activities to assess whether they can achieve objective of the project; and to make recommendation for achieving project objectives.

HIGHLIGHTS OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION (A2I) PROGRAMME

Digital Centres - A total of 5,275 Digital Centres have been established all over the country out of which 4,547 Digital Centres are operating in Union Parishad, 321 in Municipalities and 407 in City Corporations. There are 10,105 entrepreneurs including women. The centres now deliver 102 types of services – both public and private – to an average 4.5 million underserved citizens at a much lower Time-Cost-Visit (TCV) than before. With a2i's support, many government ministries have redesigned their services to make them 'e-deliverable' through these centres. Services that would require multiple trips to the district government office 40 km away are now available at the nearby Digital Centre. On an average, time to receive services has come down by 85%, cost by 63% and the number of visits by 40%. A study over a period of 6 years reveals that simplification and digitization saved citizens of Bangladesh over half a billion dollars.

Service Innovation Fund (SIF) - The Service Innovation Fund (SIF) was launched in March 2013 to provide seed funds and incubate cost-effective, citizen-centered design innovations for improving public services. SIF not only provides talented government officials with the recognition, resources and an environment conducive to experiment with potential solutions, it also encourages localized, home-grown solutions and is open to all. Nearly half of the 2700 plus proposals to the Fund came from the private sector, NGOs, universities and even individual innovators. Anyone can apply online any time, the whole year round for grants worth up to USD 32000. A total of 90 projects have been funded under 6 rounds till June 2016.

Innovation Teams - As part of its attempt to institutionalize the culture of innovation, a2i has also catalyzed formation of nearly 1,000 'Innovation Teams' comprising 5000+ officers from all units and tiers of the government in 2013 through a Innovation Team gazette; that is starting from the ministry all the way down to the sub-district level. Led by Chief Innovation Officers these Innovation Teams represent an effort to build champions who will foster a peer support network and collaborative behavior within and across government offices.

Bangladesh National Web Portal - Bangladesh National Web Portal has been developed to be used as the gateway to access information and services of all the public offices under one platform and in one address (www.bangladesh.gov.bd). More than 25,000 websites of various unions, upazila's (sub-division), districts, divisions, directorates, departments and ministries have been included in this National Web Portal. Cabinet Division, a2i programme, relevant ministries, departments, field-level divisions, districts, upazila's (sub-division) and union level offices, Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC) and Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS) have played important role in developing this National Web Portal. National Web Portal project of a2i programme was awarded by the 'World Summit on Information Society' (WSIS) under 'Access to Information and Knowledge' category in 2015.

Sebakunjo (All Services in a Single Platform) - 'Sebakunjo' (www.services.portal.gov.bd) is a web platform where citizens can find all required important information

about services provided by public offices. In addition to the information on services, necessary information of public offices and other relevant government web-sites have been linked here. 400 services of 36 public directorate/organizations are in Sebakunjo.

Forms Portal - Forms Portal (www.forms.gov.bd) has started its journey to make all public forms available in one web platform aimed at reducing hassle of citizens. The Forms Portal has been developed both in Bangla and English versions. All forms are divided into 20 types. There are about 1,500 forms on this portal out of which 1,200 forms are editable in pdf format to be filled up.

Partnerships - a2i deliberately remains a catalyst in all initiatives and actively nurtures ownership among change champions from within all ministries, the Cabinet Division, Parliament Secretaries, the Chief Innovation Officers and their Innovation Teams, district and sub-district administrative heads, representatives from local government institutions and the Digital Centre entrepreneurs. Together, they form a2i's guiding coalition, which plays a crucial role in ensuring that service reforms are successful and sustainable. a2i is also developing partnerships with a growing number of international organizations such as Google, Facebook, Telenor, Mozilla and several reputed international universities and foundations known for their innovative technological and social research. There are 115 formal MOUs and 50 informal partnerships in operation.

Policy Advocacy - a2i has been an important player in influencing the country's numerous ICT for development acts, policies and guidelines that are currently in place. Since 2012, a2i has continued to provide advice and support to the formulation of regulations, policies, standards and guidelines, particularly those related to service process simplification, e-services and online transactions, financial inclusion and payment methods, security, and innovation. Over the project period, a2i has directly drafted and contributed to the drafting and implementation of over 25 public policies.

Inculcation of TCV Parameters within Bureaucracy - One of a2i's major achievements has been the inculcation of the Time-Cost-Visit parameters of measuring service quality within the bureaucracy. Reducing TCV has become the byword for innovation within the Bangladesh government. It has replaced confusing and frequently misinterpreted jargon (like the term 'innovation' itself). Reducing the time, cost and number of visits it takes for citizens to access public information and services offer simple parameters to measure and communicate positive change through the creation or enhancement of utility.

Capacity Building of Public Officials - The capacity building outputs of the project have among others included courses, seminars and workshops for government officials, Upazila chairmen, and training of trainers. The duration of training events ranged from one-day sensitization seminars to up to one-week intensive training courses. The training and skill development activities of the project have established a cadre of sensitized and trained public employees at various ranks in the government hierarchy from the secretaries to high-level officials, district administrators to local level government functionaries. Nearly 5,000 government officials were directly trained by the project. In addition, technical and mobilization skills of over 9,000 entrepreneurs were enhanced to run and manage over 4,500 Union Information and Service Centres/ Digital Centres (UDC), covering the whole country.

Quick-Wins - In its first two years the project facilitated development of 53 Quick Win e-service projects in collaboration with various government agencies. Quick Wins are small service delivery improvement prototype led by a government officer with technical and sometimes financial support from a2i. By the end of the project period this has been scaled up to over 700 Quick Wins at various stages of design, development and deployment. Union Digital Centres (UDCs), e-Purjee sugarcane procurement system, Multimedia Classrooms (MMC) initiative, District e-Service Centres (DESCs) are few examples which started out as Quick Wins in a few locations, and were gradually scaled up across the country.

Knowledge Products - The project has delivered a number of outputs of considerable strategic importance. In all, the project delivered 35 knowledge products and services that would form the framework and a base for e-government development and e-services delivery. This has among others included the Horizon Scan Document, ICT Policy Document, Digital Bangladesh documents, e-Government interoperability framework, technical standards, e-government systems architecture as well as development of the national e-content and knowledge repository (e-tathyakosh). Considering the significant achievements and outcomes of the project the evaluation teams is satisfied that expected outcomes of the project have been effectively achieved.

Service Process Simplification (SPS) - Service Process Simplification (SPS) enables government officials to simplify public services and their delivery systems by mapping them out and improving them using citizen-centered design principles. By leveraging the government's commitment to ensuring citizens' right to information, SPS has ushered in an era of unprecedented service delivery reform, demonstrated substantial TCV reduction and become a vital imperative before digitization of services. The effectiveness of this process is further validated by the fact that each Annual Performance Agreement signed between the Cabinet Secretary and the Secretary of a particular Ministry now mandates simplification of at least one service and digitization of another every year.

MDGs to SDGs - Transforming Bangladesh

Bangladesh has accomplished remarkable progresses in MDG achievement. Bangladesh have made outstanding progress on poverty alleviation, halting stunting, ensuring food security, primary school enrolment, gender parity in primary and secondary level education, lowering the infant and under-five mortality rate and maternal mortality ratio, improving immunization coverage and reducing the incidence of communicable diseases. Achievements of these impressive results reflect the commitment of the country's political leadership toward this global development agenda, and have also encouraged Bangladesh to take up the challenges to achieve sustainable development goals. a2i programme is playing a pivotal role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals like Goal 1 - End poverty in all its forms everywhere; Goal 2 - End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture; Goal 3 - Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages; Goal 4 - Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all; Goal 5 - Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls; Goal 8 - Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all; Goal 9 - Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation; Goal 16 - Promote peaceful and inclusive

societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON IN-DEPTH MONITORING

There are some shortcomings in the a2i programme. Notably, the programme stretched itself too thin through involvement in too many policy areas, suffered from weaknesses in marketing and resource mobilization, did not focus sufficiently on key enabling factors such as broadband connectivity and carried out limited impact assessments. The programme has not been able to sufficiently institutionalize many of the results it has produced. As a result, the existing benefits are significantly dependent on the maintenance of a project of this nature at the PMO and also on many of the project personnel. These shortcomings and need for greater institutional strengthening are addressed in revised a2i project. The Service Innovation Centre under the PMO is expected to gradually take over the strategic function of this programme such that the unit will eliminate need for any continuation of this programme.

Component One: E-Services

a2i has been facilitating development and delivery of e-services in partnership with government, private sector, and digital centres in city corporations, pourashavas (municipalities) and unions. Service process simplification and innovation are two essential tactics that a2i has used in designing these services. One of the innovations is the National Portal that now has a collection of over 25,000 government websites. a2i has also defined a range of metrics relating to their performance, including the use of Time-Cost-Visit (TCV) analysis. Although the TCV methodology has contributed to the existence of a citizen-centric service mentality among government officials, mechanisms are not yet in place in government to measure user satisfaction with the e-services, and obtain user's perspectives directly from users themselves. Whilst the early unit of focus for measurement of a2i project has correctly been on the quality of e-services that they provide to public, it is observed that a more meaningful unit of focus would now be on the outcome of the e-services and the extent to which the e-services are contributing to local socio-economic development. For this component it is recommended to i) implement measurement indicators for e-services that measure their outcomes and impacts; ii) build the capacity of UDC entrepreneur-operators and provide more opportunities for them to learn from each other; iii) put in place mechanism to monitor user satisfaction of e-services delivery; iv) implement measures aimed at improving the relationships between the UDCs and Union Parishad and v) assess the National Portal from users' standpoint and make adjustments to the user interface towards a more citizen-centric portal design.

Component 2: Capacity and Awareness

a2i project has conducted several activities to build capacity among government officials, UDC entrepreneur-operators and school teachers. A number of mechanisms are in place to foster a continued commitment to innovation in the delivery of public services. These measures have been met with much enthusiasm. However, some skill gaps remain and

the training provided to UDC entrepreneur-operators has not produced a corpus of individuals with a uniform skill set. e-Learning is seen as a viable and effective tool for continuing and intensifying the capacity building activities of the Project. For this component it is recommended to i) emphasize cross-organization collaborations and provide government officials with skills and opportunities to collaborate with other government offices, non-governmental organizations and private sector; ii) focus efforts on institutional capacity development and provision of a support system for innovation; iii) intensify efforts to further sensitize government agencies through partnerships with public training institutions and civil society organizations; iv) orient elected representatives of local government units and members of parliament on innovation in public services; v) continue running the five day training workshop on innovation initiation for all IOs and Innovation Team members, particularly those working at field level. As these officers rise up the ranks with new ideas, knowledge and experiences, and a culture of innovation, this will likely have a significant impact on the whole administration; vi) Enlarge pool of resource persons and equip them with the competencies to facilitate training workshops on innovation; vii) commission research to capture the learning from the pilot initiatives. Case studies and video documentaries on both successful and failed initiatives could be used as effective training materials in order to deepen understanding of participants about the prospect and challenges of innovation in public services viii) commission research to better understand the outcome and impact of innovation in public services and to guide policy reform that will remove remaining barriers and generate further improvements; ix) incorporate and further strengthen entrepreneurial skills in training for UDC entrepreneur-operators that will improve their ability to deliver locally-relevant information-based services as well as enhance sustainability of their centres and x) develop a strategy for e-learning that explores possibilities of using e-learning platform to meet training/learning needs of different groups including government officials, digital centre entrepreneur-operators, teachers, students and professionals.

Component 3: Enabling Environment

Based on a2i's reporting and interview with key informants, it can be concluded that the a2i has been playing an active role in catalyzing the needed regulatory and policy changes, particularly in areas related to service process simplification, e-services and online transactions, financial inclusion and payment methods, security, and innovation. a2i has provided advisory support to the development of new policies and regulations, and the amendment of existing ones. For this component it is recommended to i) support government involvement in the preparatory process of the United Nations e-Government Survey 2016, and ITU and UNCTAD's upcoming indexing; ii) advocate for improved regulatory and policy environment for private sector investments and innovations in the area of ICT for development; iii) prioritize advocacy for gender equality, particularly in collection and analysis of relevant data to understand gender impacts; iv) institutionalize use of Facebook for e-participation to enable engagement between government and citizen, and achieve a more open, transparent and consultative form of government and v) encourage full implementation of the National ICT Policy at ministerial level.

Component 4: Innovation

a2i project has embraced innovation as a cornerstone of its strategy for facilitating the implementation of e-services. The Service Innovation Fund (SIF) has sponsored 64 implementations. a2i is formulating a concept note for a Service Innovation Centre, which represents an opportunity to re-envision and re-brand a2i as a facilitator or innovation broker on many fronts. The approach to innovation with public services along with its consequences constitutes arguably the most significant aspect of the A2I Project. For this component it is recommended to i) intensify efforts to further embed an innovation culture in government through further and regular training, promotion and sharing of experiences and ii) consolidate government activities that denote significant levels of innovation into a single high-level organization unit with overreaching powers towards formulating a strategy and/or policy for national innovation.

CONCLUSION

Digital Bangladesh is an integral part of Bangladesh Government's *Vision 2021*. In FY 2010, the Honorable Prime Minister outlined the Digital Bangladesh initiative consisting of four key priorities - developing human resources ready for the 21st century; connecting citizens in ways most meaningful to them; taking services to citizens' doorsteps and making the private sector and market more productive and competitive through the use of digital technology. Progress made in bringing government services to the doorsteps of citizen is probably the area where Bangladesh registered most significant progress due to a2i programme. Policy advocacy and development interventions of a2i programme with government ministries and agencies and including citizens have resulted in a number of citizen-centric e-initiatives and services such as multimedia classroom and teacher-led education content development in public schools, mobile phone based health service from Upazila Health Complex, agricultural and other livelihood information and services (e-Tathyakosh) online through grassroots outlets. These are at an early stage of implementation but they constitute a concerted effort to bring government closer to the people through use of information technology - directly impacting the society.

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