

GOOD PRACTICE IN SCALING-UP

Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific

Scaling-Up Access to Information in Bangladesh

SEPTEMBER 2013



▲ People in rural areas often have had to travel long distances, forgo daily wages and layout expenses for food and accommodation in an effort to access public services. A2I has revolutionized that process for a number of public services by providing them in a fast, easy to understand and affordable manner.

INTRODUCTION

Government offices in Bangladesh provide a wide range of public services at the district and sub-district levels. To gain access to these services, the rural poor typically have to travel long distances to get to the relevant government offices. This takes valuable time away from their daily work and wages, and incurs costs for travel.

It is against this backdrop, that UNDP, USAID and the Government of Bangladesh embarked on the Access to Information (a2i) programme to improve service delivery, with special emphasis on meeting the needs of underserved communities. The programme first focused on increasing access to services in 2007, and then on simplifying service delivery the following year.

Since then, Bangladesh has shown remarkable success in decreasing time, cost and barriers in accessing government services. In a few short years, the number of underserved people benefiting from e-Services climbed from zero to 4.5 million every month.

The a2i initiative has steadily expanded. It has set up access points through the creation of Union Information Service Centres across the lowest government tiers to connect the bottom millions with public service access. Access centres now exist in 4,545 rural local government institutions and 727 locations in all urban municipalities. Innovations

at the district level have focused on transforming traditional services into e-services by reducing manual processes and the need for face-to-face meetings, thereby minimizing time, cost and inconvenience for individuals seeking assistance.

“Citizens need not go to the services because the services will come to them,” has become the slogan that drives the transformational change in a2i in Bangladesh.



Before it took anywhere between four hours to one day to deal with each land record application, after A2i's intervention in this field it now takes up to a maximum of one hour for the entire process.

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EVIDENCE OF RESULTS ACHIEVED AT SCALE AND TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

A snapshot of some of the pilot efforts that later scaled up to the national level:

- » **Union Information and Services Centres** – These small enterprises, hosted in local government institutions in rural areas started in two locations in 2007, supported by the UNDP Democratic Governance Thematic Trust Fund. The following year, the Centres expanded to 30 locations, to 100 locations in 2009 and to all 4,545 rural government institutions by the end of 2010.

Through these Centres, more than 4.5 million people each month now have easy access to a wide range of services. These include applications for land records, mobile banking, life insurance, exam results, telemedicine and information on agriculture. Travel distance has reduced from an average of 35 kilometres to reach the district headquarters, to only three kilometres to reach the Union Information and Service Centre. The rural model has been scaled up in 2013 to serve people in remote towns and urban areas.

- » **District e-service Centres** – These Centres started with a single office in 2010 and now there are more than 64 spanning all district headquarters. More than 2.2 million land records were delivered electronically through these centres.
- » **National Portal** – This started as one site in 2007 and has now expanded to nearly 25,000 government and local government offices in 2013. It has

become one of the largest government portals in the world, bringing the entire government under one umbrella and ensures disclosure of vital information in accordance with the Right to Information Act. The portals pave the way for implementation of the National e-Service System, which has started operation in 240 government offices in one district and by 2015, is expected to cover 16,000.

- » **Education and Finance e-Services** – As of June 2013, 63 million results of public exams were transmitted over the internet; 38 million through SMS. Four million students learned from multimedia content developed by 18,000 teachers. Ten million electronic money orders were sent through post offices. More than one million railway tickets were bought over mobile phones. 23 million utility bills were paid by mobile phone.

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INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL EXPANSION

Creative Partnerships – The a2i operations serve as a bridge connecting government, private organizations and associations, and individual citizens. Such collaboration was needed for expansion, and helped in mobilizing more than USD 100 million from the government and private sector for scaling up the project’s pilot initiatives. Partnerships with media were a major factor in building a wide awareness about project results and creating citizens’ demand for improved public services.

Policy reform – Support to targeted policies helped create the environment for e-services. The a2i programme collaborated with the Ministry of Planning to develop priorities for a Digital Bangladesh. This became part of the Sixth Five Year Plan, a driving strategy for national development. In addition, a2i has been working with the Government in related policy areas like the ICT Act 2010, Broadband Policy, the Rural Connectivity Guidelines, Education Policy and Public Private Partnership Policy.

Change Champions – The a2i programme has built working relationships with each ministry through e-Governance Focal Points. This group has served as a “Guiding Coalition” with a shared vision for pushing the access to information agenda forward. Recently, the Focal Points were renamed Chief Innovation Officers in over 1000 Innovation Teams throughout the Government to nurture a culture of innovation in the civil service.

Mountains of paper tied together in musty government offices are being replaced by data on computers, making access easier for officials, and timely for citizens.



Creating 'risk space' – Government innovators were given support and sometimes seed money to develop new ideas. The Digital Innovation Fair created an environment of healthy competition among Ministries, Directorates and district level offices to come up with ways to transform service delivery.

CHALLENGES

One challenge related to the approach that a2i officials took regarding ICT in the early stages of the programme. E-Governance to them meant automation of back-office work. Workshops with high-level policy makers helped shed light on how ICTs could be used to improve service delivery. A "Quick-Win" workshop with all Permanent Secretaries resulted in 53 easily implemented service delivery ideas. The project was then ready to take off with high-level support and "quick-win" projects that could illustrate programme viability.

Another challenge was resistance by service providers. To break through the business-as-usual approach to service delivery, it was necessary to sensitize government officials, teachers and entrepreneurs so they could be part of the process of providing e-services to people's doorsteps. Workshops and training were combined with hands-on design and delivery of the services.

The lack of robust high-speed network connectivity in the country was an initial impediment. Because a2i was able to establish Union Information and Service Centres in all rural local government institutions, and develop more than 50 partnerships with the public and private sector, the demand for high-speed networks has become increasingly intense. Policy advocacy is changing network possibilities.

It has been important for the project to remain politically neutral. It has survived three administrations which is a testament to its apolitical approach.

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EXIT STRATEGY

Capacity development that has been promoted and facilitated by a2i has already shifted to the Ministry of Public Administration and various training academies within the government. The e-Service initiatives are embedded in the administrative procedures in two Ministries. In addition, the creation of the Service Innovation Centre will nurture innovation within the civil service, facilitate research and development and promote partnerships, including South-South and triangular collaboration.

ADVICE FOR OTHERS

- » Secure buy-in from the highest level of government, without which it would not be possible for system-wide scale up, cross-sectoral collaboration or sustainability.
- » Bring key stakeholders at the top and bottom of the service delivery chain together for a periodic "visioning exercise" to ensure a common understanding of purpose and approach. Formulate a simple message which serves as a rallying point for the service delivery chain.
- » Identify a few individuals who will serve as 'change champions' (e.g. policy influencers, private sector stalwarts, opinion leaders in civil society and media) to foster, institutionalize and implement changes in the way services are delivered to citizens and to improve them with further innovations.
- » Create 'risk space' within the civil service to allow failures that happen during experimentation. Provide policy support and seed funding to carry out innovative prototypes.
- » Establish a framework for partnerships with government, private sector, NGOs, academia and the media for service delivery, research and development, and public awareness of available services.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This case study was prepared by the a2i Programme and UNDP Country Office, as part of a joint collaboration on Scaling Up between the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific and the Bureau for Development Policy.