

Part 2

Title of project

Services @ Citizens' Doorsteps

Organisation name, country

Prime Minister's Office, Bangladesh

Project manager name

Mr. Anir Chowdhury, Policy Advisor, Access to Information (A2I), UNDP Bangladesh

Background

Citizens, majority of whom reside and work in rural areas, typically have to travel long distances to government offices in urban or semi-urban areas to avail themselves of public services. The face-to-face service delivery model makes it less accessible to a large segment of the population who are either unable or face substantial difficulties to undertake travel to government offices. In particular, it is especially challenging for women. They fall prey to abuse including sexual harassment by the predominantly male intermediaries who often act as gatekeepers of public provisions.

It was against the above backdrop that UNDP, USAID and the Government of Bangladesh envisioned the A2I programme, to work as an innovation vehicle in order to revamp the traditional service delivery, focusing on meeting the needs of underserved communities, with the motto "Services @ Citizens' Doorsteps."

Goals & timeframe

A2I is premised on using information and communication technology (ICTs) as an enabler in improving public service delivery to the traditionally underserved. The underlying objective here is to ignite a citizen-centric change in the existing civil service culture. Following establishment of "ICT/e-Government Focal Points" at the Ministry level in 2006, A2I shifted its focus on identifying popular services in 2007, and then on simplifying service delivery processes starting in 2008 with the identification of 53 "Quick-Wins." This inward-looking approach paved the way allowing small service delivery improvement prototypes to be led by a government officer with support from A2I. This exercise also allowed realising goals within stipulated time-frames, if not earlier, and in many cases led to national upscaling.

The nexus of Quick-Wins and rapid upscaling was a distinguishing point in triggering an innovation culture in Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS). Implementation of Quick-Wins required partnerships with both state and non-state actors where A2I played a catalytic role in bridging this divide and at the same, nurturing ownership among the agents of change.

Some early successes include: Union Information and Service Centres (UISCs), which started in 2 Union Parishads, the lowest tier of the government, now delivers services to a monthly average of 4.5 million citizens from all over the country; e-Purjee system, prototyped in one sugar mill,

delivers purchase orders to over 200,000 sugarcane farmers from all 15 sugar mills of the government; and, all 64 Deputy Commissioner (DC) offices now boast the District e-Service Centre (DESC), which has transformed many traditional public services into e-services. Access centres similar to the UISCs have come up in all 319 municipalities (Pourashava Information and Service Centres – PISCs) and 407 wards of 11 City Corporations (City Information and Service Centres – CISCs) of the country.

Another notable achievement is the national portal, which started in 2007 as one site, expanded to 64 district headquarters in 2010, and to nearly 25,000 government and local government offices in 2013. This is probably one of the largest Right to Information (RTI) compliant government portals in the world virtually bringing the entire government machinery under one umbrella. It is the pre-cursor for implementation of the National e-Service System (NESS), which has started operation in 240 government offices in one district. By 2015, NESS is expected to cover 16,000 offices of the government, automating all back-end operations.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Land, formulated an initiative to digitise all record rooms of DC offices and preserve approximately 45.84 million land records. This transformation process, from paper to electronic mode, was carried out through a Service Simplification Process (SPS) aimed at simplifying back-end service delivery processes, bearing in mind the users, i.e., citizens, satisfaction. The ELRS was initially prototyped in Sirajganj in September 2013. Its greater functionality and widespread acceptance among customers paved the way for its expansion in the remaining 63 districts of the country by June 2014.

As is evident, in executing each of these aforesaid e-government initiatives, A2I struck partnerships with several state and non-state actors. For instance, because the Ministry of Public Administration (MoPA) is responsible for public sector human resource development and management, a separate MoU was signed with the ministry for collaboration in the area of capacity development of BCS. A2I's journey, in view of its service access, service simplification and capacity development goals alongside timeline, is presented below in Table 1.

Table 1: The Upscaling Journey of A2I (2006-2016)

Year	Service Access	Service Simplification	Capacity Development
<i>2006: A2I begins</i>			
2006			✓ 56 e-Gov Focal Points
2007	✓ 2 UISCs ✓ 1 central government portal		✓ 64 district admin heads ✓ 30 personnel in 2 UISCs
2008	✓ 30 UISCs	✓ 53 Quick-Wins	✓ 53 Permanent Secretaries ✓ 300 personnel in 30 UISCs
2009	✓ 100 UISCs	✓ e-Purjee in 2 sugar mills	✓ 487 sub-district admin heads ✓ 487 sub-district elected Chairmen ✓ 500 personnel in 100 UISCs
2010	✓ 4,500+ UISCs ✓ 64 district portals	✓ 1 DESC ✓ e-Purjee in all sugar mills	✓ 9,000 UISC entrepreneurs
2011	✓ e-Tathyakosh	✓ 700 Quick-Wins ✓ 64 DESCs	✓ 128 personnel from DC offices, ✓ 600 senior officers from 400+ directorates ✓ 300 journalists
<i>2012: A2I-II begins</i>			

2012			✓ 22,000 district and sub-district level officers on portal
2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 318 PISCs ✓ 11 CISCs ✓ 25,000 government offices' portals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 400 offices under NESS ✓ 6,000 Innovation Team members ✓ Service Innovation Fund (SIF) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ MoU with 8 government training academies and National University of Singapore ✓ 24,000 district and sub-district officers on portal ✓ 5000 Innovation Officers ✓ 600 journalists
2014		✓ 5,000 offices under NESS	✓ 25,000 officers on NESS
2015		✓ 16,000 offices under NESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 80,000 officers on NESS ✓ 25,000 officers on portal ✓ 3,000 Innovation Officers
2016: A2I ends, Service Innovation Centre takes over			

Notes: The first column indicates creation of new service access points (rural, semi-urban and urban areas). Column 2 presents simplification of service delivery process at the government level. The final column indicates A2I's capacity building initiatives at both public and private level.

In a matter of seven years (2006-2013) with facilitation from A2I, hundreds of e-services have mushroomed throughout the country. Quick-Wins aimed at simplifying many public service delivery processes. Innovations focused on reducing manual processes and face-to-face delivery on the part of the government, thereby minimising time, cost and visit on the part of the citizens. Upscaling and sustaining many of the benefits required formulation of new policies and reforming some prevailing ones.

For instance, the new Innovation Team gazette instructing all ministries and their subordinate agencies, all districts and their subordinate sub-districts, to form Innovation Teams to be led by Chief Innovation Officers (CIOs), upgraded the profiles and roles of ICT/e-Government Focal Points. In addition, a multi-donor Service Innovation Fund (SIF) is in place to spread the seeds for cultivating a culture of innovation within the government and fostering public private partnerships (PPPs), a key resource in upscaling prototypes.

One of the discernible values added by A2I has been the establishment of 4,500+ ICT-empowered, government-owned, service delivery outlets. Today, a citizen residing and working in a remote, rural area have to walk only 3 km to the nearby UISC saving time, money and harassment of going to the district HQ 35 km away. S/he is also able to track the stage of decision-making which has significantly helped to reduce the traditional high opportunity and transaction costs, alongside contingent liabilities, associated with accessing public services.

Services are being offered at the lowest government tier by both government agencies – land records, birth registration, telemedicine, life insurance, overseas job application – as well as private sector organisations – mobile banking, English language learning, telephone operators, etc. A farmer in a remote location can easily learn about appropriate fertiliser and pesticide; a victim of domestic abuse can access information on legal recourse; a villager can apply for land records without having to deal with intermediaries and a migrant worker can now equitably participate in government-to-government migration opportunities.

Overall, the combination of one-stop service centres – UISCs, PISCs, CISCs, DESCs – alongside the national portal and CIOs, signifies a “whole-of-government” approach (WGA). In other

words, public service agencies in Bangladesh are working across portfolio boundaries in an integrated government towards achieving a shared goal – taking “Services @ Citizens’ Doorsteps.” They are using both formal and informal approaches which focus on policy development, programme management and service delivery. Some of the key achievements are presented in Box 1 below.

Box 1: Key outcomes

- 4.5 million (1.2 million women) underserved beneficiaries receiving livelihood and financial inclusion services from over 4,500 UISCs every month
- Online registration for more than 1.4 million potential migrant workers seeking foreign employment through UISCs
- 78,000+ ‘unbanked’ citizens (70% women) gained financial access as a result of mobile banking services and transacted BDT 113 million (USD 1.39 million)
- 35,000+ (70% women) availed of telemedicine services
- 45,000+ students and youth (70% women) received computer literacy training
- 23 million utility bill payments were made over mobile phones saving citizens time, money and visits to the public offices
- Average time on decision-making at the district office brought down to 1 hr to 2 days from 4-7 days

Challenges

In creating an enabling environment for accelerated and responsive service delivery, A2I needed to overcome three challenges:

- ✓ *Bureaucratic resistance:* The prevailing archaic public service delivery model poses fundamental challenges to promoting access for socially disadvantaged groups. Resistance towards change, from bureaucracy to vested interest groups, is not an uncommon phenomenon. Generally, innovation for a civil servant in a developing country like Bangladesh would imply a fairly major penalty, let alone any commensurate reward. A2I was able to overcome this resistance where it used the Quick-Wins approach in triggering a change in values, attitudes and skills of civil service bureaucrats. The DESCs, UISCs, e-Purjee are some examples of A2I’s success where the programme managed to identify change champions and early innovation adopters, and subsequently, keep them motivated through national Innovation Awards and SIF.
- ✓ *Capacity of service providers:* One of the key capacity gaps, identified during A2I’s formulation process, was the capacity of public officials in conceiving the usage of ICTs for improving service delivery. Quick-Wins helped to provide a thinking and risk-taking space for public service innovators and thereby allowed them to experiment with service delivery innovations. It is important to conduct regular capacity building exercises, incorporating relevant agendas for discussion, in order to boost the confidence and capacity of service providers and more pertinently, for sustaining the change momentum.
- ✓ *Weak broadband infrastructure:* Like many developing countries, the Internet in Bangladesh has witnessed phenomenal growth. Although facing many constraints in expanding Internet access and use, development of the Internet and Information

Technology are receiving high government priorities because of their demonstrated potential in connecting citizens with the government.

Relevance of the project to the respective Action Line

Establishment of new service delivery access points indicates applications aimed at promoting transparency in public administration and democratic processes, thereby improving predictability, efficiency and strengthening relations with citizens. These are WGA initiatives adopted at all levels and tailored to ensure upscaling of successful Quick-Win initiatives. Application for land records through the internet, university admissions through SMS, online tax submission, e-notification services for farmers and patients, are some examples of how efficiency gain has been introduced in government service delivery, making it responsive to citizen's needs for information and services.

This success has been possible because instead of undertaking large amounts of investment for back-end office automation, a common attribute of the e-governance agenda, A2I focused on overcoming legal and institutional challenges in democratising access to public information and services. A2I's approach has consolidated a slogan which is driving service delivery transformation in Bangladesh: "Citizens need NOT go to services because services will come to them." A2I's initiatives are altogether having a multiplier effect throughout the society from creating employment opportunities to promoting broader agendas of social inclusion. From the supply-side perspective, A2I's interventions are helping to ignite a culture of innovation in the BCS, which was hitherto unconceivable.

Finally, in search for international collaboration, A2I signed a MoU with e-Government Leadership Centre (eGL) of Singapore seeking international cooperation initiatives in the field of e-government, in order to enhance transparency, accountability and efficiency at all levels of government.

Conclusion

Governments around the world are increasingly chanting the ICT mantra in making their decision-making and service delivery process transparent and accountable to their principals, i.e., citizens. International efforts today need to be geared towards firmly embedding usage of ICTs across government. Quick-Wins prompted an innovation process in the BCS which is getting translated through the service delivery system in terms of taking services to citizens' doorsteps. However, it is important to avoid a "one-size-fits-all" approach and instead, focus on indigenous factors influencing local development discourse. ICTs, in view of their potential in reducing corruption and increasing transparency in decision-making process, could emerge as one of the key developmental agendas in view of its significance as a means for reducing poverty and accelerating economic growth in countries with limited resources and ample problems.