INNOVATION BRIEF

# ACCESS TO INFORMATION (A2I)

জনগণের দোরগোড়ায় সেবা
Service @ Doorsteps

## PROLOGUE

In Bangladesh, citizens have to travel long distances, often multiple times, incur high cost and endure considerable delays and hassle to access government services. They also lack information on how to navigate through convoluted public service delivery processes. Meanwhile, the government has to spend substantial amounts in administrative and transaction costs because of archaic, paper-based, manual processes. The centralized, hierarchical nature of decision making means that officers at the mid and field levels do not usually get the opportunity to contribute. Although they are better placed to offer useful ideas to improve service delivery, they do not have the resources or an environment conducive to experiment with potential solutions.

## KEY INITIATIVES

- DIGITAL CENTRES
- ENHANCING DIGITAL FINANCIAL INCLUSION
- SERVICE INNOVATION/ CHALLENGE FUND
- CULTURE OF INNOVATION IN CIVIL SERVICE
- INNOVATION FAIRS/ AWARDS
- NATIONAL WEB PORTALS
- ONLINE DASHBOARDS
- DIGITAL LAND SERVICES
- HUMAN DEVELOPMENT MEDIA
- MULTIMEDIA CLASSROOMS
- TEACHER'S PORTAL
- CIVIL REGISTRY AND VITAL STATISTICS
- DIGITAL JUDICIARY

## INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh, centralized policy making, opaque manual processes and a lack of skills, resources and platforms within civil bureaucracy to improve services frustrated citizens and increased the scope for rent-seeking. This meant that underserved citizens had to spend a lot of money, time and endure considerable hassle to access public services.

In this context, the Access to Information (a2i) Programme at the Prime Minister's Office, with support from UNDP and USAID, was started in 2007 with the objectives of increasing transparency, improving governance and public services and reducing inefficiencies in their delivery in terms of 'TCV' – the time (T), cost (C) and number of visits (V) associated with obtaining government services for underserved communities in Bangladesh. The project entered its second phase in 2012.

a2i is the facilitator from the Prime Minister's Office of the Bangladesh government's innovation agenda, Digital Bangladesh. It works as an innovation intermediary through a whole-of-government approach – that is, rather than limiting itself to certain ministries and government organizations, it brings together all relevant stakeholders and supports, suggests and curates their work to catalyze truly unprecedented transformations in service delivery.
a2i focuses primarily on bringing information and services to citizens' doorsteps and increasingly within the palms of their hands. It does so by harnessing modern ICTs, local knowledge and global best practices to establish both physical and virtual one-stop access points.

**5,000+ DIGITAL CENTRES**

**27,831 MULTIMEDIA CLASSROOMS**

**43,000+ OFFICES AND OVER 1,500+ GOVERNMENT FORMS IN THE NATIONAL PORTAL**

**64 DISTRICT E-SERVICE CENTRES**

# CULTURE OF INNOVATION

a2i's unique, simple and powerful model of 'innovation' revolves around:

- REDUCING TCV
- SERVICE PROCESS SIMPLIFICATION
- THE SERVICE INNOVATION/CHALLENGE FUND
- CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT FOR INNOVATION
- CELEBRATING INNOVATION

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.

Service Process Simplification (SPS) enables government officials to simplify public services and their delivery systems by mapping them out and improving them using citizen-centred 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 the 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.

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 3,000 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 32,000.

As part of its attempt to institutionalize the culture of innovation, a2i has also catalyzed the formation of nearly 1,000 'Innovation Teams' comprising 5000+ officers from all units and tiers of the government; 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.

To build their capacity, service innovation workshops and camps are organized where providers' ideas mash with consumers' viewpoints and the participants are introduced to innovation toolkits developed by global experts like Nesta and Stanford Design School. Tapping into the popularity of social media in Bangladesh and its cost-effective scalability, a 'Public Service Innovation' Facebook page has been established to spread ideas and encourage interaction. 240 more Facebook pages have been opened by ministries, directorates, district administrators and various government offices. The permanent Secretaries and District Administrators regularly hold Social Media *Sanglaps*' (consultations) through YouTube channels to connect with field level officials and citizens' representatives and work on urgent issues of public interest such as food adulteration and child marriage.

Celebrating the successful case studies of innovation in public service delivery in an unprecedented way through national and district level Innovation Fairs and awards is an important element of the strategy to make the entire innovation culture public facing. These fairs and awards both recognize and incentivize innovation and enhance the knowledge of Bangladeshi citizens about the government's proactive efforts to develop an array of more affordable, quality services that are easier for them to access.

a2i is empowering both state and non-state innovators to think and work creatively, dare to experiment, dare to fail and embrace all that new technology and new ideas can bring. Together these initiatives are giving rise to a public service innovation ecosystem and leading to a fundamental change in the way Bangladesh responds to service innovation challenges and creates better services that are easier and less costly for citizens to access.

# KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

Citizens can now pay their electricity, gas and phone bills and conduct banking transactions through mobile phones and consult with doctors from remote rural areas. 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 a2i is bringing information and services to citizens' doorsteps and increasingly within the palms of their hands.

a2i has empowered hundreds of civil servants to redesign services in a citizen-centric manner and launch 'innovation projects' around the country, especially at the field level. Over 100,000 civil servants and thousands of Digital Centre entrepreneurs have been trained to implement e-services. Tens of policies and laws have been reformed with support from a2i to sustain many of these changes.

The 5,000+ Digital Centres - one within 4 km of every citizen in Bangladesh – now deliver over 102 services – both public and private – to an average 4.5 million underserved citizens at a much lower 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 of 23 services over a period of 6 years reveals that simplification and digitization saved citizens of Bangladesh over half a billion dollars.

# KEY RESULTS ACHIEVED

1 UNDERSERVED COMMUNITEIS HAVE BETTER AND SIMPLIFIED ACCESS TO PUBLIC SERVICES

2 LAWS, POLICIES AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM FOR MORE RESPONSIVE AND TRANSPARENT PUBLIC SERVICES

3 INCENTIVE FRAMEWORK DEVELOPED TO PROMOTE INNOVATIVE SERVICE DELIVERY MECHANISMS

4 CIVIL SERVICE IS MORE CAPABLE OF PROVIDING TRANSPARENT AND RESPONSIVE PUBLIC SERVICES

CITIZENS ARE MORE AWARE AND EMPOWERED

## 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's 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.

## RECOGNITION

Bangladesh's leadership in innovations is being recognized internationally. The Government of Maldives and several other southern nations have invited the a2i team to help them establish their own innovations hub based largely on a2i's knowledge, models and methodologies. It is a great example of Bangladesh's leadership in South-South cooperation.

Bangladesh has also received the Global ICT Excellence Award from World IT and Services Alliance in 2014; and the World Summit on the Information Society Award from ITU in 2014 and 2015 for best use of ICT for information and service delivery to the underserved.

## WAY FORWARD

The New York University Economics Professor William Easterly makes a distinction between central 'planners' who design and promote top-down solutions to solving development problems and decentralized 'searchers' who explore solutions in an unplanned, spontaneous way. In the last 8+ years, a2i has functioned more as a searcher than a planner. The evolution of the Digital Centres, the hunting for innovators in civil service and in broader society, management of the Service Innovation Fund, and most importantly, development of a culture of innovation are all 'searcher' behaviour. However, a2i also realizes that large platforms such as the now maturing Digital Centres across the country, the National Portal, the e-Filing Dashboards in thousands of government offices, amongst others are better implemented through a 'planner' approach. Thus, a2i, going forward, will employ a 2-pronged strategy:

- Further strengthening a culture of innovation not only within the civil service but also including other sections of society, especially the youth
- Supporting large physical and virtual infrastructures to aid the government to reduce TCV across hundreds of services

These will include land, judiciary, agriculture, health, education as verticals and national ID, civil registry, e-service dashboards as horizontals. A number of information and service frameworks such as Land Information and Service Framework (LISF) and Judiciary Information and Service Framework (JISF), National Portal Framework (NPF) will facilitate strong architectural foundations to include new services as they develop ensuring both interoperability and sustainability in the long term.

Recognizing the urgency and importance of leveraging the growing 'youth bulge' in Bangladesh to fulfill the country's aspiration to achieve middle-income status, a2i will go beyond its core innovation agenda. In its previous incarnation, the project invested significant resources in reforming education delivery and teacher training in the primary and secondary education systems. In the future, a2i's focus will be on market-based skills development. In this endeavour, it a2i is already developing a 4-pronged strategy in collaboration with the ministry of education, private and public stakeholders and the National Skills Development Council. A Human Development Media Foundation will be launched to harness 360 degree communication for human development.

Sustainable Development Goals provide significant guiding light for what a2i still needs to achieve through service innovation. The culmination of much of future efforts will result in the establishment of an 'a2i Centre of Excellence in Service Innovation' under the Prime Minister's Office with intimate ties to the Cabinet Division.

# AT A GLANCE

**8.5 Million**
Students Learning from Multimedia Content Developed by
**100,000+**Teachers

**105**
**Digital Talking** Text Books for all **Visually Disabled** Students

**103**
Innovations Incubated through **Service Innovation Fund**

**101 MILLION+**
Results of Public Exam Over SMS

**20 MILLION+**
Admission Applications Through SMS

**$ 28.15 Million**
Earnings for Digital Center Entrepreneurs

**237 Million**
Services Provided to Citizens from Digital Centres

Online Registration of
**2 Million +**
Male & Female for Overseas Jobs

**146 Million**
Births Registered Electronically

**4.7 Million**
Sugarcane purchase orders sent over sms


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