



SERVICE INNOVATION FUND

THE CONTEXT

Like in many developing countries, rising demand and resource constraints are making redesigning public services in Bangladesh imperative. Case in point, Fulbaria in Mymensingh district where over 80,000 farmers needed up-to-date and timely information on ways to identify and treat plant diseases. But the whole area had just 46 government agricultural field officers based at the sub-district office. So, the farmers had to spend a lot of time, money and effort to travel 20-30 kilometers to consult them.

This was a common scenario across the country resulting from a problem that, in principle, was symptomatic of fundamental challenges around innovation in public services and their delivery in Bangladesh:

CENTRALIZED POLICY MAKING

LACK OF USER-CENTRIC DESIGN

LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPERIMENT

Most of the policy making and planning took place in a traditional, centralized manner by senior officials based in the capital Dhaka with little or no involvement of citizens or their colleagues at the field level who are closest to the challenges and thus better placed to offer useful ideas. Moreover, people like Md. Abdul Malek (see Box 1.1) who could make a positive difference, did not have the resources or a conducive environment to experiment with potential solutions.

Centralized policy making, opaque manual processes and a lack of skills, resources and incentives within civil bureaucracy to improve public services frustrated citizens and meant that they had to spend a lot of money, time and endure considerable hassle to access them.

PROLOGUE

PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The Service Innovation Fund opened up an unprecedented opportunity to incubate solutions from both government and non-government actors. Since launching, SIF has completed 7 rounds. Nearly half of the 3,000 plus proposals to the Fund came from the private sector, NGOs, Universities and even individual innovators.

THE SOLUTION

In March 2013, the Access to Information (a2i) Programme of the Prime Minister's Office – with technical support from UNDP and USAID – launched the 'Service Innovation Fund' to provide seed funds and incubate cost-effective, citizen-centered design innovations to improve public services particularly for underserved communities. SIF evolved from a previous a2i initiative called the 'Quick Wins' which was introduced in 2008 when each Secretary of the government was asked to identify important services that could be made more citizen-centric through simplification and digitization. Many ideas were generated; some were funded by a2i and launched as 'innovation pilots'. The pilots that succeeded such as the Digital Centres (one-stop service outlets hosted in local government institutions and operated by local entrepreneurs), e-Purjee (SMS-based purchase orders to sugarcane farmers), and Multimedia Classroom (smart classrooms promoting interactive teaching-learning in secondary schools) were scaled up nationwide. The pilots that did not succeed such as an IVR System in City Corporations, Eco-Milk Analyzer for milk cooperatives, and Agriculture Information and Service Centres for farmers left important lessons for the innovators and organizations. The lessons from successes and from failures equally contributed to the formulation of the SIF later.

SIF defines innovation as any idea or initiative that eliminates unnecessary steps required for citizens to access services and leverages technology to improve them. In other words, to be considered meaningful innovation, it must:

REDUCE THE AMOUNT OF TIME IT TAKES FOR CITIZENS TO RECEIVE SERVICES

REDUCE HOW MUCH IT COSTS CITIZENS TO OBTAIN SERVICES

REDUCE THE EXTENT OF TRAVEL AND NUMBER OF VISITS

IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF SERVICES

SIF is designed to encourage innovative home-grown and localized solutions and is open to all. It embraces the notion of co-creation and engages government agencies, development organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academic institutions, private companies and even individuals as active partners in the improvement of public services. Anyone can apply online any time, the whole year round for grants worth up to USD 32,000. Its priority areas include service decentralization and delivery, gender empowerment, empowering people with disabilities, healthcare, agriculture, rural development, right to information, green initiatives, disaster management, low-cost devices, and Bangla language tools.

As illustrated in Figure 1, not only does SIF identify and fund promising ideas, it also incubates them and nurtures talented innovators. This incubation element is a critical element of SIF's strategy to :

BUILD ESSENTIAL MANAGEMENT & ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS

To enhance the probability of talented innovators to scale and sustain their initiatives. This is done by organizing workshops and introducing the innovators with various templates to help refine and structure their ideas.

LEVERAGE A2I'S ROLE AS AN INNOVATION INTERMEDIARY

To bring together all government offices relevant to a particular idea and help sensitize them by establishing a working relationship with the innovators. This is particularly useful for junior or grassroots level government officers and private firms or citizens who aim to use SIF funds to improve government services with their innovative ideas.

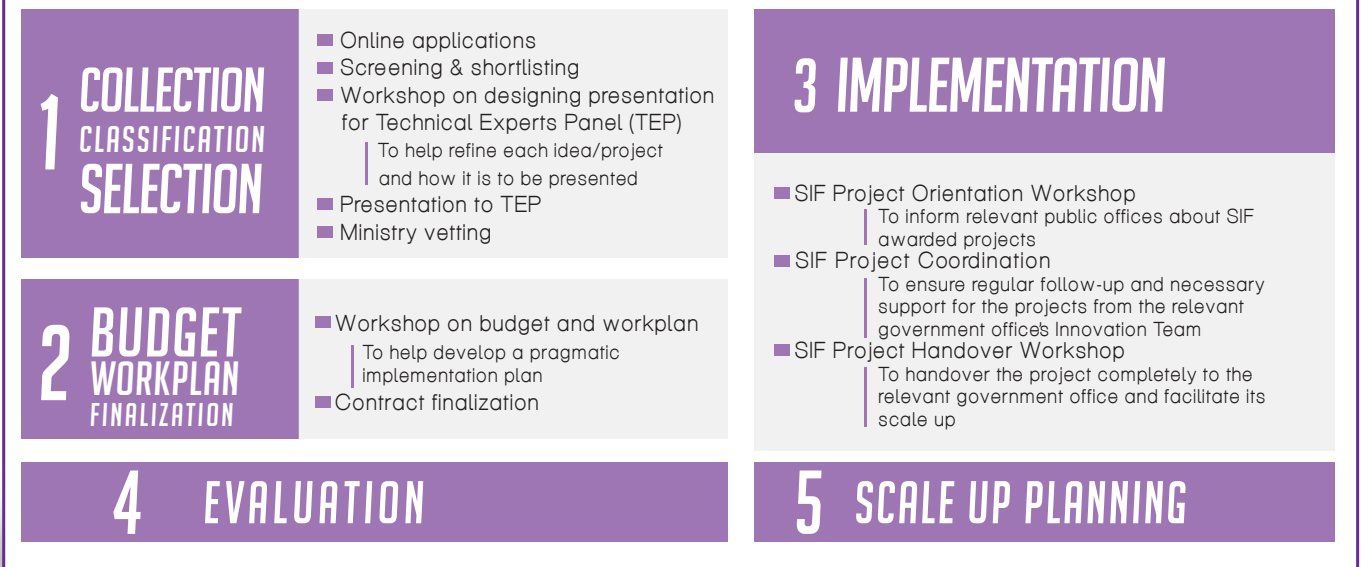
ENSURE OWNERSHIP & SUSTAINABILITY OF THE SUCCESSFUL PILOTS

Two of the most important factors deciding the success of any pilot initiative are its ownership and sustainability. In case of both the public and private innovator led innovations, a2i facilitates building linkages between the innovators and relevant government offices and public sector organizations that can contribute in scaling up or replicating the innovations at a national level. Having the short-listed ideas vetted by the relevant ministry is a key part of this.

Innovators become co-owners of the intellectual property rights to the ideas. This facilitates the process of the ministries and directorates taking ownership and scaling them up. Moreover, it also provides the basis for revenue sharing arrangements for innovations that have the potential to generate financial returns.



FIGURE : 1



BOX 1.1

Digital Plant Problems Identification System (DPPIS)

by Md. Abdul Malek (Agriculture Extension Officer, Fulbaria, Mymensingh)

The Innovation

- A pictorial database of the problems of more than 120 plant types
- Agricultural extension workers, dealers of pesticide and fertilizer, farmers and other users of this database can easily identify plant problems and get proper solutions

Results already achieved

- Database with more than 1,000 plant problems for more than 120 plant types (using over 3,500 pictures) has been made freely available
- The software has been distributed to more than 1,500 users (agri extension workers, advanced farmers, NGO workers) who are now better equipped to answer the queries of farmers
- The database can be used in both online and offline modes
- Over 10,000 farmers benefited

Potential for more

- The offline version can be distributed to all agri extension officials and all Digital Centres which can then be observed through mobile phones, desktop PCs and laptops
- The database can be used as study and training material

BOX 1.3

Cost-effective and Off-grid Multimedia Classroom

by EcO Electronics and Engineering Ltd. (a private sector organization)

The Innovation

- A multimedia classroom setup which is locally assembled, easy-to-install, power-efficient, and can run using solar power ideal for areas beyond electrical grid
- Multimedia content can be preinstalled in a single board PC and displayed on a high-res 42" monitor with sound
- Upon every charging, system can run for a week if used for 3 hours daily

Results already achieved

- Piloted in 4 remotely located underprivileged schools in Thanchi, Kishoreganj, Khulna and Panchagor
- Students can get access to better quality education content prepared by teachers using content from Teacher's Portal

Potential for more

- The classroom setup can be taken to more than 9,300 schools and training institutions in remote locations and underprivileged areas without electricity
- The existing multimedia projectors may be replaced by this setup since the latter has greater longevity and lesser maintenance cost.

BOX 1.2

Multimedia Digital Talking books

by Young Power in Social Action (a local NGO)

The Innovation

- Full text and audio Multimedia Digital Talking Books are developed for 36 curriculum books at the primary level and 93 curriculum books at the secondary level
- The digital talking books have been made available through the e-Tathyakosh so that they can be downloaded by anyone anytime over the internet
- Soft copies of braille books can be prepared to be distributed to braille presses for printing

Results already achieved

- 10,000 visually impaired children who are registered through the government mechanism can access these books
- The teachers at schools for the visually impaired are better equipped to educate their pupils

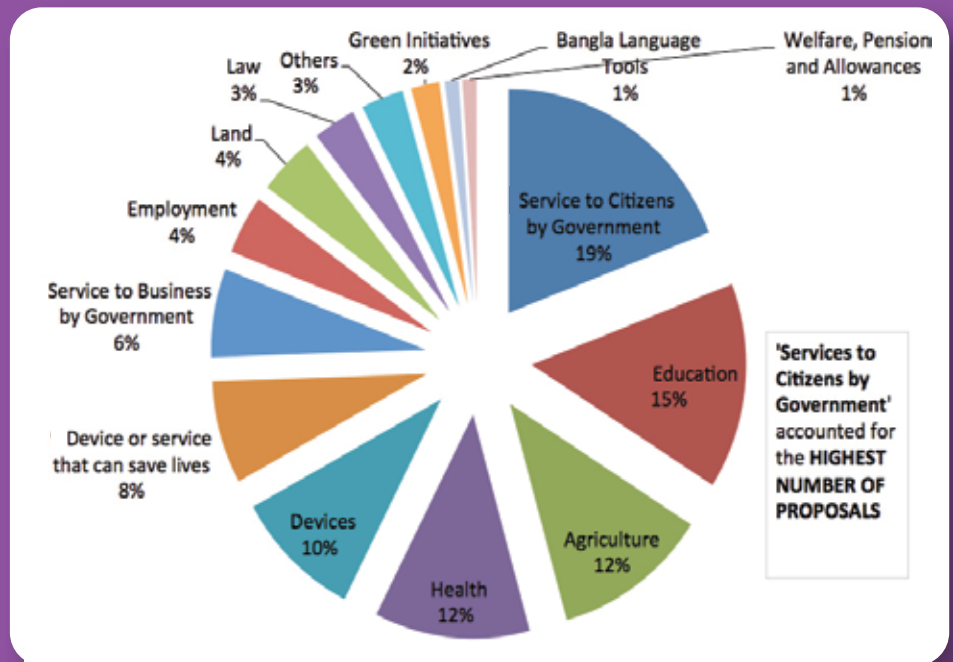
Potential for more

- There are over 100,000 school going visually impaired children who can benefit from this
- Illiterate people and even slow learners can also benefit since they can now listen to the text and try to self-learn

SERVICE INNOVATION FUND

103 PROJECTS HAVE RECEIVED OVER USD 2.5 MILLION IN FUNDING. OUT OF THESE, 18 PROJECTS HAVE BEEN COMPLETED

(SEE BOXES 1.1, 1.2 AND 1.3 FOR A FEW SNAPSHOTS)



CHALLENGES & WAY FORWARD

Not all innovators have the marketing, management and entrepreneurial skills required for successful project implementation. Even when they do, there are cases where the innovator is a relatively junior person – in terms of rank, age or both – which adds another dimension of difficulty. A lack of ownership within the government unit which is the natural home of a project complicates things further. To address these challenges, besides intensifying its incubation and intermediation activities, a2i has also catalyzed the formation of nearly one-thousand 'Innovation Teams' comprising 5,000+ 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 who are senior policy makers, these Innovation Teams represent an effort to build champions who will foster a peer support network and collaborative behavior within and across government offices. 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. The Service Innovation Fund reinforces these teams by functioning as an intrinsic capacity building tool for them.

The Service Innovation/Challenge Fund is a critical element of the innovation ecosystem that a2i is building in Bangladesh. There is full appreciation that such an innovation ecosystem cannot merely be an inanimate object. It has to be a living system composed of a multitude of diverse actors in intense interaction with each other. a2i has recently started exploring the possibility of linking with informal business clusters such as light engineering in Dholai Khal – the country's biggest and oldest market for automotive and industrial spare parts - and in other areas of the country. It 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. Developing an innovation ecosystem that builds synergies of innovation capacity across the government, private sector, NGOs, academia, international actors and even individuals has thus become a long-term priority.

The hope is that ultimately, all this would lead 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.



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