

**Keynote Address by a2i Policy Advisor on
South-South and Triangular Cooperation in
Scaling up Innovations in Public Service Delivery**
(UN, NY 20 September 2016)

ICTs don't solve problems, people do. It is with this foundational idea that the Digital Bangladesh clarion call of Sheikh Hasina, the Hon'ble Prime Minister of Bangladesh, has brought the country's civil service and society together into action. And that action is to build a modern nation with citizen-centric services to achieve the SDGs.

*Hon'ble Heads and Deputy Heads of Governments,
Hon'ble Ministers, Vice-Ministers and Deputy Ministers,
Respected heads of development agencies,
Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.*

It is indeed a privilege for me to address this august gathering. I would like to take this opportunity to draw your attention to 3 short stories and share what Bangladesh has learnt from them.

First story. In 2010, when our Hon'ble Prime Minister and UNDP Administrator jointly launched the 4,500 Union Digital Centres, most people thought that it was too risky and too early. Why too risky? Because private entrepreneurs were going to run these sitting in government offices. Why too early? Because we didn't have the internet infrastructure ready, and the willingness to pay by the underserved was unknown. However, against all odds, these centres have flourished over time and today deliver nearly 5 million services every month saving poor citizens over half a billion dollars in the last 6 years alone. 10,000 new digital self-employment opportunities have been created generating a monthly combined income of 600 thousand dollars.

This story leaves many lessons for us. One, several years of experimentation, successes and failures in a hundred union councils, which is the lowest tier of local government in Bangladesh, gave us the courage and confidence to scale this up nationwide. Without this experimentation, we could not have possibly defied conventional wisdom.

Two, we focused on improving services by shifting them from the district headquarters 50 km away to the doorsteps of people, just 3 km away. Inspired by these centres, agencies were mandated to find innovative ways to eliminate age-

old, non-essential steps in the delivery of vital services including birth registration, land records and passports. We now call this Service Process Simplification.

Digitization was encouraged only after process simplification. This key insight was derived from something Bill Gates once said: (quote) “The first rule of any technology ... is that automation applied to an efficient operation will magnify the efficiency. The second rule is that automation applied to an inefficient operation will magnify the inefficiency.”

Lesson number 3 was from our relentless efforts to develop micro-entrepreneurship at the local government level where we combined the mandate and infrastructure of the public sector with the entrepreneurial zeal and efficiency of the private sector. These one-stop centres ensured effective public-private partnership and delivery of both public and private services, nearly one hundred of them today, and growing. This has enabled previously underserved citizens to receive efficient, affordable and reliable access to vital services at their doorsteps. Since half of the 10,000 entrepreneurs are female, these centres depict an important edict of our national development – women empowerment.

Distinguished guests,

The second story is about 23 teachers who told us that our approach of trying to inject technology in classrooms would not have sustainable educational impact. “So what would work?” we asked. They said, “Build us a social media platform for sharing our classroom content and good practices so that we can teach each other without having to depend on the trainers whom we see every ten years if we are lucky!”

Thus, the award-winning Teachers’ Portal was born that now hosts over 125 thousand teachers, with the number increasing every week. Teachers are now indeed training one another every day dispelling the myth that only professional trainers can do the training. As a result, a fun and interactive learning environment for millions of students across Bangladesh is organically evolving.

The third story is from the ‘empathy training’ sessions that our Hon’ble Prime Minister mentioned. These trainings are arranged for mid-level civil servants working in the field and dealing with citizens on a daily basis. The participants act as ‘secret shoppers’ and visit citizens’ access points for services outside their agency or area of expertise. This truly places them in citizens’ shoes since they are forced to navigate public systems without any official or knowledge privileges. The result in most cases is a powerful, moving experience that creates a deep sense of empathy for citizens and the myriad sufferings they must endure to avail even the most basic services. This experience helps participants develop both a critical eye that they use

to scrutinize their own agency's delivery systems and a sense that it is indeed possible to make the necessary changes because rules don't forbid them, their fears do.

'Empathy' has now been firmly established as the first guiding principle of public service reform in Bangladesh. Because understanding the citizens we serve is central to what we're trying to accomplish.

A 55-year old doctor, very close to retiring, thought out of the box, he says for the first time in his life (!), to design a healthcare system for the extreme poor in his area. This low-cost mechanism may indeed hold an answer to universal healthcare in Bangladesh by 2030!

A junior land officer built a covered waiting area for his poor, aged clients and automated arguably one of the most corruption-ridden land service thereby becoming a local 'hero' overnight.

With encouragement from the senior officers, over 600 such pilots are running across healthcare and education, crops and fisheries, land and human rights. More than half of them don't use ICTs at all! But all of them simplify service delivery processes. Each is inspired by the slogan, 'Failure is OK' promoted by our heads of civil service – the Cabinet Secretary and the Principal Secretary to the Hon'ble Prime Minister. At the same time, agencies and districts are competing with each other for excellence.

The interesting thing is that most of these pilots don't require an injection of external funds. The ones that do are supported by a 'Service Innovation Fund' from a2i - which has, to date, attracted 3,000 innovative proposals and supported over 130 of them being implemented by government agencies, development organizations, NGOs, academic institutions, private companies and even individuals.

What's more, we have been able to design a process to scale-up the successful pilots into nationwide implementation through collaboration with the right government agencies or with the right private sector partners. Our national portal uniting over 43,000 offices of the government was built by over 70,000 officers participating from all agencies. Recently, we have engaged college and university students to unleash their creativity on solving problems that plague our society. We are determined to take advantage of our demographic dividend by providing the right skills to our youth on leadership development, creative thinking, problem solving and collaboration to raise proactive 21st century citizenry.

From the Prime Minister's Office, a2i works with all ministries, all districts and all local government institutions in not only triggering and nurturing vital

innovations, but also facilitating their scale-up throughout the country – this is why we describe ourselves as the world’s first ‘Innovation Lab+’! UNDP and USAID have been long-time partners in this process of creating a culture of innovation in Bangladesh. Recently, the governments of Maldives and Bhutan have joined hands to extend this process to the respective nations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I want to leave you with the realization that innovation in public service delivery is not rocket science. However, it can almost certainly be more difficult than rocket science if we don’t take the time to understand our citizens’ struggles, if we don’t create a nurturing environment for experimentation to unleash the true potential of our service providers, if we try to copy an innovation without understanding the human incentives behind its adoption and scaling up, and if we don’t partner with the private sector, civil society, academia and students to solve our biggest development problems.

Our father of the nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s long cherished goal was to develop such empathy for our citizens and to collaborate with all stakeholders to build a nation which he termed ‘Sonar Bangla’ – Golden Bengal. Our Hon’ble Prime Minister’s Vision 2021 of Digital Bangladesh is the 21st century incarnation of Sonar Bangla guided by the undying commitment of her ICT Advisor.

Excellencies,

Each country in the South and North has stories and lessons similar to what we are experiencing in Bangladesh. Sharing these insights and knowledge, understanding not just what innovation happened, but how it happened and why it happened – and in full glory of the context it happened in – will allow us to “build on the shoulders of giants” in those countries, avoid the mistakes they made and thus accelerate our own progress.

To borrow from the famous African proverb, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” We are in an inspired moment in history where we can have our cake and eat it too. We have to question the conventional wisdom. Given the scale and urgent nature of public service challenges globally, we have to find a way to go far *and* fast, *together*.

Thank you very much.