INNOVATION BRIEF

SOUTH-SOUTH & TRIANGULAR COOPERATION
On Public Service Innovation

a2i

Prime Minister's Office

BANGLADESH

prologue

Governments around the world, especially in southern developing countries, are going through tremendous changes to respond to the rapidly rising expectations of their citizens for improved public service delivery - something that is also vitally important for achieving the SDGs.

The rate of development in the Global South can be fast-tracked using far less resources through a collaborative south-south and triangular cooperation network focused exclusively on empowering southern countries to learn from and support one another in identifying vital innovations and scaling up novel solutions to public service challenges by customizing the necessary tools and strategies to their unique country contexts.

Trends in Southern Developing Countries' Response to Public Service Challenges

Breaking away from archaic, rules-driven systems through creating a culture of public service innovation within civil service and embracing a healthy competitive pressure from private sector service providers, governments are embracing approaches and tools to become more citizen-centric, responsive and participatory. In particular, the following trends are seen:

1. Experimentation both within and by civil service:

Typically, civil service is designed to be risk-averse in order to maintain order and the status quo. Yet, many governments are dabbling in various experiments, at times partnering with NGOs, for-profit companies and academia, to improve public services and their delivery systems.

Numerous 'innovation labs' have sprouted around the world and produced fascinating innovations and evidence that have the potential to help inform policy formulations.

2. User-centered innovation methodologies:

To fully understand the perspective of the citizen, especially the underserved, and modify their own structures and processes to incorporate this new understanding, many governments are employing tools such as 'design thinking' and 'behavioral insights'.
These trends are breaking operational and functional silos, establishing a culture of citizen-centric innovation within the practicing governments and making public services more effective and inclusive.

Hon' Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and UNDP Administrator Helen Clark shake hands after the South-South & Triangular Cooperation side event at UN General Assembly 2016

Going Far & Fast, Together

Side-Event on Scaling Innovations in Public Service Delivery at the 71st UN General Assembly in New York

The stage of development in terms of public service innovation that Bangladesh has attained (see section titled, 'Daring to Experiment, Daring to Fail: Lessons from Bangladesh's Experience as a Southern Developing Nation') could have been achieved much faster and using far less resources if there was a collaborative south-south and triangular cooperation network focused on empowering southern countries to identify vital innovations and scale novel solutions to public service challenges.

On 20 September 2016, a2i, UNDP and the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) convened a high-level meeting on South-South and Triangular Cooperation for Scaling up Innovations in Public Service Delivery on the sidelines of the 71st session of the UN General Assembly at the United Nations headquarters.

Heads of states and governments from Bangladesh and Sweden, ministers from Bhutan, Kazakhstan, Maldives, and the Netherlands, and the Permanent Representative of Uganda to the UN in NY highlighted cases of innovations in respective countries that could be adopted in other countries. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh proposed the need for a collaborative network to share these good practices and find ways to adopt them in other countries. Heads of UNDP, ITU, UNCDF, Mexican Agency for International Development Cooperation and UNOSSC endorsed the concept of a global collaborative network that would focus exclusively on identifying innovative practices on making governments more effective, transparent, accountable and citizen-centered and proliferating these practices globally.

a2i Public Service Innovation Lab+

Creating a Public Service Innovation Ecosystem in Bangladesh

Long known as a development laboratory for areas such as poverty alleviation, public health and climate change adaptation, the country has now firmly added public service delivery to its focus areas for innovation.

a2i, a public service innovation lab under the Prime Minister's Office of the Government of Bangladesh, is driving this strategic priority. With a whole-of-government approach, applying behavior change methodologies and leveraging the rapid expansion of technologies, a2i is not only triggering and nurturing vital innovations, but also facilitating their scale-up throughout the country by collaborating with the right government agencies and the right private sector partners. This is leading to unprecedented transformations that are taking public services to citizens' doorsteps and increasingly within the palms of their hands.

a2i's primary goal is to ensure easy, affordable and reliable access to quality pubic services for all citizens of Bangladesh. Its strategy is to:

• Empower civil servants with the tools, expertise, knowledge and resources they need for experimenting and innovating citizen-centric solutions to public service challenges;

• Establish both physical and online one-stop access points that scale innovative services and make them available to citizens easily, reliably and in an affordable manner;

• Encourage and support non-government actors, including small entrepreneurs, teachers and the youth, to partner with government actors.
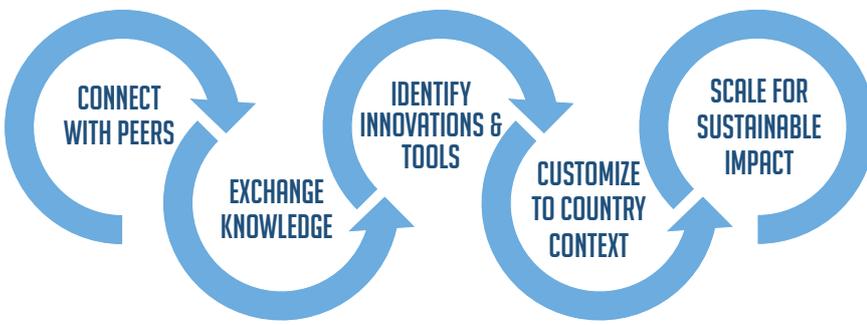
Daring to Experiment, Daring to Fail:

Lessons from Bangladesh's Experience as a Southern Developing Nation

When a2i started its journey in Bangladesh nearly a decade ago, it was very much a traditional e-government project and considered catalyzing the spread of Digital technologies as the 'silver bullet' to solve complex development and public service challenges. It closely studied exemplary models from developed countries such as South Korea and the United States that ranked towards the top of the UN e-Government Development Index and attempted to emulate them.

However, despite achieving rapid successes in terms of introducing numerous technology-based solutions, their impact lagged behind as the dividends of 'Digital Bangladesh' were unevenly distributed. This was attributed largely to the following challenges:

- Lack of a public service innovation ecosystem that encouraged and incentivized experimentation with in and by civil service and ensured proven solutions were able to reach the geographic/demographic scale necessary

- Lack of experience in identifying the right innovation tools and adapting them to the needs of Bangladesh and its unique context

- Developing technology-cent ered rather than citizen-centered approaches and the adoption and promotion of digitization by the service providers themselves

These challenges are not unique to Bangladesh but manifest in unique ways right across the world. Important reasons why they exist include replication without proper understanding of the context in which innovations originate and the lack of commensurate efforts in human and institutional capacity development. These result in wastage of scarce resources and frustration among policy makers, service providers and seekers alike.

CONNECT WITH PEERS → **EXCHANGE KNOWLEDGE** → **IDENTIFY INNOVATIONS & TOOLS** → **CUSTOMIZE TO COUNTRY CONTEXT** → **SCALE FOR SUSTAINABLE IMPACT**

a2i thus adopted a strategy of persistent experimentation, daring to fail but learning continuously over several years as it embarked on a mission to customize the knowledge - including models and tools sourced from the developed world - completely to the reality of Bangladesh. The Behavioral Insights Team of the UK government (popularly known as the "Nudge Unit") and the world renowned 'd.school' at Stanford University were consulted to improve government policy and services.

This lead to some important lessons and breakthrough realizations:

• The need for a unifying, national vision to galvanize widespread collaboration and unprecedented innovation: This manifested through the Digital Bangladesh clarion call of Sheikh Hasina, the Honorable Prime Minister of Bangladesh and brought the country's civil service and society together to build a modern nation with citizen-centered services to achieve the SDGs.

In the last 8 years, Bangladesh has established a new development paradigm through its novel approach to socio-economic development which is high-growth and yet inclusive, self-dependent and yet collaborative, respectful of heritage and yet opportunistic in its use of new technologies. The country has moved up to low middle income status but, more importantly, by human development indicators, achieved a level of development commonly predicted for twice its per capita income.

Leveraging the power of social media to incentive civil servants to innovate and engage citizens in the process of improving public services

Top bureaucrats like the Cabinet Secretary and Principal Secretary are inspiring Bangladeshi civil servants to improve public service delivery through experimentation using the slogan, "Failure is OK!"

'Public Service Innovation Bangladesh' – a Facebook group for civil servants – has brought about a revolution in Bangladesh Civil Service's internal communications system. Together with Departmental Blogs, they have led to the breakdown of hierarchical barriers that have historically deterred quick organizational communications and enabled civil servants to demonstrate their potential by sharing ideas, learning from and supporting each other by talking about their challenges.

The fact that an idea posted as a status on 'Public Service Innovation Bangladesh' by a field level officer can attract a comment or question from their ministry's top secretary serves as tremendous inspiration and an effective incentive for them to continue to think, engage and act innovatively to further the cause of citizen-centric public service innovation in Bangladesh.

Moreover, a2i is working with government agencies to leverage this platform to enable citizens to voice their concerns and point out their needs in a way that is convenient for them. All 64 districts now have open 'DC Office Facebook Pages', established and monitored by the Deputy Commissioners (DC). DCs are the chief government appointed executives of districts and residents rely on them for everything from maintaining law and order, to improving the quality of education, healthcare, and even settling disputes and tackling natural disasters. These pages are being used to redress citizens' grievances and contributing immensely to the provision of better, quicker and more affordable public services.

Making a deep sense of empathy for citizens' needs central to transforming public services

'Empathy' has now been firmly established as the first guiding principle of public service reform in Bangladesh. Because understanding citizens' needs is central to what a2i is trying to accomplish.

a2i's empathy methodology arranges trainings 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.

Equipping civil servants with the right Innovation Toolkit

'TCV' to measure improvement by placing citizens at the heart of innovation:

Achieving a shared understanding of what 'innovation' actually means is critical to its practice – a challenge that is grossly underestimated. Reducing 'TCV' has now 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 puts them at the center and offers simple parameters to measure and communicate efforts to improve public services and their delivery systems.

But how does one actually go about reducing TCV?

"**SPS' – emphasizing 'simplification' for the benefit of citizens rather than 'digitization' for the sake of service providers:**

a2i took 'Business Process Re-engineering' (BPR) and changed it to 'Service Process Simplification', or SPS. The latter term was more meaningful to policymakers and government service providers who did not consider themselves to be engaged in either 'business' or 'engineering'! SPS helped government officials to analyze and redesign workflows within and between ministries in order to optimize end-to-end processes and automate non-value-added tasks. It empowered them to fundamentally rethink how they do their work in order to dramatically improve the quality of services, cut operational costs and reduce TCV for their citizen clients.

A true testament of the effectiveness of the SPS methodology is the fact that more than half of the 600 innovation pilots launched by civil servants in Bangladesh don't use ICTs at all! But all of them simplify service delivery processes.

Enabling whole-of-society to innovate through a Public Service Innovation Fund

Fledgling innovators in Bangladesh face a few common challenges:

• Lack of funds to develop complete prototypes

• Testing the efficacy of prototypes with real users or beneficiaries

a2i's Service Innovation Fund (SIF) was designed to address these challenges. It provides seed funds and incubates cost-effective, user-centric, home-grown innovations to solve some of the most important problems affecting underserved communities. SIF also sets itself apart from other 'innovation funds' by:

• Co-investing with the innovators in bringing their ideas to life

• Providing mentorship support and access to citizen-beneficiaries to refine the prototypes and make them more user-centric

• Supporting innovators through liaising with relevant partners from both the public and private sectors for effective project implementation, successful scale up and sustainability

To date, SIF has attracted 3,000+ innovative proposals, using an online platform called 'Idea Bank' and granted over a quarter million dollars to government agencies, development organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academic institutions, private companies and even individuals.

Taking public services to the door-steps of the underserved through public-private partnership:

Digital Centers run by Citizen-Entrepreneurs: To decentralize the delivery of public services and take them to the doorsteps of millions of under-served citizen a2i established 5,000+ one-stop information and service delivery outlets known as Digital Centers in all union councils, the lowest tier of the Bangladesh government.

The Digital Centers ensure that the underserved such as rural women, people with disabilities and the elderly – regardless of their literacy and ICT literacy - can access vital information and services. A typical UDC is about 4 km from the average rural citizen's home whereas a government sub-district office is about 20 km and a district office over 35 km.

– 1 male and 1 female in tandem with elected local government representatives. They leverage modern technology to provide citizens both free and fee-based access to public services (land records, birth registration, telemedicine, life insurance, passport and overseas job application as well as application to various other government services) and private services (mobile financial services, insurance, various types of computer and vocational training, etc.)

These one-stop service centers are essentially micro-enterprises run by 'citizen entrepreneurs'. They combine the mandate and infrastructure of the public sector with the entrepreneurial zeal and efficiency of the private sector. The Digital Centers ensure 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 centers also depict an important edict of our national development – women's empowerment.

Results & Recognition

This is leading to an absolute sea change in the quality of public services and how they are delivered in Bangladesh. An average of 5 million underserved citizens are now able to access vital services every month at a much lower 'TCV' than before. Services that previously required multiple trips to the district government office 20-30 km away are now available at the nearby Digital Centre within a walking distance of 3 km. 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 over half a billion dollars.
International recognition for these achievements followed in the form of a2i, Bangladesh receiving the Global ICT Excellence Award from World IT and Services Alliance in 2014; and the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Awards from ITU in 2014, 2015 and 2016 for most innovative use of ICT to improve public service delivery to the underserved.

WHY DO CERTAIN PUBLIC SERVICE INNOVATIONS SCALE WHILE OTHERS DON'T?

HOW MUCH EXPERIMENTATION IS PRAGMATIC IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE SPHERE?

WHAT KINDS OF INNOVATIONS IN GOVERNMENTS ARE MEETING CITIZENS' EXPECTATIONS FOR IMPROVED PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY?

Southern Countries as Champions of South-South Cooperation

Countries from the South are well-positioned to understand each other's development realities; particularly, what works and what doesn't, and perhaps most importantly, the whys behind the successes and failures. They also recognize the need to experiment on their own turfs and avoid mistakes made by similar countries. The expectation therefore is that countries facing common thematic challenges and seeking to achieve similar strategic development goals can make faster progress through shared learning and experiences.

a2i has organized several policy dialogues on 'South-South and Triangular Cooperation for Public Service Innovation' attended by delegates from over 40 countries spanning the Global North and South. It is an attempt at:

• Sharing the insights that a2i has accumulated from years of experimentation on how to adapt ideas, models and tools to meet the unique needs and ground realities in Bangladeshi

• Connecting other developing countries with one another and joining them in proliferating innovative solutions and the knowledge necessary to customize them for local contexts

Bangladesh also holds annual international expos called 'Digital World' to showcase ICT-based innovations and serve as a platform to facilitate the exchange of technology, knowledge and expertise among participating countries and companies.

a2i hosted a 'Ministerial Conference on South-South & Triangular Cooperation' at Digital World 2016 Dhaka, to promote the exchange of knowledge on identifying, customizing and scaling up innovations in public service delivery. Ministers from the governments of Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldives, Saudi Arabia, Uganda, Vietnam, Suriname and Bangladesh participated in the conference.

In 2015, then President of the United Nations High-Level Committee on South-South Cooperation, the Government of Bangladesh hosted world leaders at the High-Level Meeting on South-South and Triangular Cooperation in Dhaka, 17-18 May.

These interactions have led to a2i signing MoUs with the Governments of the Maldives and Bhutan on exchanging knowledge and expertise to make public service delivery more citizen-centered.

South-South and Triangular Cooperation for Scaling Up on Innovations in Public Service Delivery: Side-Event at the UNOSSC's Global South-South Development Expo 2016

Governments around the world, especially in southern developing countries, are going through tremendous changes to respond to their citizens' rapidly rising expectations for improved public service delivery. Representing the Government of Bangladesh, a2i is organizing a side event at the GSSD Expo 2016 jointly with UNOSSC titled, 'South-South and Triangular Cooperation for Scaling Up on Innovation in Public Service Delivery' to encourage a discussion between southern countries and public services-focused institutions on challenges such as: What kinds of innovations in governments are meeting citizens' expectations for improved public service delivery? Why do certain public service innovations scale while others don't? How much experimentation is pragmatic in the public service sphere?
The session will also discuss progress towards a network focused exclusively on empowering southern countries to learn from and support each other to customize innovation tools and strategies to their unique country contexts for the sake of improving public service delivery and achieving the SDGs.