

Promoting e-Governance in Public Service Delivery: The Case of Union Digital Centres of Bangladesh

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Abstract: The Union Digital Centre- UDCs were settled up by targeting to create a service delivery hub in rural areas. Its main motto is to deliver different types of government, social and other services to the doorstep of the people with reduced time, cost and number of visitors. The main theme of the UDCs is to make the government more responsible by providing more accessible service to the citizens based on public-private partnership module which one of the best practice of people's welfare and ensure good governance. Digitization is one of the major tools of ensuring e-governance and e-governance helps to achieve good governance in a country. It plays a significant role in terms of administrative reform. In any democratic country, the elected government mostly rely on the mass people where public service delivery plays an influential role to make the government stronger by receiving peoples support. UDCs enable more participation of both male and female in order to access public services. *Through the UDC services, the chance of corruption is almost zero as UDCs maintain transparency in every step of its movement.* It is relentlessly working for reducing the service time, cost and visit and it is creating huge user satisfaction. In this journey, they face a lot of infrastructural and political problem and removing these barriers should be the key priority of government.

Keywords: e-Governance, Union Digital Centres (UDCs), Public Service Delivery and Digital Bangladesh.

Introduction

The present age is known as the era of information and communication technology (Rashid & Shafie, 2018). It has a huge impact on good governance and in a democratic country, service delivery process from government to the people is mostly associated with the governance term. Without a proper public service delivery process, we cannot think about the good governance. As a developing nation, Bangladesh is no longer out of this thought also. In this context, the government of Bangladesh has theorised e-governance as an interactive information service system amongst the mass people (Rashid & Shafie, 2018). It can grant sustained supply of public services. To give a boost to e-governance through ICT based service delivery process, the Government of Bangladesh brought e-service delivery centres in rural level and also in urban locations for fantastic public service delivery and the service centres are commonly known as as Union Digital Centres (UDCs). The important theme of this paper is to have a look at how UDCs are promoting e-Governance in service delivery process.

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The approach which is used in this paper is mixed in nature. Secondary resource is the base of this research paper where in dept interview method following random sampling gives a boost to the theme of this paper.

To ensure good governance, e-governance is one of the essential component. It plays a substantial role in terms of administrative reform (Moon, et al., 2005). In any democratic country, elected government mostly rely on the mass people where public service delivery performs an influential role to make the authorities more desirable by receiving peoples support and for this, each and every government tries to ensure effective people oriented public service delivery process. It ensures governance in the country. ICT performs an vital role here through providing digital support in service delivery which enable any authorities to ensure e-governance. This thought of e-governance emerged in this sector due to the backdrops of typical government structure and service delivery procedure (Salam, 2013).

There are different sorts of trouble confronted by the people of rural and far off areas of Bangladesh in order to access different types of public services. The traditional public service delivery process, top down bureaucratic method in service implementation made the consumer experience struggling in the rural areas. Previously people need to spend a big amount of money and time to get public services. To scale down this problem, Access to Information (a2i) Programme of Prime Minister's Office, supported by the UNDP, introduced the Union Digital Centre Model all over the country progressively which now creates a enormous instance in public service delivery through ICT. In this regard, the essential center of attention of a2i was to minimize the service time, cost and number of visit of the service beneficiaries.

To build a digital country and provide people all the facility to their doorstep, UDCs had been inaugurated 2007 in two Unions of Bangladesh in a pilot basis by the joint plan of local government division of Bangladesh and Access to Information (a2i) Programme and this pilot programme used to be elevated in 30 Unions in 2008 for the positive consequence of firstly piloted two UDCs. With this gradual process, 4547 UDCs successfully established by November 2010 (Hussain & May, 2014) where a2i provide all the support to make it successful (Faroqi, 2014). That time UDCs were being known as Union Information and Service Centers (UISCs). Later in 2014 it was once renamed as Union Digital Centre (UDC). Mainly UDCs are located in nearly every Union Parishad to reach maximum number of people for providing public service in a short time and with a low cost. At present the complete number of digital centers is around 5286 or more (a2i, 2018). Here one important issue is that a2i programme also mounted to ensure the same mandate of Digital Bangladesh.

Union Digital Centres (UDCs): How it works?

The UDCs have been settled up by targeting to create a service delivery hub in rural areas to deliver different sorts of government, social and other services to the doorstep

of the people with a reduced time, cost and number of visit which is noted before already. Although some other foremost center of attention of this initiative is to provide services to the rural people with a hassle free procedure, eradicate the harassment of middlemen, expand the rate of consuming services by the women, marginal people, handicapped individual etc. (a2i, 2012a). Every UDCs are operated by two private entrepreneurs beneath supervision of Union Parishad Chairman of that Union Parishad and it is running through Public Private Partnership Approach. A house is provided by the Union Parshad and different tools provided by the other institutions who are linked with this programme (Rashid &Shafie, 2018). For successful public service delivery and to make this programme price benefited through UDCs, government create linkage with different banks, mobile financial service provider organizations, telecom companies, different NGOs etc. (a2i, 2012b). A variety of services UDCs provide to the people of Bangladesh, such as birth registration, citizenship certificate, agricultural information, market information, passport and visa application, electrical energy invoice receive, agent banking service provide, job application, admission application, land related service like e-mutation, e-challan, e-Porcha etc. video conferencing, varieties download, computer compose, photocopy and many more. In some UDCs, they grant computer training in order to make the village people skilled in computer. They especially provide this training to the youths. UDCs additionally creates chance to involve the rural people in e-commerce activity. With the help of EkShop system, now rural human beings can promote their product in the main e-commerce web sites and in anywhere of the country. Again they can buy others items through UDCs also.

Literature enquiry: e-Governance with service delivery process

e-Governance is a broader term which has an impact on the exercise of power, particularly from the point of view of openness, participation, responsibility, effectiveness and consistency (Mahajan, 2015). To define e-governance, some fundamental thoughts come into frontline which are transparency, accountability, the morality of the authorities etc. which can be accomplished through the use of information and communication technology (Heeks, 2001). This substantial impact of ICT facilitate the strategies of government and public administration (Drucker, 2001). E-Governance is a strong mechanism to empower citizens, improve service delivery procedure to the mass people, ensure transparency and accountability of the authorities and expand the efficiency as well (World Bank, 2001). These mechanisms are interlinked with every different through three most important domains (Heeks, 2001), which are-

- E-administration: improving government processes
- E-services: connecting citizens
- E-society: building interactions with all and within civil society

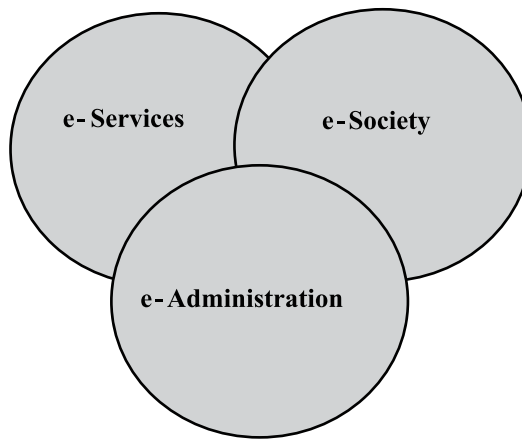


Fig. 1: Major overlapping domains of e-government (Heeks, 2001)

Here citizen centric e-service delivery connecting citizens with government and also to the other citizens with an ICT enable the e-administrative process.

e-Governance helps to make a government efficient and effective (Heeks, 2001) by producing-

- Same output at reduced total cost,
- More output at the same total cost,
- Same outputs at the same total cost in less time and
- Same outputs at the same total cost in the same time, but to a higher quality standard as well as producing new outputs (Heeks, 2001).

So here the most important criteria for greater government efficiency are providing service to the citizen with a low cost and less time and at the same time to make authorities effective, maintain a satisfactory standard and progressive outputs are some of the must ensuring elements. The UDC model of Access to Information Programme fits with this concept efficaciously in terms of quality public service delivery to the doorstep of the citizens with reduced time, low cost and less quantity of visit. So it is evident that, e-Governance or electronic governance has a robust relationship with public service delivery and in this regard, ICT performs an influential role as the practice of ICT in governance sector by the government institutions or organizations, turns into e-Governance. Faster, hassle free and quality public service delivery with a low cost to the people make nexus between e-governance and public service delivery process. Here it creates a new dimension when the subject of UDC connected with public service delivery process. By providing best service to the citizen through ICT, it makes the authorities efficient and productive. In Karnatak, India, twenty million rural land records of over 6.7 million farmers have been computerized. Citizens can get land records and crop details to take loans from banks through 177 government kiosks. This facility has helped farmers to take land records without spending any extra money. Also it has saved their time and

reduced number of visit to government offices where they were faced challenges in different steps for not aware of the different systems and complex procedures (Sangita & Dash, 2005).

UDCs in Public Service Delivery: Evidence from Bangladesh

The predominant purpose of the UDCs is to make the authorities greater responsible by providing more accessible service to the citizens based on public-private partnership- PPP system which is one of the great practice of people's welfare. Here people don't hesitate to go UDCs because UDC entrepreneur are local people of that particular area and usually popular in that location which ensured the trust of local people in public private partnership process (Rashid & Shafie, 2018).

Due to our male dominant social system, females are less accessing government services than male member of the family. Some greater purpose at the back of this situation such as safety concern, shyness, distant of the authorities' workplaces from the locality, harassments etc. but, as UDCs placed in every union parishad, so it is convenient to access the services by the women. Again, in every UDCs, a female entrepreneur works alongside with male entrepreneur. In this regard, women who come to get hold of services experience blissful and easy. This creates gender balance in receiving the government or other services via digital medium which is a major criteria of good governance. The following table indicates the growing trend of women's participation in getting access to public services from the UDCs.

Table 1: Gender wise Service Recipient of UDCs (a2i, 2017)

Service of UDCs	Male	Female
Birth Registration	45%	55%
Death registration	6%	94%
Citizen Certificate	54%	46%
Government Form	63%	37%
Government Service Bill	66%	34%
Character Certificate	55%	45%
Agricultural Service	71%	29%
Photocopy	41%	59%
Print Out	48%	52%
Compose	77%	23%
Computer Training	25%	75%
E-mail	69%	31%
Internet Browsing	79%	21%
Job Application	49%	51%

Bureaucratic corruption in Bangladesh has been an acute problem in Bangladesh. People wished to pay extra money to get the service in time. File moves from desk to desk in quest

of speed money and this creates lengthy time gap to get a public service (Hossain, 2017). To maintain protocol, it takes a huge time to receive a single service even once in a while it needed to go several time to access that service. Here UDCs make an example to provide service except any harassments (Rashid & Shafie, 2018). For example, to make a birth certificate, previously it needed to complete a wide variety of steps manually. But, in the UDCs, it is now possible inside a very quick time. Again, in the village areas, land related issues is very common. For this, land proprietors needed to collect different types of documents like Porcha, Mutation etc. from land office which is not time and cost effective. Again the manual process is also very complex. But, from the UDCs all people can apply for the mutation very easily. They can get the land porcha with in 7 days' time from the UDCs and with less cost. This services and documents are very necessary to have for a citizen. Waiting for long time, delays, harassment ruin peoples trust from government services. UDCs performs here an influential role to keep the peoples trust on government services. UDCs have created the possibility to effectively receive the government services and in case of emergencies, receive the stated services at a faster rate than before (Rashid & Shafie, 2018). A real journey from Ibrahim Miah, who is a school teacher of Sariakandi Upazila-

"Last year I was came to land office to receive may land porcha. I got the porcha but it took long time. For that I visited the office several time because in manual system it was very complex system. And lots of harassment in every step. But this year I got the same service within 10 days after application and I didn't need to go again and again .¹"

UDCs provide the services with reduced time cost and number of visit. As the UDCs are very close to most of the villagers, for that rural people don't need any transportation to go there most time. In that case it saves the transportation cost. Again the beneficiaries don't need to wait in the UDCs, after going there, they get their desired service within a short time. Besides, the UDC entrepreneurs are so much efficient and skilled and the service delivery process of UDCs is very easy, for this people do not need to go there several times for a single service. For example, one of the study on UDC Land e-Porcha service indicates the effectiveness of UDCs to provide service in low cost, less time and much less visit which are described in the below figures-

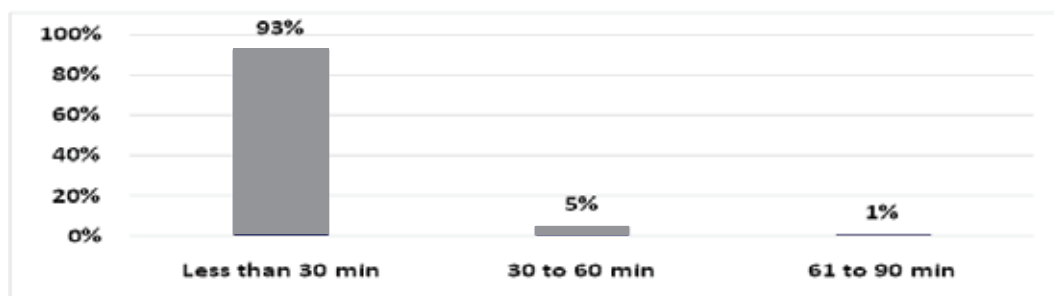


Fig. 2: Time Needed to Collect e-Porcha(A2i, 2018)

¹ Interviewed by the authors

According to the figure 2, most (93%) of the beneficiaries have collected the land e-Porcha from UDC within less than 30 minutes. From the previous study of a2i, it has been found that more than half (51%) of the respondents had needed 60 minutes to 120 minutes to collect the Porcha through DC office manually. In this regard, UDC has reduced time immensely to provide the specific services and increased satisfaction of the beneficiaries (A2i, 2018).

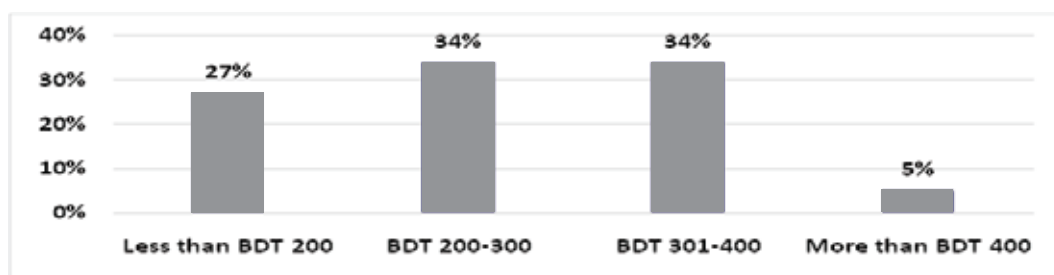


Fig. 3: Cost needed to collect e-Porcha(A2i, 2018)

Figure 3 depicts that about 68% of the service receiver have received the e-Porcha by paying BDT 200 to BDT 400. From the previous study of a2i, it has been found that two-third (39%) of the service receiver have received the same service from manual record room by paying above BDT 500. It is notable that the cost analysis does not include the government fees here(A2i, 2018).

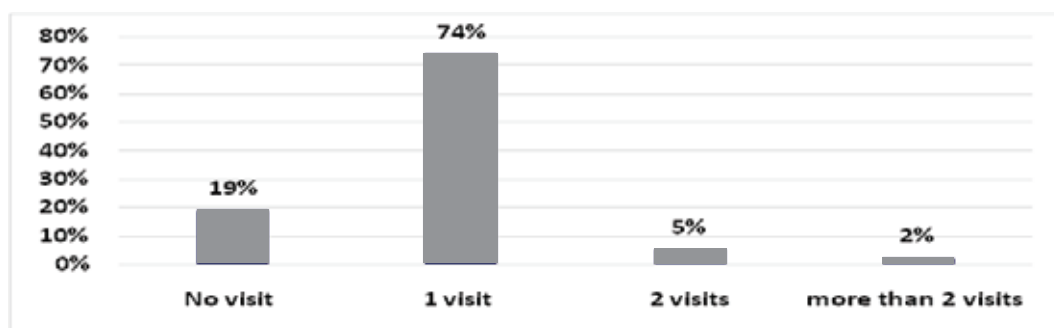


Fig. 4: Visit needed to collect e-Porcha(A2i, 2018)

Figure 4 shows, about 74% of the beneficiaries have availed the Porcha from UDC by visiting once. In contrast, from the previous study of a2i, it has been found that about 66% of the respondents needed two visits to receive the same service from other service point. Here no visit indicates that sometimes people receive more than one service in a single visit, that time the second service has no visit.

Currently, corruption is one of the major problem in our country. According to the final corruption perception index of Transparency international, Bangladesh drop its position 6 step from previous year and now stands in 149th position out of 181 country (Transparency

International, 2018) where administrative corruption is a concerning threat. To fulfil the dream of Digital Bangladesh, corruption must be eradicate where UDC based digital service started to put its impact in ensuring governance through service delivery. As UDCs are totally digital and monitored through the regarding authority, its work is so quick which is mentioned earlier and succeeded to earn people's trust in terms of public service delivery.

There is a tradition of intermediary is to be seen in many government offices and it is very common scenario. Rural people those who come first time in government offices, majority of the time they are caught by middleman. They process the service for the beneficiary in opposition to a high amount of money. But, the UDCs are like one stop centre. To ensure transparency all UDCs have to hang the service charge in the wall which makes the people aware of the services.

Above all the reasons keep the UDC in people's heart which makes satisfaction. According to a study report of a2i on a particular service indicates that 53% of UDC beneficiary were highly satisfied after receiving the service from UDC where 38% are satisfied and 9% moderately satisfied. Most important thing is that here no one found who dissatisfied with UDC service (A2i, 2018).

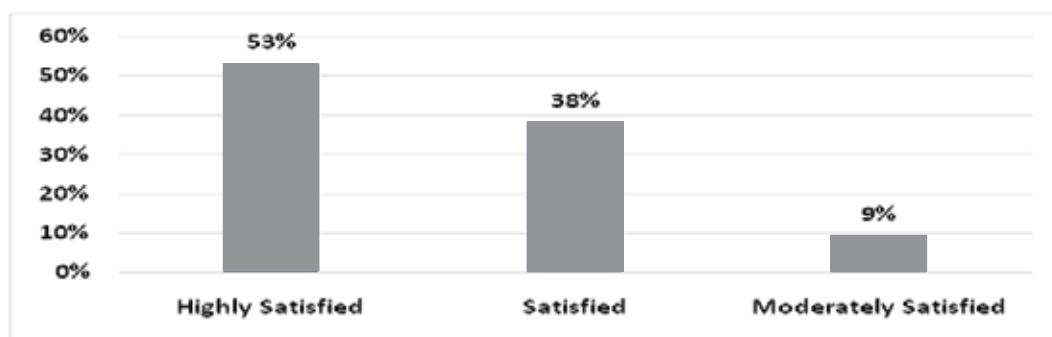


Fig. 5: Level of Satisfaction with UDC Service(A2i, 2018)

Challenges of UDCs for Quality Public Service Delivery

As UDCs performs a massive role in terms of ensuring e-governance through public service delivery, however it faces quite a few barriers in its notable successive journey. Power exercise on UDCs by the UP Chairman is a major backdrop of UDCs progressiveness because UDCs are placed at the Union Parishad Building and the Union Parishad have the oblique control over it. Beside this, lack of infrastructural association is another foremost barrier. Their room is not adequately large to ensure seating arrangement for all the service beneficiaries when lots of people come at a time. They have digital tools like computer, scanner, printer, photocopy machine etc. however not all of them up to date and in most time they are very slow and laggy. And in most of the cases they have only one laptop which create hassle when they attempt multitasking. Bangladesh is now in the club of 3G and 4G internet and the present government of Bangladesh tries to provide its people

5G internet when it will be available globally. But in the rural areas, people hardly obtain the 3G internet and 4G is very rare. Again Broadband internet also not reachable in the rural and far flung places of the country. For this reason, many UDC entrepreneurs use internet via modem which is very pricey and sluggish in speed.

Md. Mehedi Hasan Tutul, who is an entrepreneur of SariakandiPourasava Digital Centre expressed his feeling with sorrow face²-

"Although it's not a remote area, a number of people come to my digital centre and take services. But sometimes I face trouble as my computer and printer is very old model. It creates problem to serve the people within a short time."

Conclusion

Ensuring governance throughout the country is the topmost priority of any welfare state to achieve sustainable development. In the era of globalization, digitization is a common term which makes worlds countries interconnected with each other. As a developing country, Bangladesh is also tries to make itself as a model country by achieving good governance in a digital way where the theory of e-governance exists. Provide user friendly public service in digital way is one of the key ideas of achieving e-governance pathway. Union Digital Centres acts as a pioneer in public service delivery sector in the rural and remote areas. By providing service at the doorstep of the people- UDCs are facilitating the government by reducing the gap between government and citizen in terms of service delivery process. Although at this moment not only in service delivery sector, UDC spreads its area in people centric e-commerce, welfare for the youths, women's, disable persons and in many more sectors, the main theme is to ensure e-governance. UDCs helps the government to make Bangladesh a peaceful and welfare state by reducing corruption, harassments, unethical money providing etc. from the public service delivery sector and make the user experience smiley.

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