

Impact of Digitalization on Service Delivery of Union Parishad in Bangladesh: Role of Union Digital Centers

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to identify the impacts of digitalization on service delivery of union parishad in Bangladesh and critically trace out the contribution of union digital centers. We know that union parishad is the lowest tier of Bangladesh administrative systems. It also part of our field administration. Union parishad deals with grassroots people who are deprived of taking the services of the central administration. Rural people cannot directly contact with the central personnel. As a consequence government tries to reduce the gap between the central administration and rural people through establishing union digital centers at each union parishad in Bangladesh. This study is descriptive nature and relevant information was collected through different books, daily newspapers, online published articles and magazines. The findings of the study help the policymakers to identify the loopholes of our union digital centers.

Keywords: Union Digital Centers, Digital Bangladesh, Union Parishad, Rural Community

Introduction

Bangladesh is an overpopulated country in South Asia. A large number of people live in per square kilometre. The government of Bangladesh had faced many problems in delivering developmental services. No government can reach grassroots or remote rural people. For that result many rural people are deprived of taking the governmental services in a due time frame. As a result the gap has been increased between government service holders and rural people. Decentralization is one of the best tools to disseminate services from central to rural areas. To reduce the gap the government of Bangladesh has taken the establishment of a digital center in each union parishad. It was previously known as Union Information and Service Center. With the help of UNDP and access to information projects under the prime minister office it begins operations in 2009 in 30 unions parishad through collaboration with Local Government Division. But now day's union digital center is operating at all 4547 unions parishad across the country. It helps to development of socio-economic as well as the political conditions of marginalized people by providing daily necessary services and people of rural areas are up to date about the state or world political and economic conditions. Rural people are getting the service at their doorsteps without facing any types of hassles and ensure service providers and receivers to save time and cost. Union digital centers are operating by public-private partnership basis and run by local young entrepreneurs, under the control of union parishad and financially supported by central administration. The government of Bangladesh has created those service centers for the marginalized people who are getting different government and private services easily, cheaply, and hassle-free. From union digital centers the people of that concerned parishad are getting different services like government forms on different public examinations, visa-related service and information, online land notices, law-related information, job news, citizen certificates, a result of public examinations, repayment of electricity bills, university online admissions, online birth, and death registration, agriculture-related information, health counselling, mobile banking, internet browsing, application of visas and tracking, printing and scanning, photocopies, laminating and so on. Union digital centers help in eliminating poverty by creating job opportunities for rural young people. Union digital center has been an important initiative in changing the social, political, and economic conditions of rural people in Bangladesh.

Objective of the study:

The main objective of this study is to find out the impact of digitalization on union parishad in Bangladesh and the role of union digital center. The objectives of the study include the following:

- Impact of digitalization on service delivery of union parishad and find out the contribution of Union digital centers.
- To find out the present status of union digital centers in Bangladesh.

- To trace out the challenges of union digital centers face during providing services and government initiatives regarding mitigate these challenges.

Materials and methods

The study is based on secondary data and it is basically in descriptive nature. Relevant information was collected from various reports, journal articles, daily newspapers, magazines, books, conferences, and governmental webpage's.

Literature Review

There are few numbers of literature have been found that a direct connection of impacts on digitalization on the union parished in Bangladesh and the role of union digital center. The daily star (April 2020) report shows that as a one-stop shop the union digital center has reduced corruption through delivering the government and private services and it is the hallmark achievement of government vision. A study conducted by BRAC University shows that the successful implementation of union digital center and proper functioning is quite hard tasks because of poor infrastructural arrangements. Another study was conducted by S.S Ahmed (2015) the finding of this research reveals that it ensures the effective and efficient service within minimum cost and largely reduces the corruption and makes the governmental service more accountable. Mustain Billah (2015) shows that union digitals centers help rural people by increasing their socio-economic and cultural conditions which brings social change. It helps to change in socio-economic conditions through creating job opportunities for rural young people. Biback Das (2019) shows that the government should ensure people's participation in union digital service. Before introducing the union digital centers rural people are not concern about the different governmental services. He emphasized the government should take proper steps to people participate in this process. The finding of his paper is that people's participation should be ensured so that they can touch with governmental activities and cope up with the new changing situation. Alias et al (2011) found that adaptation of e-governance in rural areas is challenging because of security, cost, and dialect languages. The findings of this study showed that sometimes it was impossible to deliver better service because of limited allocation of the government money supply as well as create a negative impact on the time of delivering service as a result of dialect languages. Bakshi. Karim.Rejaul, Rahman. Tariqur (2016) showed that union digital centers are providing governmental services by using online systems. They analyzed his research that corruption must be reduced through using this online system and proving different governmental services at the doorstep of rural people at minimal cost and introducing the e-administration of government. 'Dynamics of service delivery of union digital center in Bangladesh: an assessment on institutional sustainability' by Mamun. Akhter (2018) was revealed that sustainability is a big question about the union digital center. He stated that the union digital center is a public enterprise but run by private manpower so that finance is the matter for running the public entity. The mindset of service receivers mind is another factor in to smooth operation of this entity. Entrepreneur qualification and promptness, regularity, and cordial service delivery are the big factors of the sustainability of the union digital center. Technical skills, infrastructure, and high speed of internet connectivity factors to deliver the services in a due time frame. Social sustainability and good relationships between union parished chairmen are important to sustain the union digital center. 'Union digital center in delivering e - services: Roles, potentials, and challenges were conducted by Iftekharuzzaman, Khair. Sumaiya (2017) analyzed that the role of union digital center and how efficiency and effectiveness should be ensured through providing the service at the door shop of rural people. They also analyzed numerous problems faced by union digital center like lack of available accommodation, infrastructural facilities, lack of proper logistic supports by government, poor skills of a service provider, and lack of proper orientation between chairman and other members the concept of public - private partnership and non -availability of another power supply in union digital centers. 'Union digital center, a step towards digital Bangladesh: has it got institutional roots? Was conducted by Begum.Ara.Ulfat (2017) described the institutional capability of union digital center and also emphasized the role of union digital center in the forward to digital Bangladesh. She was more emphasized on the sustainability of this center and described sustainability largely depends on financial and social viability and user acceptance. 'Union digital center: expectation and challenges in services delivery to the rural people of Bangladesh' were conducted by Shamrat. Sufian. Abu, Hossain. Amjad showed that decentralization is the key mechanism to deliver the services at the rural door shop. As a result, government has introduced the union digital center to provide the basic service to the remote areas people. They emphasized that union digital centers are providing services with low cost, less time consuming, less labor-intensive and maintain less bureaucratic formalism and helps the government to apply the NPM tools in the country. M. A. I. Md. Nazmul Islam, "Exploring the Shortcomings of Union Digital Center (UDC) in Bangladesh: A Study has shown the detailed activities and shortcomings of union parished for running its smooth operations. They emphasized some techniques for resolving the current problems of union digital centers.

Discussion and Findings

Union Parishad is the lowest tier of Bangladesh administrative systems. Union parishad are directly dealing with rural people. Decentralization has become a popular tool for delivering the service within due time frames. To deliver the public service to rural people, the government of Bangladesh has introduced ICT based service system. Union digital center is one of the examples of ICT based service. Today is called the era of information and communication technology (ICT). UDC helps to minimize the gap between the central administration and rural people and introduce the e-governance systems by providing different types of services like birth registration, online job applications, agriculture-related services, passports scanning, electronic bills collection which will lead to good governance in Bangladesh. Today most of the public and private service deliveries largely depend on information and communication technology (ICT). It has been seen in recent time, most of the countries in the world taking the fruits of ICT is the main instrument for improving the socio-economic condition of mass people. Digital Bangladesh is the main election manifesto of the present government of Bangladesh and after coming to the power they introduce computer councils and delivering the services effectively and efficiently with minimal cost. Union digital center is a basis on public-private partnership process. It is a public entity but run by a private person. Every union digital center has two entrepreneurs one is male and the other is female. Most of the union digital centers are run through a contractual basis. The Government does not provide any extra financial assistance to run this center. This is not a paid job to deliver governmental services to rural people. So sometimes the providers are reluctant to deliver the service in a due time frame. There is no fixed official time. Union digital center has produced a positive impact and helps to reduce the digital divide. The main purposes of establishing union digital centers were providing governmental, private services with minimum cost and placing the right information at the right time, at the right place and the right person. For delivering the proper service it is equipped with computers, modem, photocopy machines, laptops, scanners, printers, multimedia projectors, etc. The government has introduced this digital center to deliver the services with minimum cost but the real scenario is that most of the private entrepreneurs demand extra money to render the services to the rural people. It is interesting to the fact that every union digital center is under the control and supervision of union parishad chairman. Union parishad chairman is the vital factors to select the private partner to render the services. The service of union digital centers largely depends on the willingness of union parishad chairman. Plenty of services are offered by union digital center like online job applications, paying utility bills like electricity, gas, online admission form fills up, passport scanning, photocopy servicing, land-related information, providing birth and death certificate, agriculture services, mobile banking, computer training, national e-service system, district e-service center-settlement record, health services, creation of employment, online tax calculator, online tax returns preparation, digital innovation fair, and electric money order and postal cash card to the rural people which are ultimately leads the country on the way of digitalization. At the very first time of the inauguration of these services the rural people of our country are not aware of this digital center. The government takes different initiatives to announce digital tools to deliver the service to the rural people. Today it has been seen that most of the people are taking the service within minimum cost without facing any hassle. The illiterate farmers of rural areas are benefited by getting agriculture-related services. Bangladesh Rural Power Development Board (REB) has collaborated with the digital center so that the marginalized people can submit their electronic bills by paying only a little bit extra service fees. Today almost 727 unions' digital centers are collecting electronic bills from rural customers. The most important function of the union digital center is offering computer training at a low cost by using multimedia projectors. Rural students and youth get this computer training which helps them to get a computer-based job in the competitive jobs market. Union digital center helps to the creation of jobs to rural people. Two employees are working in each digital center, one of them is male and the other is female. This organization has created the opportunity to empower women in rural areas. A villager can apply for their land records and people get birth and death certificate without having multiple visits at union parishad. Most of the union digital centers have taken the initiative of mobile banking because rural people are deprived of getting mobile banking facilities. To provide banking facilities at the grassroots people four banks have launched mobile banking programs with the collaboration of union digital centers. The rural people are deprived of insurance benefits. Government Insurance Corporation has taken the initiative to cover the mass people under an insurance policy. There are a lot of services offered by the union digital center to ensure digitalization in Bangladesh. Apart from these facilities there are huge numbers of challenges faced by the union digital center. Location is an important factor to deliver the services. The qualifications of service providers are a major question. It means knowledge, capacity, and skills that suit or make someone eligible to handle the operation. It is important to note that skills people are inevitable for delivering the service at the grassroots community people. But it is seen that most of the entrepreneurs are not knowledgeable about the proper utilization of resources. The delivery of service depends on the willingness of union parishad chairman. Though there are plenty of advantages of union digital centers. Union digital centers have faced a lot of challenges over running the project. Government intervention is another challenge of delivering services to rural people. Political will is mandatory for providing the services. The irregularity of service providers is another thread of union digital center. In those cases, the presence of a male provider is satisfactory but at the same time, female member rarely comes to the office. Though union digital center is a personal investment of service providers so most of the time they are reluctant to invest their money in this sector because they feel insecure to invest in the UDCs. Under the access to

information projects the government only provide the laptops or photocopies machines and most of them are out of service and the service providers are not curious to repair because the shortage of money and they thought that they are a not permanent employee which impedes the service of rural people. Powers and networks are important ingredients to deliver the service in remote areas. It is a matter of regret that the internet facility is very much poor in rural areas. So most of the service providers have faced numerous problems in operation time. A large number of union digital centers depend on the power supply but due to uninterrupted power supply is the main problem to deliver the proper services. Absent of logistic support is the problem to provide service to the rural people. There are no supervisory body to oversight their performances and most of the entrepreneurs are not skilled on computer-based knowledge to deliver quick services. So it can be said that the union digital center is the primary step to digitalize Bangladesh and provide necessary services in a short time.

Conclusion

Bangladesh is facing numerous challenges to work or implementing the e-governance system and achieving the target of vision 2021. Union digital center is an essential tool to make the government more accountable and transparent, reduce the time and costs of services receivers, effectively and efficiently use of optimal resources of government to deliver the services at rural community people. Essentially union digital center helps to reduce the gap between the government and rural people through proper utilization of information and communication technology. To ensure the vibrant success of union digital center government should need to pay more attention to reducing corruption. It helps to massive development of socio-economic growth in the rural areas of Bangladesh. It helps to poverty alleviation at large scales from our society. The government of Bangladesh needs to increase IT literacy and internet awareness for the well being of Bangladesh. The government should trace out the financial viability and reduce political constraints which are the key challenges of implementing e-governance.

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