E-Governance: Bangladesh Perspective

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1 eGovernance in the Bangladesh Context

Governments, much like businesses, have two major efficiency criteria. First, in the short term it has to reduce the cost of production of the commodities that it produces and second, in the long term, it must also improve the shareholders wealth by increasing its value in the market. In case of governments, both the stakeholders and consumers are the same, the people. And the market also constitutes of roughly the same group of people.

Put in context, it can be said that, the government must deliver its services at the least possible cost and, in the long run, it must earn the confidence of the people by providing the services that people want. A properly designed and implemented e-governance system has the potential to help government to fulfill both the efficiency criteria.

In the Bangladesh context, the following can be the most direct gain that e-governance can bring to the country.
- Enhance the Transparency, Accountability and Efficiency of government: e-governance provides the right tools for monitoring of the government activities by its citizenry by allowing the government to follow predefined and transparent processes whose quality and efficiency are measurable.
- Greater decentralization of governance: e-Government systems make decentralization of government services and makes decentralized decision-making easier.
- Makes ICT relevant to the masses: e-Government systems make ICT relevant to the masses as its benefits gradually extend to citizens and communities throughout the country.
- Private sector development: e-governance systems allow for easy accessibility to government services and allow businesses to access government services on the fly thereby enhancing overall competitiveness of enterprises in a country.

2 E-governance and Bangladesh: Challenges

2.1 Technological Aspects
As is in most of the Least Developed Countries, Inadequacy of ICT infrastructure is a common problem in most government offices of Bangladesh. This situation is further compounded by the marked absence of technical infrastructure planning and sub-optimal utilization of whatever infrastructure is available.
The other challenge is in ensuring ‘sustainability’ of ICT infrastructure. Often due to myopic planning of development projects lead to a lack of integration of ICT based systems into the core business processes of an organization and the long term financial sustainability aspect of ICT infrastructure is ignored.

2.2 Human Resource
Due to lack of institutionalized means of developing related skills many e-Government implementation projects suffer from lack of skilled human capital. Only ICT skill courses available for the civil servants are not enough to bridge the gap. There is not much done for the civil servants to enhance their ‘soft-skills’ associated with managing implementation of e-Governance systems. Government institutions may explore introducing courses on ‘change management’, etc. to address such deficiencies.

Absence of incentive for acquiring ICT skill is also considered as one of the reason for lacking of ICT skilled human resources in the government. Indeed, in most government offices the use of IT is mostly self-motivated and a matter of individual self-development.

2.3 Economic Aspects
The economic/financial challenge for e-governance system implementation in Bangladesh is two pronged. First, like most developing countries, Bangladesh faces difficulties in investing large sums in e-governance system from its own coffer. Absence of pro-private sector policies impedes this other potential source of investment.

There seems to be a marked need for building capacity of the civil servants to conduct cost-benefit and results-resources benefit analysis before approving e-governance projects. Indeed the lack of managerial acumen and technical know-how to analyze the cost-benefit scenario and return on investments to assess financial sustainability of a project is hurting the country’s e-governance aspirations. It is also an important reason why the private sector remained as a sceptic bystander rather than a active partner in e-governance.

2.4 Social Aspects
In Bangladesh, a country where ‘disparities’ between haves and have-nots are ever increasing, introducing ICT in the governance mechanism faces the challenge of ensuring equitable access to e-governance services by all strata of the society. It is essential to create public awareness with regard to e-Governance services that are available and could be made available to everyone.

The other social aspects that come under e-Governance challenges are lack of literacy and a weak basic education standard; standardization of Bangla for official use; and the ‘Brain Drain’ of ICT skilled human resources from the government.
2.5 Administration
More needs to be done to sensitize senior government officials with regard to
e-governance and the benefits inherent to it. It is mostly due to this lack of awareness
that e-governance systems lack buy-in from the senior management of government
organizations. Such lacking of acceptability often means lack of sustainability of the
system and even failure to implement such a system.

E-governance requires rethinking the standard operating procedure. The existing
administrative rethinking mechanism is not aligned with e-governance activities and
plans. Such lack of coordination between administrative reform and e-governance is
another challenge that we are facing too.

Finally, in absence of central e-governance coordinating and monitoring entity the
tasks of prioritizing and controlling the quality of the e-governance projects remained
as a challenge in Bangladesh.

2.6 Legal Framework
The nation still needs to strive to have an operational regulatory / legal framework
including relevant Cyber Laws. While the ICT Act has been approved recently, the
work of drafting the bylaws (19 of them) and rules might take still some time.

2.7 Local content
There is a dearth of local content available in the country. This plays an especially
important role in the government since even if an officer is connected to Internet the
relevant knowledge resources available to him is limited. This often limits the need or
wants on the part of government staff to access the Internet as a part of their normal
working routine.

3. Way forward: Need for national strategy

The single most important lesson learned during almost two decades of e-governance
initiatives of the country is ‘e-governance is a strategic choice not an operational
alternative for service delivery’. A nation needs to be sufficiently ‘ready’ before
shooting for e-governance objectives. A national e-strategy is required to address the
following fundamentals elements of e-governance readiness.

· E-governance Awareness among public servants: training courses for government
  officials should move beyond the office productivity suite to conceptual courses that
  enable them to conceive ICT as a strategic asset rather than operational tools.
· Facilitate public private partnership model to work: E-governance initiatives are
  often capital intensive and have to compete with projects addressing other national
development priorities. Additionally, e-governance projects are often riskier than
  more traditional development projects. Hence, most countries that are seriously
pursuing e-Government have partnered with the private sector to share the costs and risks of starting and running e-Government projects. A concrete policy framework and directive is needed to engage the private sector for Bangladesh too.

In this context, the government needs to look into the possibility of outsourcing most of the service delivery and substantial part of service production function to the private sector.

- Enhance access to ICT tools for citizens: the government needs to ensure equitable access to government services delivered online to all potential users. It is therefore important for the Government to invest resources and introduce policies to extend access to ICT throughout the country. Participation of public sector needs to be ensured to speed up infrastructure roll out. Innovative means of content delivery like mobile telephony, community radio, etc. based solution should be encouraged and explored.
- Creation of local content: The government should take the lead in creation of locally relevant content in the local language. At the same time, preservation of local knowledge in easily understandable forms must be encouraged. In the backdrop that most of Bangladesh’s cannot read and comprehend written text strategies to encourage voice and video data should be developed and implemented.
- Adopt open standards and open source solutions: It is highly unlikely that the country can embark on a single project to develop both its hardware and software solutions and can only address these needs gradually. To enable the nation to undertake small but manageable projects and gradually build up its e-governance maturity, it is important that the nation adopts an open architecture for easy interoperability.
- Plan for the long term: E-governance systems bear fruits only in long term. Failure to recognize this long gestation period often results in unnecessary frustration and experimentation resulting in the loss of resources and motivation among the users.

4. Successful e-governance initiatives:

Mixed with failed or not so successful e-governance initiatives are a few truly successful initiatives that demand special mention here (in alphabetic order).

- Automation of Internal Processes: Bangladesh Bank began to computerize its functions almost at the same time most government offices started investing in automation. However, the Bank is only among the handfuls that have been successful in integrating ICT into the core business processes of the institute. Today it is one of the most fully computerized public institutions in the country. The current system actually automates most of the Banks operational processes and some of the most important strategic processes including monitoring of commercial bank transactions.
- Electronic Birth Registration System: Electronic Birth Registration System was introduced by The Rajshahi City Corporation (RCC) and the Local Government
Division of the Ministry of Local Government with technical and financial support from UNICEF. This is probably the best local level e-governance example of Bangladesh where a local government body, in their own initiatives and leadership and with support form a development partner took such a bold step forward. The system also doubles as an immunization management system. Once registered, the system also generates an immunization schedule for every child. To system generated ID is also used to get admission in the public schools of the city.

- **Financial Management System:** On the backdrop of not to successful project such as reforms in the Budgeting and Expenditure Control (RIBEC 1 and RIBEC 2) and somewhat successful RIBEC 2A and then RIBEC 2B, Ministry of Finance has gradually and surely the ministry of Finance now have developed a quality MIS system that is successfully used for budget planning, sensitivity analysis, impact analysis, financial projections and other core processes of the ministry.

- **Government Forms Online:** Accessing government forms online is made possible by the Prime Minster’s Office of Bangladesh though a project funded by UNDP Bangladesh. This not only saves time but also the cost and hassles associated with the travelling to the government offices located at a distance.

- **Hajj Web Site:** The Ministry of Religious Affairs, GoB introduced the Hajj Web Site in 2002 to service ten and thousands of pilgrims who go to Mecca to perform holy Hajj. During the Hajj, the website also acts as a important information portal for the family members of the pilgrims and other interested persons and organizations. One of the best examples of a Public-Private Partnership project, the site provides timely and reliable information to a large segment of the population.

- **MIS for Project Management and Transparency:** Department of Roads and Highways, Ministry of Communication, GoB, developed this MIS as a component of a World Bank funded project for the institutional development of RHD. The eGovernment initiative of RHD involved the launch of a website that provides a variety of information, data and notices to users. Website users include the private sector, related government offices, ordinary citizens, and donor agencies.

- **National Board of Revenue:** Several development projects like Asian Development Bank funded ‘Customs Administration Modernization Project’, International Development Agency funded ‘Excise, Taxes & Customs (ETAC) Data Computerization Project’, World Bank funded ‘Modernization and Automation Project’ etc. much of the core processes of NBR and some of its citizen services has already been computerized and implemented successfully.

- **Personnel Database:** The Personnel Management system (more of a database with some analytical reporting) of the Ministry of Establishment is probably the oldest egovernment initiative that is still is in use and in demand. The database in maintained by the technical personnel with in the ministry and maintains the personal information card for each government employ of the ‘Administration’ cadre including their respective annual confidential reports.

- **Railway Ticketing:** Technically, Railway ticketing might not be a simpler egovernment project but from people’s convenience perspective, this is one of the important one. Bangladesh Railway outsourced the job to a local IT vendor. With a
few technical hiccups the system was put to operation in 1996. The vendor owned operated and maintained the system till early 2002. The system was than transferred to Bangladesh Railway, who later decided to outsource its operation to another private vendor.

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