ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Exploring the Shortcomings of Union Digital Center (UDC) in Bangladesh: A Study

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Abstract

Union Digital Center (UDC) is one-stop service center set up in Bangladesh with a view to providing all sorts of government digital services and ICT facilities to the doorsteps of every citizen residing at the rural peripherals of the country. These newly set up information centers are powered by Prime Minister's Office (PMO) under the "Access to information (a2i)" project and UDP and other organizations are helping to fulfill the real objectives of "Vision 21" and "Digital Bangladesh". This paper is an attempt to delineate the present helms of UDCs and possible problems that hinder these information centers from reaching the rural people smoothly with necessary digital equipments and services. This paper also puts forward some recommendations in order to overcome the existing problems.

Keywords: Union Digital Centers (UDC); Digital Bangladesh; Rural Community; Union Parishad; UISC.

Introduction

At present "Digital Bangladesh" and "Vision 2021" have become common phrases in Bangladesh. These buzzwords are no longer limited to the glossary of information and communication technology (ICT) enthusiasts, and these phrases have become popular to all classes of people [1]. Bangladesh government has an aim to make the country digitally advanced in 2021 and to make this dream fulfilled different information centers across the country are being set up. Union Digital Centers (UDCs) are the phenomenal achievements of Vision 2021 and Digital Bangladesh. UDCs represent 'service access innovation' which is leveraging the government's 'service process simplification' works. In other words, UDCs are assisting rural grass-root populace to access different movement, non-government and other information services as a result of innovations in ICT based services in service delivery [2]. Since the present phenomenon "Digital divide" seems acute across the country and the urban populations are leveraging the benefits of ICTs, the Government of Bangladesh has been initiating several steps to lessen this gap. The government has thus so far set up 4554 UDCs at the Union Parishad (the lowest tire of the local government system) level as a major strategy to boost up the use of ICT among the rural people [3]. In recent years, providing digital services through e-government project in rural areas plays an important role to access to the relevant information and transformation of local government services [4]. Various e-services can be rendered fruitfully to the rural people through UDC and the present government puts special emphasis on it [5]. UNDP is helping Bangladesh government to establish these information centers at the Union level and this humble initiative will

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definitely bring a new era for the rural people [6]. Union Digital Center has opened a new window for the rural grass root people immensely but the stereotype architecture of these one-stop centers is still not coping with challenges of this 21st century [7]. Despite having many limitations UDCs are now playing the roles of local knowledge centers equipped with internet-based ICT facilities and other information services relating to the needs of people at a nominal charge. UDC brings phenomenon impact in e-governance and other digital service delivery to the rural people [8].

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to reveal the limitations of the UDC in rendering services and activities to rural dwellers. More specifically the objectives of the present study include the following:

- To delineate the present status of the Union Digital Centers (UDC) of Bangladesh;

- To trace out the existing limitations of the Union Digital Centers (UDC);

- To bring up some recommendations to solve the existing problems of the Union Digital Centers (UDC).

Materials and Methods

The present study is primarily based on the review of primary and secondary literature including reports, journal articles, books, conference proceedings etc. Relevant literature were also collected and consulted through a massive Internet browsing. For exploring the problems seven Union Digital Centers of Godagari thana, namely Pakri Union Digital Center (RUDC), Rishikul Union Digital Center (PUDC), Gogram Union Digital Center (GUDC), Deopara Union Digital Center (DUDC), Mohonpur Union Digital Center (MoUDC), Basudebpur Union Digital Center (BUDC), Matikata Union Digital Center (MaUDC) were visited directly. The shortcoming presented this study and recommendations made follow through were given based upon the field visits of these UDCs particularly.

UDCs of Bangladesh: At a Glance

The following information depicts the factual scenario of Union Digital Center in Bangladesh:

• Total Number of Union Digital Centre	4,554+
• Total Number of Entrepreneurs	9095
• Citizens visit to UDC per month	3.20 million
• Total Birth Registration	3, 40, 00,000
• Mobile Banking Services Available	3700 UDC
• Life Insurance Offered	2770 UDC
• Telemedicine Services Offered	35,000 Citizens
• Computer Literacy Training Provided	45,000 Students
• Health Services provided.	75 million citizens
• Overseas workers registration	1.45 Million

Services Provided by UDC

The Government of Bangladesh has affirmed a vision of Digital Bangladesh by 2021 to ensure services at peoples' doorsteps. A total number of 4554 Union Digital Centers (UDCs) have been established in the Union Parishads. Since UDC is the storehouse of information, from beginning to end of the appliance of ICT, people can easily access to any information smoothly and quickly with a lowest cost [9]. The following services and information can be provided through UDC.

- Online Birth Registration

- Health-related Information

- Agriculture oriented Information

- Different types of government forms

- Government circulars and notices

- Online university admission

- Information about law enforcing agencies

- Information about admission test in all levels (school, university etc.)

- Examination results

- Population census data entry

- E-government service

- Citizenship certificate

- Weather forecasting/Natural disaster information

- Social safety network-VGD, VGF, Kabikha, Kabita etc. information

- Land-related information- registration, mutation, record, survey etc.

- Family planning Information

- Mobile Banking service

- Employment & Job Information

- Voter ID card & election-related various information

- Information related to all sorts of development activities taken in local & central level

- Livelihood-related information service
- Government information service
- Computer compose, printing, scanning & laminating
- Photographic service
- Photocopier service
- Internet Browsing & E-mail Service – connectivity with information super high way
- Video conferencing
- Mobile Telephone Service
- Tax-related information- income tax, VAT, excise duty etc.
- Business & recreation information
- Various types of government forms download
- Multimedia education for children
- Blood test
- Sugar test
- Arsenic test
- Soil test
- Telemedicine service
- Knowledge repository service
- Traditional library service
- Online knowledge bank service
- Pregnancy test
- Acid test
- Instant money transfer
- Tourism information service
- Passport and visa processing

Besides those services, present government is highly determined to provide all sort of necessary information electronically available for all grass root people. The digitalization process is going take a new shape in rural areas of Bangladesh. UDCs are playing the roles of intermediary in the massive task of digitalization by availing all the digital accessories at the doorsteps of rural community.

Problems of UDC in Bangladesh

1. Delay in Providing Service

This is a common problem for all types of information centers. As UDCs are newly funded project of the government, these one-stop information centers are to stumble on the way for different reasons. Delay in providing service is likely to occur for low internet speed when some services are being offered through online means. As the manpower working behind these information centers is insufficient, it is definitely a difficult task to manage so many people at a time.

2. The Indifference of the Staff Members in Providing Services

As a limited number of staff members serve a great number of users at a time, they often show indifference and inertia [10]. This behavioral pattern of the UDC personnel hampers the normal functions of the information centers.

3. Demand Heavy Charges in Providing Services

As the officers in charge and other staff members are ill-paid and they do not get fixed salary from the government, they mostly depend on the service charges taken from the users. Information officers sometimes demand a heavy amount of charge from the users. This trend makes the rural inhabitants indifferent to the UDCs.

4. Lack of Knowledge and Skills of the Staff Members or Information Officers

Skilled and knowledgeable staff members and information officers can manage the task of massive digitization effectively [11]. Most of the UDCs are run by the stuffs having little knowledge on ICT and other digital services. The unskilled information officers and imprudent staffs fail to operate the UDCs properly and users are to get frustrated with the poor quality of services.

5. Quality of Provided Services

The quality of provided services of UDCs is still not up to the expected level for meeting up the information needs and other needs of the rural people. Most of the UDCs do not have sufficient number of digital equipments. Users do not always get quality services because of the poor infra-structural frameworks of the UDCs.

6. Bureaucratic Problems

The bureaucratic problem can be the crucial factor in the implementation of the digitization process and the user's participation and accessibility can be affected seriously. This type of problem hampers the normal activities of UDCs.

7. The Unfriendly Behavior of the Staff Members

The unfriendly behavior of the staff members is a serious problem that hampers the normal participation of the rural inhabitants and they lose interest for UDCs. Many rural dwellers have reported that they are often treated in an unwelcoming manner and for the reason they do not feel like going to the UDCs always.

8. Lack of Electronic Resources

In order to provide digital services, sufficient electronic resources are required to make the task of digitization process even better. However, most of the UDCs do not possess sufficient electronic resources. The number of computers, scanner, photocopier and other electronic equipment are not sufficient to meet up the needs of many users at a time.

9. Lack of Balanced Book Collection

Every information center must have a balanced collection of books to serve the user community properly. Though these UDCs do not have traditional library facilities for the expansion of education among the rural people, UDCs did not take any pragmatic step to provide a balanced collection of the book for the rural inhabitants.

10. Lack of Planning in Providing Services

A fruitful planning can make an institution interactive and useful for the attainment of its objectives. To make UDC a fruitful institution, a sound planning is required for the dissemination of information to the doorsteps of rural people.

Recommendations

Union Information and Service Center (UDC) is a platform for the rural people where they can get the necessary information and other services when necessary. It has become a commonplace for all rural people where they can get both government and private information services at a lower cost. Through the UDC, modern technologies have reached to the root level of our country due to initiative of present government. Different classes of people can get different types of benefits from the UDC. Students, women, educated unemployed person, farmers, teachers, journalists, employees -government or private, doctors, businessmen, residential/non-residential Bangladeshi people and many other classes of people can get

benefits from UDC as per their requirements [12]. Some recommendations are given below to increase the benefits of the people by improving UDCs.

1. Development of Infra-Structural Facility

In order provide more up to date and proactive services to the rural community, government should give importance to the infrastructural facilities of UDCs. These centers should facilitate the rural people with user-friendly environment so that they can feel ease to make their approach fulfilled in due time [13]. UDCs do not own sufficient ICT facilities, governmental services and other services. Government should take necessary steps for the development of infrastructural facilities of these information centers.

2. Human Resource Development

The government should pay more attention to human resources development program to make UDCs effective institutions for the rural communities. Human is the main driving force of any development project. Qualified and skilled human resources are the key factors for all development activities [14]. In order to run UDCs fruitfully, people working behind or in front of these institutions should get proper education and training programs.

3. Uninterrupted and Continuous Power Supply

The country usually suffers from a chronic shortage of electricity. To make the UDC worth visiting centers, uninterrupted and continuous power supply is a must.

4. Budget Allocation

UDCs are still suffering from sufficient amount of budget that would be required to implement Digital Bangladesh. Every year our government should make a proper financial allocation for the smooth functioning of these one-stop information and service centers.

5. Institutional Capacity

UDCs are still lacking the institutional capacity for the implementation, organization, and management of different technological facilities and other facilities. UDCs should have enough space for the good organization of digital equipment and provide accessibility for all users frequently.

6. Robust Internet Connectivity

To gets the full advantages from UDCs, a robust internet connection is a must. But the present internet speed in the UDC is very low. The users are to wait too long for a simple query. Generally, EDGE or GPRS modem is used in the UDCs which are very slow in providing high speed of the internet. Rather it can be used 3G/WIFI modem or broadband connection for providing quick and speedy e-services among the rural people

7. Locally Relevant and Local Language Content

Though the new media and internet open up the user to a world of information and knowledge, very little is in the local language and much of the content is not found relevant to the local context.

As most of the people living in the rural areas do not understand the English language properly, the UDC authority should make all the relevant contents in an understandable form and language.

8. Positive Mentality

The positive attitude among service seekers is needed towards UDCs for massive development and success. It has a great impact on the success of UDCs.

9.Trained Entrepreneurs

Trained entrepreneurs are very much necessary for the smooth functioning of UDC. They are the lifeblood of UDC as the overall performance of UDC mainly depends upon the well-trained entrepreneur's. If they are trained enough to provide the e-service according to customers' need, the UDC must be useful and effective for all.

10. Publicity Program

UDC members should sometimes arrange publicity programs for the orientations of service facilities among the rural people. This type of activity can make the people feel interested in the information services and information centers at a great extent.

11. Handsome Salaries for the Staff Members

To make the staff members of UDCs more dedicated to their duties and responsibilities, a handsome salary can make them more mindful of their jobs and they will feel enthusiastic about service delivery.

12. Awareness Building & Promotional Activities

People at the grassroots level are not well aware of the functions of UDC. They do not at all about what facilities are provided from UDC. As a result, two third of the UDCs are not running well. So, this is high time to take promotional activities to make the purpose of UDC successful. Local political leaders' like- UP chairman, Members, Teachers, Government Officials and mass media can play an active role in this regard

13. Make UDC as Center for All Services

Geographically, UDC has the potential to become the center for all services. As it is established in Union Parishad (UP), it can be a growth center at the local level and lower tier of administration. Rural level development activities can be monitored through UDC. People can easily get one-stop services in time from UDC. So UDC can be made as a one-stop service center for both government and non-government activities.

14. E-education Service

UDC can conduct online admission support, admission advertisement, application form, payment of admission fees, exam date and time, qualification and result of different educational institutions and so on. For the promotion of e-education in the rural areas, UDC can play a dominant role.

15. Other Necessary Proposals

The officials may be offered some sorts of incentive packages for additional contribution in e-service implementation. It has a positive impact on motivation and satisfaction of the employees. There should be a provision of citizens "participation and empowerment" in service concerning decision-making process.

To maintains the quality of service and quality of experience by provisioning Network Management System, a consultation forum with the conscious rural citizens can make the UDC worthy of making info- literate people and the key enablers for the creation of knowledge-based society [15].

Conclusion

Union Information and Service Centers (UISC) or Union Digital Centers are the sole information agencies that help the rural inhabitants to get the

real information service to be the active citizens of the state. Union Digital Centers (UDCs) are set up by the government across the country ushered in a new hope for helping the rural people to develop their life and livelihood through providing information services. UDC's mainly provides information's related to different sectors like agriculture, governmental functions, health, education etc. by using e-Technologies. It aims at providing expedite digital services on demand according to the need of the rural populace. As a one-stop Union Digital Centers UDCs are contributing much to the massive development of socio-economic growth in the rural areas of Bangladesh. UDC essentially helps to reduce the inherent inconsistencies that occur in the process of manual operational procedure during the interactions between different stakeholders. The prime goal of Union Digital Center lays in increasing interactions between government and the citizen for efficient and quality service delivery and enhancing transparency and accountability of the government and enabling poverty alleviation initiatives at a massive scale.

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