

Union Digital Centers (UDCs): Roles, Challenges and potentialities

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Abstract

Union Digital Center (UDC) is a unique step of the government at the use of ICT in the systems of local government in order to strengthen it and to ensure e-services at the doorsteps of people. Union digital centers are newly established one-stop service outlets operating at all 4,554+ Union Parishads of the country. The study tries to examine the roles of UDCs in delivering services. It is based on secondary data. The key objectives of UDCs are to ensure easy access of common people to government, commercial and social information and services; create ICT infrastructure at all Union Parishads and to increase its efficiency through prompt delivery of information and other day to day services. UDC provides 3 types of services 1) Information Services which includes; Information related agriculture, health, education etc. 2) Commercial Services which includes; Computer and English language learning training, photocopy, scanning, email, internet browsing, talking with Skype etc. and 3) Government Services which includes; online birth registration, death certificate, citizenship certificate, character certificate, download different types of government forms etc. This study then identified challenges and potentials of UDCs. The challenges are lack of equipment, slow internet speed, inadequate manpower, load shedding etc. The study further gave some recommendations based on its potentialities such as; alternative power supply, training for the entrepreneurs, availability of essential equipment, and internet access through fiber optics and so on.

Keywords: Union Digital Centers (Udcs), A2I, 2018, Union Parishad, Roles, Challenges And Potentialities.

INTRODUCTION

Electronic governance is a common phenomenon all over the world which that has been developed in the late 1990's (Grönlund & Horan 2005). This modern dimension of public administration is the latest addition for providing better services to the doorsteps of people with shortest period of time and this practice has been practicing over the world Uddin (Uddin 2012). At the same time this mechanism also been designed with the assistance of all stakeholder (Das & Chandrashekar 2007; Rowley 2011) so that Government are trying to ensure citizen's quicker and hassle-free access to the service delivery and ensure better efficiency, transparency, accountability and participation in the government process by using the modern Information Communication Technology (ICT) (Karim 2010; Ntulo & Otike 2013; Kettani & Moulin 2014; Apleni & Smuts 2020).

Being inspired by the success of other countries and to keep pace with the developing world, Government of Bangladesh has taken unprecedented initiatives to encourage the role of information technology in improving public services (Islam & Grönlund 2011; UN 2017; Sarker et. al. 2018). The National ICT Policy of 2002 emphasizes on e-governance, declaring that the Government of Bangladesh intends to use ICT systems

that has been helping to ameliorate the government efficacy, diminish waste of government resources, maximum use of government resources, augment plan and program, and increase the delivery system of government services of the public organization (ICT policy 2002; Planning Commission 2010).

The Government states to implement ICT systems to deliver all over the Bangladesh that may applied to extended different government services all over the Bangladesh specially the rural area. (A2I 2011; Hasan 2014; New Age 2018). To ensure services at peoples' doorsteps, Bangladesh government has introduced Union Digital Center Centre (UDC) which has been considered as one-stop ICT service center which has been established in the rural area under the supervision of Union chairman and UNO (Mahiuddin & Hoque 2013; Shahnewaz et al. 2015; Begum & Khair 2017; Das 2019).

There are another information based service, that has been very renowned and called Telecenter, has been operating under private entities all over the Bangladesh especially in the remote area (Shamim & Raihan 2016; Faruqi & Siddiquee 2017, March) and brings govt. services within reach of every citizen in terms of

proximity and cost (Saleheen 2015). As UDC turned in to be UDC,

At present A total number of 4,501 UISCs was established at all last tier in Bangladesh, whereas all of the Union digital center haven been start functioning in 2010 end of the November in order to turn into 'Digital Bangladesh' in reality. Now it has been operating as Union Digital Center (UDC) and the number has been reached more than 5286 (A2I 2020). Most of the services have been providing under one roof through one-stop shop globally so that citizens can get various services staying at a single storehouse without facing any discrimination in terms of service delivery.

In recent times, one-stop shops or some called single window or community-based service hub through government portals and websites to ease the service by reducing corruption and hassles which has been operating more than 80 countries all over the world. (Hasanuzzaman 2019).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Study Objectives

The key objective of the paper is to identify role of UDCs in ensuring e-services at the local level.

The specific objectives are:

1. To assess the different services of Union digital center including government service, commercial service and information services available
3. To identify challenges faced by UDCs.
4. To identify prospects of UDCs

Significance of the Study

Although Bangladesh has been doing very well in terms of reducing poverty comparatively in 2018 where 21.8% population living below poverty line, and human development index but till most of the people live in local area in the developing country like Bangladesh (ADB 2018; WB 2020). They have to go to town or urban area to take various services of Government (MEF 2012; Hoque et al. 2019;). Nowadays Government is trying to ensure different services in the local area by establishing Digital Union Centers (UDCs) all over the Bangladesh to fulfill the citizen demand and make them satisfied (Rahman 2017; Rahman 2019; UNDP 2019, Faroqi & Collings, 2020). Since the beginning of the establishment of UDCs, these institutions are playing an important role by providing different types of government, commercial and information services (Rahman 2016; Bakshi & Rahman 2016;). As a result people of local area are now can save both money and time (Rahman 2019). UDCs have brought positive changes in the life of rural people (A2I 2015;). But there are some challenges faced by the UDCs (Kumar & Kim 2017; Nowrin 2018). This study tried to identify the challenges as well as

potentialities of the UDCs which will play an important role for further study and development.

METHODOLOGY

Sources of Data Collection

The study is based on the secondary source.

Methods of Data Collection

Content analysis: The method of this study is Content analysis. It is essential to know expert opinion. It is the secondary sources of data collection. Literature and research documents are analyzed to get a clear conception on e-governance and services providing by UISC at local level.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Union Information and Service Centre (UISC) is one of those crucial endeavor in order to bring unprecedented opportunities for the destitute rural citizen making better accessible in government information services through Information and communications technology. UISCs have unlocked a new horizon of opportunity for mass people in Bangladesh. It has contribution to empower rural people through access to information like agriculture, health, education etc. (Hoque & Mahiuddin 2013).

The government has formed Union Digital Center (UDC) under the PPP modeled tale-center in all Union Parishad (UP) complexes as part of its reduction of digital divide & public e-service delivery strategy (Hoque and Sorwar 2015; Islam and Rahman 2019). The government initiatives on ICT based service delivery system and tried. Citizens are getting various kinds of government, commercial and information services through UDCs. These services are now easily accessible for the rural local people. Thus, UDCs are saving time, money and cost of the service recipients. (Ullah, 2016).

It focused on rural digitalization process and introduced different sectors which are providing their services under the digitalization process (Bakshi & Rahman 2016). Although UISCs was infant stage but that situation has dramatically changed with the passing of time as Union Information Center (UISC) turned in to be Union Digital center (UDC). Therefore it is facing some crucial challenges.

There are many challenges faced by Union Digital Centers like uninterrupted electricity, high speed Internet, entrepreneur's technical skills to provide desired services and maintaining coordination among the local elected representative, UNO and getting support from local administration (Ayachi et al. 2016).

Knowledge Gap

Though various studies are done on the UDCs, the problems and potentialities are yet to be discovered. All the UDCs in the country are not providing the same services as the UDCs are facing different problems like lack of machineries, better internet services, interface of union parishad, poor infrastructure and so on. This study tries to discover the inherent problem faced by the UDCs and potentialities of UDCs which are very essential for ensuring better services of the rural people.

DISCUSSION

Establishment of UDC

The commensurate if of UDC journey was not very old in Bangladesh. It was started in November, 2009 under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 30 Union Parishads with the collaboration of Public Private Partnership concept. After that the number of UDCs became 4051 and started serving in the rural area. This project was funded by the UNDP under the direct supervision of Prime Minister's office in Bangladesh. (Mamun 2018).

Partners of UDC

Important service partners are involved public bank like Sonali bank, Jontata bank and Rupali bank. At the same time private bank also involved like Dutch Bangla bank, Mercantile bank and bank Asia. It also incorporates life insurance company, telecommunication companies, non-governmental organization like, British Council. Government agencies including, cabinet division, Bangladesh Computer Council and Cyber Café Association Bangladesh.

The UDC has been running with the partnership of newer agencies to make them sustainable services at the local level in Bangladesh. Both the Government and UDC entrepreneurs are getting benefitted each other to improve public service delivery at the grassroots level.

Objectives of UDCs

The key objectives of UDCs are to ensure easy access of common people to government, commercial and social information and services; establish ICT infrastructure at all local level and to increase its efficiency through prompt delivery of information and other day to day services (Daily Star 2019). It also provides a supportive environment for creation of local entrepreneurs; ensures free flow of information for empowering rural community; and creates a vibrant, knowledge-based UP. Free flow of information is the pre-condition of people's empowerment. Especially it can change the standard of living of the backward people (A2I 2018). For this purpose, Ministry of Local Government has taken initiative to set up UDC in the union level to ensure information service for the grassroots people's door steps (Daily Sun, 2017). UDC means Union Digital Centre where all sorts online and

off line (information like-health, agriculture, education, land, market condition, weather, passport, employment, M-banking, internet connectivity, printing, compose, scanning, photocopier etc.) facilities are provided to the people (A2I, 2018). We can denote it as an information cell (store house of information) in rural level and pre-condition of implementing of e-Governance as well as Digital Bangladesh. The whole world is considered as a global village as we are living at the age of globalization (Georgiadou 1995). So, free flow of information and application of ICT are two pre-requirements of being connected with global village as well as empowering people. UDC is the combination of communication technology and information where people can get connected with the whole world or the global village. UDC is such an important place where every people even the poor villagers/grassroots people in remote place can be benefited. UDC is the one of the important tool of implementing Digital Bangladesh.

By analyzing the activities, the objectives of the UDCs can be summarized as (Asad, 2012)

- To ensure access to information and easy way of getting services
- To assist government and general people in service delivery process
- To maintain reliable and diversified services for local rural people
- To attract and convince local people in public service delivery

Operations of UDC

Each UDC is one of the popular institution that has been run under the by two young, dedicated local entrepreneurs, a male and a female, those are being working self-employed and motivated under the supervision of a local elected representative headed by UP Chairman.

One of the main concerns for the UDC is the area not receiving any government financial support. Deputy Commissioner's Office has set a guideline to appoint entrepreneurs in order to getting proper computer training so that the entrepreneur become very skilled in order to conduct their daily activities. At the same time, they shall be able to provide all kind of services among the rural people (JAICA 2015).

They invested in the center and in order to ensure their profit maximization between the elected body and entrepreneurs. Local Government Division coordinates with Cabinet Division and BCC were responsible to ensure the basic ICT setup which has been included computers, laptops, printers, multimedia projector, digital camera, webcam and solar panel. The entrepreneurs are able to working independently to set up supplementary facilities to support business improvement. At the same time, it is also ensuring the social sustainability of the center that has been working

to deliver the government different services. People are used to go the Union Digital center to fulfill their individual demand. The service provider are providing different services through ICT. Forexample, someone want to get access in government website in order to make a print copy of the application form.

Management of UDC

According to UDC Circular (2013), the UDC committee shall be including of 7-9 members represents that will manage called committee of the UDC. The Chairman of concern Union Porished will be the head of this committee. The duration of this committee is 2(two) years. One-third of the members of this committee shall be women. The UP secretary I responsible to provide all types of institutional and other assistance to the committee. The managing committee is assigned to render the following Activities.

- Choosing of local entrepreneurs by discussing with UNO.
- Managing different equipment's of UDC.
- Taking decision about the rate of various services provided by UDC.
- Helping in preparing and maintaining different income and expenditure reports.
- Organizing at least one meeting in every month to review all of the UDC activities.
- Incorporating local people to talk about their problem.

Services of UDC

It is clear that that UDC are being providing 3 types of services through the theUdc CENTER (A2I, 2018):

- Information Services,
- Commercial Services, and
- Government Services.

Information Services

These services have been providing to common people on the basis of their demand and creating awareness in favor of Government. Information related agriculture, health service, education services including school, college, and universities, law and human rights, tourism related information like hotel booking. It is also helping to consult with the doctor through telemedicine and getting appointment with specialized doctor.

Commercial services:

Commercial service is one of the very frequent and popular service in the UDC center among the rural people. People can take various services like computer typing, print copy, photocopy, English language training, computer training, internet browsing, video calling, e mailing are the popular services and mobile banking and bank account opening are also very popular right now at UDC.

Government Services

Government Services includes following services like online civil birth registration, death certificate, citizenship certificate, character certificate, government circulars and notices, online university information, exam results, population related data , etc.

Key Services of UDCs

Public exam results:

Different public exams like Secondary School Certificate, Higher Secondary School Certificate are now pebbling in government official websites where as student can accessed and searched from UDCs. It is very easy for the destitute people who do not have any internet facilities. At the same time they can make print copy of their result simultaneously and apply in the education institution.

Government forms download

Different types of Government forms like passport; land mutation form etc. Area now amiable and local people are able to download or viewed before submitting at relevant offices for the specific purpose in the UDC.

Birth and death registration certificate:

In Bangladesh birth registration and death registration are one f crucial for all of the people. here people can apply for their birth and death certificate from the UDC center.

Online university admission data entry

At present time student can apply in the university through online. t but in the rural area some people do not have computer and internet access. As result they can take this service from the UDC center at any time.

Employment information

All of the job circular are available online searched in the UDC and candidate apply for the job.

E-mail and Internet browsing

Rural people and student are able to internet brows at any time from the UDC.

Computer Training

There are some UDC entrepreneur are providing computer training in the UDC center..It is helping to make out student and young people become use to in the computer related knowledge.

Video conferencing

Rural people can make video call with their relative those are living abroad. At the same time the can sent any e mail as well.

Mobile Banking

Mobile banking and opening bank account are on f the common service in the UDC center. They are able to making money from this sector. People are conducting financial transaction and rural people are able to transect their money remotely. Now a days this services is very popular as it is very user friendly and available in all over the Bangladesh. atthe same time rural people can open their bank account like Bank Asiaare available in the rural are through UDC.

Miscellaneous

It includesscanning, spiral binding, mobile call serving, arethey very common in the rural area. Even some of the UDC also are doing online business. However, the popular income generating services are:

- Birth Certificate
- Computer compose, printing, scanning & laminating
- Photographic service
- Photocopier service
- Email
- Internet browsing
- Computer training
- Mobile Banking
- Photography
- Job information
- Voter ID card & election related various information

CHALLENGES

Absence of specific guideline for entrepreneur selection

Processes to select entrepreneurs (issuance of advertisement, competitive examsetc.), required technical proficiency of entrepreneurs, distribution of UDC profits between theentrepreneurs, tenure of agreement between UP and entrepreneurs are not clearly defined.

Lack of space in the UP premises for UDCs accommodation

The UDCs have to share rooms with UP chairman or Secretaries. Entrepreneurcannot keep their devices properly which hampers to provide proper service to the people in time.

Influences in the selection of entrepreneurs

UP Chairman influences the recruitment process. They try to recruit the candidates who arepersonally known to them. As a result,concerned UP Secretaries just follow or serve the interests of those Chairs rather to serve the interest of people.

Lack of investment for replacing idle equipment

During establishment the government gave necessary ICT equipment for the operations ofUDCs. Being a public-private initiative it is expected that the entrepreneurs would meetoperational cost and repair idle equipment from their regular earning. Some entrepreneurs expect that government and UPs would support them to buy new equipment and repair idle ones. Becauseof their expectation, a considerable number of equipment are left idle for a long time.

Challenges faced by UDCs

Slow Internet speed

Sometime operationsof UDCs disrupt frequently and public services delayed because of slow internet connectivity. Central server is found congested often for which service recipients suffer from getting quick services.

Load shedding, inadequate alternative power supply

UDCs face power shortage load-shedding that disrupt running of computers, printers and photocopy mechanism (Rahman 2016). In most of the UDCs has solar panels as an alternative source of powers. But, solar panel is not viable source for running printers and photocopiers because of their low voltages. Generators, IPS are not available in all UDCs.

Interfere of UP chairman and membersON UDCs

Sometimes UP Chairs and Secretaries interfere in purchasing materials of UDC. It hampers to maximize profit of the entrepreneurs.

Insecurity faced by entrepreneurs

In some cases agreement renewal dependson the wish and preference of newly elected chairmen. Because of short agreement tenure, the entrepreneurs are reluctant to reinvestment inmaintaining of equipment (computer, photocopy machine, projector etc.)whichdisrupts to provide quality services.

Lack of publicity

Because of limitedpublicity, local people are not aware about the service provisions of UDCs. Income of UDCs would increaseconsiderably, If service provisions can be expanded through proper publicity.

Lack of female entrepreneurs

Female take this entrepreneurship as apart time work. They have moreinvolvements in their family activities and less involvement in UDC's work which is a great barrier for women empowerment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Regarding policy reform

- Transparent and competitive entrepreneur selection process

- Tenure for the entrepreneurs should be long
- Financial assistance from UPs can be given
- Monitoring guideline for entrepreneurs
- Standardization of service charges

To enhance UDCs' performance

- Separate complex for UDC's needs to be established to provide their services properly.
- Interference of the UP Chairman or Secretary should be reduced for smooth functioning.
- Uniformity should be ensured in the activities of all UDCs.
- Instant Power Supply (IPS) should be installed as alternative source of power for ensuring better power supply.
- Highspeed internet connectivity should be ensured.
- Need based training should be organized for entrepreneurs so that they can provide best services to the people.
- Old and damaged equipment should be replaced with new ones.
- The government fees and service charge should be mentioned properly and separately.
- Incentive should be given for the Service Providers and Officials for additional contribution in e-service implementation.
- Special provision needed for the appointment of female Service Provider.
- Campaign by making, leaflet, yard-meeting, advertisement through cable network at local level and broadcast of TVC on BTV at national level should be arranged, especially the issues of cost minimization through taking services from UDCs.

Prospects of UDC

- Most of the people of our country live on the villages. So, it is quite impossible to provide different public services from central offices. UDC has given the opportunity to provide all sorts of services from the root level to the grassroots people.
- Now only certain numbers of services are provided from UDC. All other services like data & information related to land, passport, national ID card, voter ID, banking service, library facilities etc can be provided from UDC.
- The people of local level will get all facilities from one place (one stop service) that is UDC.
- Time and hassle will be reduced in accessing government and private services.
- Closer ties will be established between the local administrations and the citizens through creation of service oriented UPs

CONCLUSION

The innovative idea that has been taken by the Government of Bangladesh of providing e-services at the local level by the various activities of Union Digital Center is really praiseworthy. Union Digital Center is providing various Information, Commercial and Government Services for the local people those services are normally not available in the local area. But at present time, rural people are getting various services without going town which help them to save both time and money. Although this institutions has been facing Various challenges like absence of specific guideline for entrepreneur selection, lack of space in the UP premises for UDCs accommodation, Slow Internet speed, load shedding, inadequate alternative power supply etc. But Government is trying to solve all the barriers faced by UDCs. For this reason Government is giving special attention in UDCs. The services of UDCs are improving gradually and the rural people are getting better services from these digital centers.

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