

Role of DESC (District e-Service Centre) in Promoting e-Governance in Bangladesh: A Case Study of Netrokona District e-Service Centre

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Abstract: The core objective of e-governance is to provide services to people in a less time consuming, easily accessible and corruption free process using internet based platforms. Considering its positive aspects, the government of Bangladesh is trying to assure best possible use of modern technologies in rendering government services to the people which also resembles their commitment in upgrading the country as a digital one. Establishment of District e-Service Centers (DESCs) across the country is among the major steps towards promoting e-governance. The DESCs of Bangladesh are using modern information technology for service delivery and information dissemination. Introduction of an e-service center in Netrokona made some government services easily accessible and cost effective for the recipients in addition to that, the system reduced discrepancies and assured more accountability in service delivery process. Lack of updated data base for service recipients, lack of proper tracking system and lack of feedback receiving option are some of the major limitations existing at current DESCs. Moreover, some services like bill payment, telemedicine, e-education, etc. were expected to be there but not available at the moment. Interruption in power supply, poor coverage of internet, insufficient manpower and equipments and poor literacy on information technology are some of the major challenges faced by DESC of Netrokona. Initiatives to fulfill the lacking and assistance to overcome the challenges are need of time for a more effective district e-service center. Continuous research by service providers and academicians are necessary for better e-service delivery.

Key words: e-service, e-governance, good governance, public service delivery, DESC

I. INTRODUCTION

The world has experienced a major paradigm shift in the field of governance. The new paradigm is named as e-governance. It is a great way to uphold the democratic purposes of the citizens. To serve this purpose, a linier relationship among common people, civil society groups, enterprise owners and government officials is necessary. The old age traditional system of public service delivery has been failing to serve people's need on time. A continuous transition from territorial and hierarchical governance system to an adaptive and technology based governance system has been observed for most part of the world (Soavolainen et al, 2004). Following the global trend, the government of Bangladesh took a vision to digitalized Bangladesh by 2021.

Basically it was included in the election manifesto of the present Awami League ruling government. District e-Service Centers (DESC) are established to promote effective public service delivery using information and communication technology. The government of Bangladesh has taken this project jointly with UNDP under Access to Information Program. United Nations Development program (UNDP) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) technically assisted government to implement this program and this is run directly from Prime Minister's Office. To check how effectively the DESCs are serving the purpose of e-governance and to find out the barriers the DESCs are facing, an in depth inquiry is necessary. The findings of the research may help to figure out the limitations and lacking in the current service delivery system and can come up with ideas to improve the service delivery system. This research therefore aims to critically analyze the role and activity of DESC in promoting e-governance in Bangladesh. Because of limitations in time and resources, only a single DESC which is DESC of Netrokona district has been selected for conducting the research. The researchers believe that the findings from Netrokona will help to assess the overall performance of DESCs in Bangladesh to a great extent. The researchers do not deny the urgency of large scale, country wide and more in depth research on this phenomenon also.

II. OBJECTIVES

The research has three objectives:

- i. To check the effectiveness of DESC in promoting e-governance through e-service delivery in Bangladesh.
- ii. To identify the problems, challenges and barriers to effective service delivery by DESCs
- iii. To come up with recommendations for a better service delivery system

III. METHODOLOGY

In order to conduct the research, the researchers interviewed government officials from field level to higher authority level along with 50 service recipients of DESC, Netrokona. The government officials were selected through purposive sampling which is purposively and intentionally selecting a

respondent according to the type of information required for any study. One the other hand, service recipients were selected through random sampling that means they were selected randomly without following any criteria. The interviewees were asked mostly open ended questions for the inquiry that means they had the privilege to answer the questions elaborately and researchers tried to understand the reality from the perspective of the respondents. Despite of that, supportive secondary data were collected from government websites, different journals, books and newspaper articles. The field data was first processed by editing and checking to ensure that everything is alright. Analysis of the output/data involved describing, summarizing and interpreting the data.

Understanding “E-Governance”

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), (cited in vikaspedia.in) defines e-governance as

“Governance refers to the exercise of political, economic and administrative authority in the management of country’s affair, including citizen’s articulation of their interests and exercise of their legal rights and obligations. E-governance may be understood as the performance of this governance via the electronic medium in order to facilitate an efficient, speedy and transparent process of disseminating information to the public and other agencies, and for performing government administration activities”.

Interactions in E-Governance

Bacus(2001) in his e-governance model, mentioned three types of interactions in e-governance, they are:

- a. G2G (Government to Government): means the process where the relationship is maintained among the local, national and regional government and also with the foreign government organizations. Here cooperation among the various government organizations is maintained effectively and is mandatory.
- b. G2B (Government to Business): includes communication between government agencies and private business organizations.
- c. G2C (Government to Citizen): refers to the relationship between government and citizens. Here e-governance permits government organizations to deal with common people. By this way accountability and transparency can improve.

Key Principles of E-Governance:

European Union has established its own key principles of e-governance. It includes: Universal access to information, openness and transparency, participation, equality, accountability, effectiveness (reduced transaction costs), interoperability, coherence and quality and protection of

privacy, consumer rights, and intellectual property rights as the key principle of e-governance (UNDP, 2003).

State of E-Governance in Bangladesh

According to United Nations e-Government Survey Report 2020, Bangladesh is stated in the High EGDI (e-Government Development Index) category. In the report of 2016, the country belonged to middle EGDI category. The survey report shows that significant improvement has been achieved for Bangladesh in e-governance but the country is still very far from an ideal e-governance status as it ranked 119th with a score of 0.5189 among all the countries. Besides, it has dropped four notches in ranking compare to year 2019 as in that year, Bangladesh ranked 115th among the countries. This report also shows that among 10 South Asian countries of the world Bangladesh ranked in number 5 at e-government development index. The country is still lagging behind Sri Lanka, India, Bhutan and Maldives, that indicates that the country has to go a long to reach its desirable position in e-governance.

Although the situation of e-governance in Bangladesh is not up the mark, some initiatives from the government are showing strong commitment for an enhanced e-governance system for the country. The government of Bangladesh is trying to improve the ICT facilities to ensure people’s right to know information, right to have public services smoothly along with ensuring transparency, accountability, decreased corruption rate etc. To make Digital Bangladesh was highly prioritized in the election manifesto of 2008 election of Awami League. It promised to build Digital Bangladesh by 2021 in the year of nation’s golden jubilee. According to their definition of Digital Bangladesh it implies broad use of computers and modern technologies in terms of fulfilling their promises in poverty reduction and development.

According to the paper named ‘Journey towards a digital Bangladesh’ (2011), by Ministry of Finance in materializing the dream of establishing a Digital Bangladesh four elements have been identified as priority. These are – governance, education, citizen service and use of ICT in trade and commerce. That is why it took several initiatives like promoting e-service, e-governance, e-democracy and e-commerce. Already Bangladesh has achieved startling progress in the arena of e-commerce.

IV. MAIN FUNCTION AND ACTIVITIES OF DESC, NETROKONA

Common Functions of the District E-service Center (DESC):

- a. Receiving official letters and applications and enter them into NESS (National e-Service System).
- b. Receiving application for *Porchas* (Records of right for land) and delivering certified copies of *Porchas*.
- c. Receiving application for “Want to Know Information”

- d. Providing facilities for the service recipients for tracking system. (Absent in the Netrokona District E-service Center).

Besides these tasks, the DESC officer and staffs of Netrokona district perform some other activities; they are

- a. Maintaining an “up to date” district portal www.netrokona.gov.bd
- b. Publishing several notices to district portal
- c. Publishing daily programs to district portal
- d. Maintaining digital attendance system to the office.

Some other activities those DESCs in Bangladesh usually perform but absent in DESC of Netrokona

- a. Maintaining Bill-paying website
- b. Providing Tele-medicine service
- c. Maintaining Primary school monitoring system
- d. Maintaining Group SMS system
- e. Maintaining E-file management

Number of service recipients per day:

According to the service providers and the record keeper, around 180-220 people come to take services from them. It is an average number based on the record of one week and this number varies. The number of service recipients has increased compared to that of from the previous traditional system according to the officials.

V. LEVEL OF TRANSPARENCY, EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS

The researchers have following findings regarding the transparency, efficiency and effectiveness of the DESC of Netrokona

a) Reduced Corruption:

The e-service centre has reduced corruption to a great extent especially in *Porcha* delivery service as third party cannot play any role in the present system. The recipients have to give only the fee set by the government. Some recipients are still confused about the transparency status because of the absence of e-literacy. So many people are not properly aware of the e-service system and information technology. For this reason they come through third party and pay extra amount. Most of them perceive that, this extra payment is going to the pocket of the employees. The service providers are also aware of this allegation but they claimed that they do not get enough time to make them literate about the technology and process as there is shortage of manpower. Moreover, they are disturbed about this allegation as they are trying to be transparent in their service delivery system but not getting their expected applause from the service receivers. They annested e-literacy gap for this misunderstanding. Among the 50 respondents, 38 persons are satisfied with the overall transparency level.

b) Greater openness of local government assured:

Greater openness of local government has been ensured through the activities of the DC office. Online notice/regulations and the schedule of the daily program of the DC office are updated regularly in the website of Netrokona DC office. Through this regular update of the schedule of the activities people are becoming aware of the activities and the progress of the various ongoing services. To make it easier, a facebook page named DC Netrokona has been opened where people can raise various problems and issues and can get suggestions for expected services.

c) Helped timely attendance of all the officials:

By e-attendance system time of entry of the employees are recorded. Every employee of DC office has their own smart ID card and they enter into the office by scanning that card in a machine which is situated beside District Commissioner’s room and then the DC gets notification from the web site of DESC. They are accountable to give reasons if they are late in the office.

d) Timely delivery of services needs improvement:

The service recipients come to take mainly 4 types of services from DESC. The services are- receiving civic application, receiving official application, information slips application and *Porcha* application. The first three applications are processed through the e-services delivery system which is called National e-Service System (NESS). The *Porcha* application does not fall under NESS but the delivery time of the information slip application and *Porcha* are generated automatically through an automatic machine named POS machine. Generally it takes up to 7 days to deliver the services but sometimes it takes more time because of interrupted internet and electricity services. Among the 50 service recipients 41 people got timely delivery of their services which is 82% of total service recipients.

e) More Cost effective:

The service recipients do not have to pay any bill for civic and official applications. But for *Porcha* and information slip application, they have to pay only the fee fixed by government. No extra cost has to be paid because of the absence of middle man. In previous system the service recipients have to pay several times for getting the services and have to go through the middle man that used to cost them a lot. On the other hand they had to come several times due to untimely delivery of services. For these reasons the service was not cost effective. But at present system, the service recipients are satisfied. Among 50 service recipients, 45 persons were satisfied with the government determined fee, the rest 5 were not satisfied.

VI. SOME LACKING IN CURRENT SYSTEM

The researchers found following lacking in the current service delivery system

a) *No scope for tracking system and SMS alert system:*

There is no scope to track the state of the application of the service recipients as e-tracking system is absent in the DESC of Netrokona. People also do not get any notification through SMS when their services get ready.

b) *No feedback from service recipient:*

There is no feedback giving system from the service recipients through the DESC websites which is necessary to know about people's satisfaction and discontent over the service.

c) *Traditional payment system:*

The payment system for *porcha* and information slip application is traditional. People make payment through the service providers which is reversal to the concept of digital government.

d) *Absence of recipients database:*

The details of the service recipients are not been kept in any database. Only the number of the service recipients is counted. But what kind of services each individual took from DESC is not mentioned in the record book.

e) *Absence of collaboration with other organizations:*

There is absence of collaboration with other organizations (private, NGOs, etc.). Such organizations can provide training facilities to the service providers and can raise awareness among people with their logistic and manpower in a joint venture with the DC office.

VII. CHALLENGES FACED BY DESC OF NETROKONA

Following challenges have been identified for DESC of Netrokona.

a) *Slow internet speed:*

The internet speed is slow which hampers the service delivery process for the District e-Service Center.

b) *Lack of skilled manpower:*

The number of service provider is only 5 which are not enough for giving services to the people of whole Netrokona district. Among them only 2 are trained by the government through DESC. As a result people have to wait in a long queue for taking services which does not go with the concept of e-service delivery as well as e-governance.

c) *Lack of auxiliary services:*

There is lack of auxiliary services like POS, fax, printing machine, photocopy machine and scanner machine for common people or service recipients. These facilities should be installed for an ideal DESC.

d) *Interrupted power supply:*

The power supply is not trouble free all time. The activity of DESC is hampered by low voltage of electricity and load shedding.

e) *Poor literacy rate on Information Technology (IT) :*

The literacy rate on IT is very low among the service recipients even the educated persons are not familiar with various operations of Information Technology.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on their findings, the researchers suggest following things for better e-service delivery.

- a. Solar energy can be installed in the DC office for ensuring uninterrupted power supply.
- b. Online payment system should be introduced instead of manual payment system for *porcha* and information slip application.
- c. Internet access should be enhanced for the whole district.
- d. A database should be maintained for the people who have already taken services from DESC.
- e. Proper computer and IT training should be given by the government to the service providers.
- f. The clarification process should be included within the system so that service recipients can understand the reasons of refusal for their application.
- g. Expansion of the services is necessary under DESC like – bill paying system, telemedicine services, e-education through website etc.
- h. A system for receiving feedbacks from the recipients should be introduced to achieve more transparency and accountability.

IX. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The use of information technology in public service delivery has started a new era in the digitalization process of Bangladesh. The inclusion of common people is necessary to reap maximum benefit from the system. More researches should be initiated by the government, academicians and IT experts to make it more fruitful and easily accessible. Not only the structural problem of DESC need to be repair but also the dilemma behind the behavioral problems of the service providers and service recipients should be identified to resolve it permanently. In addition, strong e-society should be developed by using e-literacy to ensue the maximum benefit of e-governance in Bangladesh.

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