

Chapter 13

E-Government in Bangladesh: Prospects and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors delineate the overall policy and institutional framework of e-government from the perspective of Bangladesh. Recognizing the current government's attempt at branding the country as "Digital Bangladesh," the authors explore major e-government programs and initiatives in operation. Most importantly, they eloquently elaborate on the constraints and challenges facing Bangladesh in its pursuit of electronic governance and also shed light on the way forward.

INTRODUCTION

Since its rise in the 1990s, e-government has quickly become a key element of public sector reform drives around the world. Currently it is widely regarded as an effective means to promote efficiency in government operations and to improve the delivery of public services. Generally defined as the application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the public service, e-government is, in fact, an extension of e-commerce in the public sector where modern technology, especially the Web-based Internet, is used to deliver public services in a

much more convenient, customer-oriented, and cost-effective manner. Most scholars, however, see e-government as more than mere application of ICT for it involves the process whereby the citizens and businesses are able to interact and execute transactions with government electronically (Haque, 2002; West, 2008). Thus, it requires the government to improve its internal operations by transforming the process in which public services are delivered. It also requires a modification of the entire range of relationships that the government has externally with citizens and businesses and other governments.

It is believed that this new approach to governance will not only facilitate easy and hassle-free access to services, it will also ensure efficiency,

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transparency, and public participation in the process of governance. As such, it has come to be seen as a solution to many of the perennial problems of the public sector. It promises to make governmental operations more efficient, cut red tape, and simplify bureaucratic procedure, reduce transaction costs, and make governmental operations transparent. In addition, e-government is believed to promote innovations in the delivery of public services, offer increased flexibility in the service use and foster people's participation and empowerment (see UN, 2008). In developing countries, e-government has assumed an additional significance: it is expected to help eradicate poverty, boost national economic growth, reduce bureaucratic complexity and corruption, and establish good governance (Hoque, 2006).

While e-government offers enormous benefits and enjoys massive popularity across the globe, its implementation has proved to be far from an easy and straightforward task for it requires transformation of organizational structures and business processes, mobilisation of significant human, technological and financial resources, among others. Resource constraints, lack of political support, lack of technology, inadequate infrastructure, illiteracy and the paucity of skilled human resources often pose a formidable challenge. The task gets compounded in the context of developing countries where such problems are acute. At the same time, digital divide between rural and urban people, the poor and rich, the literate and illiterate makes service accessibility to all next to impossible. As such, the vast majority of the population remains unaffected by the new mode of governance and service delivery notwithstanding huge promises offered by variety of governmental initiatives in the field. This chapter illustrates some of these points by a detailed examination of the state of e-government in Bangladesh—a developing country in South Asia. It provides an overview of Bangladesh's journey to e-government to date and some of the constraints and challenges the country is facing in this regard. Mainly based on secondary litera-

ture, the chapter is organised into three sections. The first section outlines the key policy issues and institutional framework for e-government in Bangladesh. Section two focuses on the current status of e-government in Bangladesh highlighting some of the major programs and initiatives. The final section analyses some of the key challenges confronting Bangladesh in terms of e-initiatives and online service delivery.

E-GOVERNMENT IN BANGLADESH: THE POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

As elsewhere, in Bangladesh e-government has lately become a key element of the drives for improving governance and service delivery. Faced with increasing demands from citizens especially from the business community to have access to online services and the concomitant development in the private sector, e.g. e-commerce and online banking the government in Bangladesh has made it a priority. Although emphasis to modernize public administration with the help of science and technology was put as early as in 1972, the actual process in this regard began in the 1990s. Having assumed power in 1996, the *Awami League* government took major steps towards adoption of ICT in the public sector. It agreed, to connect the country with Information Super Highway, designated the ICT as a thrust sector, waived taxes on computers and computer accessories, and formed a Task Force with the Prime Minister as its head. All this has paved the way for rapid computerisation and ICT penetration in the country. The process of e-government implementation gained a fresh momentum following the Public Administration Reform Commission Report, 2000, that emphasised on the speedy implementation of the electronic government (Hoque, 2006). Subsequently, the broader framework of strategies and actions for e-government has been outlined in different policy documents.

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