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Initiatives towards Citizen Empowerment in Bangladesh through e-Governance: How far implemented

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Abstract: E-Governance is comparatively a new phenomenon where the ultimate objective is ensuring good governance. Government all over the world are taking e-government initiatives to promote government service and tap the potential synergy from the new technologies, an educated population and enabling environment to meet the challenges of globalization. In this regard, developing countries like Bangladesh are not far behind. A forward looking vision of building "Digital Bangladesh by 2021" emerged with a commitment of establishing a transparent, committed and accountable government. In this context, this study attempted analyzes extent to which the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) has incorporated e-governance mechanism through the web portals of the ministries and divisions to establish citizen empowerment. As this study largely emphasizes Government to citizen (G2C) perspective of e- governance as a means to ensure citizen empowerment, the scope of this study is limited to the analysis of information and facilities currently available on their websites as an attempt to incorporate e-governance and the study mainly relies on secondary data in obtaining the information. In this study, researchers found that mere 30% of the 50 web portals use Bengali content together with English; while 70% is created in English only. Only 18 (36%) website provide search facility where all most all of them are simple in nature. Out of the 50 ministries and divisions, only three (6%) web portals provide options for queries or complaints, 16 (32%) demonstrates Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) option and 6 web portals (12%) contains statistical information. Finally, this study has come up with some recommendations to enhance the features of the same

1.0 Introduction

Openness and transparency are the two underlying properties of any democratic government. People want to know more about the activities of their government whom they elect as their representatives. Therefore, democratic process incorporates not only voting but also citizen participation and engagement in government. It is the second aspect

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which most readily offers the opportunity for empowerment by encouraging citizens to care about issues within their community and providing them with a feeling of ownership. Here the concept of egovernance emerges where the ultimate objective is to establish good governance. Electronic Government (e-government) has become a worldwide reality that public sector at both national and local level are dealing with for the last few years. Although, Government of developed countries has started to use Information and Communication Technology (ICT) long before, the concept of e-governance is comparatively a new phenomenon. The ultimate objective of implementing e-governance is to establish an integrated, cost effective and time saving approach which will result in good governance of a country. Government all over the world are taking e-government initiatives to promote government service and tap the potential synergy from the new technologies, an educated population and enabling environment to meet the challenges of globalization. Developing world is not far behind in this regard.

In this context, this paper has attempted to study the initiatives taken by the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) to incorporate e-governance mechanism through its web portals with a view to establish citizen empowerment. This paper has also come up with some major findings on the present condition of these web portals and recommendations to enhance the features of the same

2.0 Objective(s) of the Study

The objective of this study is to find out the level of interactive communication facilities provided by the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) to her citizens. In relation to this, the specific objectives are -

- (a) To identify e-facilities provided by the Ministries and divisions of Bangladesh Government to the mass people through their web portals.
- (b) To examine those e-facilities in terms of appearance and content, lo solution interactive functions and purpose and benefits.
 - (c) To come up with some recommendations for improvements in the e-facilities to ensure an efficient e-governance mechanisms.

3.0 e-Governance

Okot-Uma has defined e-government as "e-government refers to the processes and structures pertinent to the electronic delivery of Initiatives towards Citizen Empowerment in Bangladesh through e-Governance ... Homaira Semin/Mansura Akter

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3.0 e-Governance

Okot-Uma has defined e-government as "e-government refers to the processes and structures pertinent to the electronic delivery of

government services to the public" (Okot-Uma, 2001). Drucker defined e-government as "In its simplest sense, e-government can be said to about the use of emerging information and communication technologies to facilitate the processes of government and public administration. In reality, though, e-government is real about choice. It is about providing citizens with ability to choice the manner in which they wish to interact with the governments. And it is about the choices governments make about how information communication technologies will be deployed to support citizen's choices" (Drucker, 2001). In this study, e- Government refers to the electronic delivery of government information and services to the citizens.

4.0 Literature Review

Use of Information & Communication Technology (ICT) in government activities has become a common phenomenon in recent years. In the late 1990s, ICT introduced a unique concept--electronic government (egovernment)--in the field of public administration (Hasan, 2003). E-Government is the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to enable more efficient, cost-effective, and participatory government, facilitate more convenient government services, allow greater public access to information, and make government more accountable to citizens (Rondinelli et al 2010). Morshed (2006) showed that a properly designed and implemented e-governance system has the potential to help government to fulfill both the efficiency criteria. Introduction of e-Government in a phased way, with clearly defined objectives, responsibilities of public officials, and performance evaluation systems can set the basics right for combating corruption and ensuring effective use of public resources, thus alleviating poverty. (Hossain et al, April 2004). In reality, availability and non-availability of information creates the digital gap among different segments of the people in a society which is the one of the major causes of non-equity and social injustice. If everybody gets the same extent of accessibility to e-Governance then the class distance among the different groups in the society will be minimized abruptly (Kabir, 2009). 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. Hossain et al (2004) showed, as the Government lacks adequate technical, managerial, or financial resources to venture into e-Government solely on Initiatives towards Citizen Empowerment in Bangladesh through e-Governance ... Homaira Semin/Mansura Akter

its own, for sustainability and strategic planning of e-Government, it is essential for the Government to establish partnerships with the private sector. According to the research, the most critical factors contribute to the failure of e-government implementation are lack of internal political desire, inadequate technological infrastructure and lack of overall vision/strategy (Hossan, Habib & Kushchu, 2009).

Seventh Global e-Government Study (2010) shows where we Bangladesh, out of 198 Countries Ranked Bangladesh now 155. The researchers have evaluated government Web sites based on two dozen criteria, including disability access, the existence of publications and databases, and the presence of privacy policies, security policies, contact information, and the number of online services. Bangladeshi web developers and IT companies who developed Bangladeshi e-Government web sites should pay attention to these criteria "disability access, the existence of publications and databases, the presence of privacy policies. security policies, contact information, and the number of online services, PDA access, user fees, and foreign language translation" to improve Bangladeshi e-government web sites (Rahman, 2007). As this Websites are not interactive, there is no scope for active participation of the concerned people. Moreover, as these Websites have not been updated regularly, they mislead public with backdated information. In e-Governance environment all governmental organizations should have networked and interconnected. But preconditions for initiating such a huge project, the government needs to be honest, transparent, and stable with a clear vision for future (Kabir, 2009).

Bangladesh has very poor infrastructure and service delivery mechanism to deliver e-government service. Contrary to assumption, the research noticed that willing users live not only in city areas but also in rural areas. This means government has to take active measures so that citizens would have get access irrespective of their place of living. One of the ways to overcome this problem is to provide e-government service through internet service by cellular phone which is now widely available in Bangladesh. Without considering the socio-economic background of her citizen, all the e-government efforts of the government would be ended in failure like the 85% of all the e-government efforts in developing world (Akther, Onishi & Kidokoro, 2009). Most of the egovernance initiatives so far have created islands of information, difficulties in data interchange, and inefficient communication among the government, the businesses and the citizens. Technology incompatibility is only a piece of this "Interoperability Issues Puzzle" in e-governance initiatives in Bangladesh. According to Zaman (2010), we may need to organize and solidify our grounds based on the ground-realities. Though lack of proper infrastructure and digital divide are the known major causes behind the failures of e-service implementation, the study reveals that e-government applications have been growing in Bangladesh. The prospects include mobile phone based e-service development, and public private partnership (PPP), while the challenges are frequent power interruption, lack of techno-savvy people in public organizations to look after the systems, etc.

In this context, it is imperative to examine the extent to which the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) has paved the way to interact with the citizen and thereby establish the Government to Citizen (G2C) relationships with a view to achieve the goal of making Bangladesh Digital by 2021.

5.0 Methodology

This study is descriptive and empirical in nature using qualitative and quantitative data that are collected mainly from secondary sources. The study has made use of published materials such as books, magazines and newspapers to collect data and information regarding the topic. The study also used of the internet to obtain related information about the e-services provided through web portals. This study will mainly rely on secondary data in obtaining the information. Due to inaccessibility of the subject or the case study, other research methods are not applicable. Secondary data in this case provide a useful source of information from which to achieve the objectives of the study and the quality of data in general may be superior to anything that could have been created alone. A small observation is conducted in 52 ministries and divisions of the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) are reviewed to study the content and features that they carry and to scrutinize how those web portals are able to provide information and services for people

5.1 Variable Studied

Thirty variables were studied under three parameters. Web portals of 52 ministries and divisions of GOB are observed in terms of menu/content, Interactive functions and purpose or benefit of these web portals.

The status of the menu/content has been evaluated in terms of the presence of the following variables: 'About us', 'Contact us', 'News', 'Public Notice', 'Public Forms', 'Rules and Regulation', 'Public Documents', 'Publications', 'Lists of Projects' 'Presence of Bangla Language',' E-mail Address', 'Search Facilities', 'Links to Attached Department', 'Linked to Other Web portals'.

Under interactive functions variables are as follows: 'Queries/Complaints', 'Comments and Suggestion', 'Statistical Queries', 'Online Application', 'Facilities of e-services', 'Provision for Feedback', 'Archives of Publicly Available', 'Career' and 'Annual Reports'

Finally, the status of 'Purpose or Benefit of the Study' has been determined in terms of 'Under construction, 'Mere Presence', 'Organizational Information only', 'Tender Notice/Documents/Forms for Business Sector and Organizational Information', 'Some Useful Information, Documents or Rules-Regulations for Citizens including Organizational Information', 'Few Useful Forms for Citizens and Organizational Information', 'Opportunity for Online Application'.

5.2 Collection of Data

Data of this study are secondary in nature collected mainly from the web portals of the Ministries and Divisions. In addition to this, data has been collected from books, magazines and newspapers.

5.3 Processing and Analysis of Data

As most of the variables are qualitative in nature, the quantitative analysis has been done based on the presence (1) or absence (0) of those features. Then percentages of the presence of these features have been calculated. A long with this quantitative analysis, descriptions has been provided about the quality of these features.

Data collected through observation of websites were analyzed using MS Excel and interpretation of Ms Excel results were carried out.

6.0 Analysis and Findings

6.1 Web Initiatives

To prepare and empower citizens, it is more important to bring them close to the planning and decision making processes by providing information and soliciting their opinion. Most industrial and developing countries now regularly consult concerned citizen groups. This practice has now become easier and more comprehensive through accruing the advantages of the Internet and the Web. Bangladesh government, as well, trying to reach e-governance by taking initiatives to provide information and services online. A review 52 of these web portals along with the national portal of Bangladesh, presented below, would provide so the ideas in respect of standards and quality of the web portals, as well as, nature and extent of information and services provided through the web portals that would ultimately reflect as to how they are able to bring people closure to the public administration.

6.2 Appearance and Contents of the Web Portals

Government has adopted an official web design parameter as early as on July 2003 that provides guidelines in relation to appearance, menu and contents for public web portals of Bangladesh. In respect of graphical appearance, ministries and divisions are found to follow disorganized preferences to design their web portals. This made them dissimilar in appearance, but also difficult to access. Observations on the contents of the web portals are depicted in the following table.

Appearance/Contents/Items	Exist(%)	Non-exist (%)	Comments
About us	88.00	12.00	
Contact us	88.00	12.00	
News	54.00	46.00	20% blank
Public notice	64.00	36.00	Contains some outdated notice
Public forms	42.00	58.00	Limited in numbers
Rules and Regulations	74.00	26.00	Most of them are provided in a disorganized way
Public Document	80.00	20.00	Limited in numbers
Publication	36.00	64.00	25% blank ·
List projects	42.00	58.00	30% blank
Presence of Bengali Language	30.00	70.00	
E-mail Address	84.00	16.00	
Search Facilities	36.00	64.00	Simple search
Links to Attached Dept	38.00	62.00	Links with dept. are rare
Linked to Other Web portals	78.00	22.00	Contain some unrelated link

Table 1: Menu/Contents of the Web portals

Source: Collected by analyzing different web portals

It has been found that some of the web portals display items, however, do not carry any content or hold outdated contents. Although, most of the

web portals shows features like lists of publications, reports, regulations and public documents, they are very few in numbers and some of them are not accessible. Only 44 web portals (42%) ministries/divisions offer public forms in PDF format in their web portals, however, do not provide plenty of those that could enhance benefits for citizens and attract a larger audience. Present study notes that mere 30% of the 50 web portals use Bengali content together with English; while 70% is created in English only. E-mail address of the respective ministry or division is displayed in 84% web portals. Only 18 (36%) website provide search facility where all most all of them are simple in nature. It is further noted that in case of links with own departments/agencies, 38% carry links to other Department and 78% carry links with other related web portals.

6.3. Interactive Functions

For interactive functions, three options for citizens' use are found, such as: queries/complaints, 'comments/suggestions/ complements and statistical information. Out of the 50 ministries and divisions, only three (6%) web portals provide options for queries or complaints, 16 (32%) demonstrates Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) option that can meet some pre-specified queries of a user and 6 web portals (12%) contains statistical information. Twelve of them (24%) provide provision for feedback box for users. Facilities like online application and e-services are all most absent. Following table shows the status of interactive function of web portals.

Items	Exist (%)	Non-exist (%)	Comments
Queries/Complaints	6.00	94.00	
Comments and Suggestion	32.00	68.00	FAQ only
Statistical Queries	12.00	88.00	
Online Application	0.00	100.00	
Facilities of e-services	4.00	96.00	
Provision for Feedback	24.00	76.00	
Archives of publicly available	26.00	74.00	Most of the archives are under construction.
Career	16.00	84.00	
Annual reports	8.00	94.00	

Table 2: Interactive functions of web portals

Source: Collected by analyzing different web portals

In addition to this, 13 (26%) web portals provide archives which are not enriched enough. Only 8 (16%) web portals have the option of career where circulars of job vacancies are posted. Annual reports of ministries and divisions are found in four web portals. Hence, existing web portals almost do not have any interactive feature, so far.

6.4 Purpose or Benefits of the Web Portals

With the above-mentioned observations, it is evident that present web initiatives narrowly serve any purpose for public administration or rarely bring any benefit for businesses or citizens. Following table reveals that they are not yet grown with appealing features that could attract a large audience, in general and the businesses and citizens, in particular. Near about 10% web portals are in a status of almost no presence or mere presence, 33% limit their presence only around organizational information. Despite the fact that rest of the 57% goes to the category of simple informative web portals, however, very few of those hold a clear objective peoples' benefit. From an overall consideration, public web portals in Bangladesh do not show any 'common look and feel' regarding their appearances. Public information and forms are not adequately available, and electronic services are not prepared or offered by the existing web portals. In view of that, they hardly provide any value related to needs and choices of people.

Items	Number	%	Comments
Under construction	2	3.85	
Mere Presence	3	5.77	
Organizational information only	17	32.69	Informative
Tender notice/documents/forms for business sector and organizational information	7	13.46	Informative; also carry, in a very limited sense, G2B aspect. However, some of the sites found to carry outdated notices.
Some useful information, documents or rules-regulations for citizens including organizational information	11	21.15	Informative, and have a nominal G2C purpose
Few useful forms for citizens and organizational information	12	23.08	Informative, and have a nominal G2C purpose
Opportunity for online application	-0	0	

Table 3: Purpose or benefit of website

Source: Field Survey



Besides, these web portals become unable to earn a wide range of active users because of the absence of desired interactive features. Rather, these web portals are mostly confined with detailed information on respective organizational structure, hierarchy, activities, achievements, top personnel, etc. that tend to continue with posing the legacy of traditional governance. Rational efforts are required to bring the web initiatives closure to the concepts of engaging citizens and serving people through innovative use of the Internet.

7.0 Recommendations

From the observation of this study, it can be clearly understood that a good number of initiatives have been taken with the view to achieve the vision of making 'Digital Bangladesh'. The observation found that the government web portals have progressed in terms of 'menu/content', however, severely lack 'interactive functions' and therefore still not capable to meet their 'purpose and benefit'. Based on the analysis made in this report, the study came up with some recommendations which are as follows:

- Although, most of the ministries and divisions have implemented web portals, there remain inconsistencies in terms of design, navigation and usability. The government should take proper initiatives to get ministries to work together to make the tasks of citizens easier to undertake.
- Governments need to utilize more features that enhance public accountability. Currently, most of government web portals are providing only simple search option, limiting ordinary citizens from finding the information relevant to them.

- The same logic applies to the technologies that allow citizens to post comments or otherwise provide feedback about a government agency. A simple feature such as a comment form empowers citizens by giving them an opportunity to voice their opinion about government services they would like to see.
- Countries need to update their sites on a regular basis. Some sites are not updated regularly, and consequently contain inaccurate information, broken links and incorrect email contact information.
- Access to information and education depends critically on easy availability of internet connection. In this regard, the government should take measures to ensure internet connection across the country at affordable prices.
- Computerization and e-Governance are not synonymous. In fact, over the five years, computerization processes in some ministries or government sectors have been initiated. But truly speaking it is not e-Governance. We have to go a long way to implement e-Governance in our country.
- Based on the existing National voter database, a National Data Bank is needed to be developed. This Data Bank will to keep identity of citizen and thus help track the record of them. A properly developed National Data Bank will also help ensure the interoperability within the ministries and divisions.
- Until now, the services provided by the government web portals are mostly limited to organizational information. In order to enhance the interactive features of Government web portals, initiatives should be taken so that citizen can apply to any governmental agencies online.

'Digital Bangladesh' strategy and implementation needs to take into account the above deficiencies and provide a framework that is capable of supporting its mandate. If not, "Digital Bangladesh" will continue to be seen as just another clichéd political slogan that in reality does not create positive development outcomes for citizens, particularly those who are poverty stricken and marginalized.

8.0 Conclusion

"Digital Bangladesh by 2021" emerged as part of "Charter for Change". In many ways, the "Digital Bangladesh" vision took the policy makers and practitioners by surprise. While the basic premise of the vision is not new, the all-encompassing nature of the vision demands a fundamental shift of mindset of the implementers. It not only needs thinking anew but new ways of thinking. Bangladesh has very poor infrastructure and service delivery mechanism to deliver e-government service. Contrary to this situation the willing users live not only in city areas but also in rural areas. This means government has to take active measures so that citizens would have get access irrespective of their place of living.

The central obligation of e-governance is to ensure citizens' satisfaction and the fundamental challenge for introducing e-governance in Bangladesh ultimately rests on: how to connect and serve the mass people, who are poor, rural and illiterate. Therefore, an integrated initiative right from the grass-root to the level of higher authority is to be taken to reap the benefit of new inventions of Information Communication Technology. These initiatives will empower the citizen, creating an environment where others are equipped and encouraged to make decisions in autonomous ways and to feel that they are in control of the outcomes for which they have accepted responsibility.

At the end it could be concluded that Bangladesh should take its own step considering the development of socio-economic factors of the land instead of following developed world in providing e-government facilities to its citizen. Without considering the development of socioeconomic background of her citizen, all the e-government efforts of the government would be ended in failure.

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Appendix

Web portals of Ministries and Divisions:

President's Office	www.bangabhaban.gov.bd
Prime Minister's Office	www.pmo.gov.bd
Cabinet Division	www.cabinet.gov.bd
National Parliament of Bangladesh	www.parliament.gov.bd
Ministry of Establishment	www.moestab.gov.bd
Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC)	www.bpsc.gov.bd
Finance Division	www.mof.gov.bd
Economic Relations Divisions (ERD)	www.erd.gov.bd
Internal Resources Division (IRD)	www.ird.gov.bd
Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs	www.minlaw.gov.bd
Supreme Court of Bangladesh	www.supremecourt.gov.bd
Bangladesh Law Commission	www.lawcommissionbangladesh.org
Ministry of Agriculture	www.moa.gov.bd
Ministry of Food and Disaster Management	www.mofdm.gov.bd
Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications	www.mopt.gov.bd
Ministry of Information	www.moi.gov.bd
Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA)	www.mora.gov.bd
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	www.mofa.gov.bd
Ministry of Planning	www.plancomm.gov.bd
Statistics Division	www.statisticsdiv.gov.bd
Ministry of Environment and Forests	www.moef.gov.bd
Ministry of Defense	www.mod.gov.bd
Ministry of Labour And Employment	www.mole.gov.bd
Ministry of Textiles and Jute	www.motj.gov.bd
Ministry of Housing and Public Works	www.mohpw.gov.bd
Power Division, M/O. Power, Energy & Mineral Res.	www.powerdivision.gov.bd
EMR Division, M/O. Power, Energy & Mineral Res.	www.emrd.gov.bd
Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC)	www.berc.org.bd
Ministry of Commerce	www.mincom.gov.bd
Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism	www.mocat.gov.bd
Ministry of Land	www.minland.gov.bd
Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MWCA)	www.mowca.gov.bd
Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock	www.mofl.gov.bd
Ministry of Youth & Sports	www.moysports.gov.bd

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Web portals of Ministries and Divisions:

Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MWCA)	www.mowca.gov.bd
Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock	www.mofl.gov.bd
Ministry of Youth & Sports	www.moysports.gov.bd
Ministry of Communications	www.moc.gov.bd
Ministry of Industries	www.moind.gov.bd
Ministry of Education	www.moedu.gov.bd
Ministry of Primary and Mass Education	www.mopme.gov.bd
Ministry of Science and ICT	www.mosict.gov.bd
Ministry of Social Welfare	www.msw.gov.bd
Ministry of Water Resources	www.mowr.gov.bd
Ministry of Cultural Affairs	www.moca.gov.bd
Ministry of Home Affairs	www.mha.gov.bd
Ministry of Health and Family Welfare	www.mohfw.gov.bd
Rural Development & Cooperative Division	www.rdcd.gov.bd
Local Government Division	www.lgd.gov.bd
Ministry of Liberation War Affairs	www.mlwa.gov.bd
Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare & Overseas Employment	www.probashi.gov.bd
Ministry of Shipping	www.mos.gov.bd
Bangladesh Election Commission	www.ecs.gov.bd
Information Commission	www.infocom.gov.bd

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