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TIME TO TURN A CORNER
PART-3: GLOBAL TRENDS: ADVERSITY OR OPPORTUNITY?

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E-Governance: Myth or reality

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"WE are not technical enough to understand e-Governance ...", "Our people don't even have computers ...", "Fine! Connect my office to the internet ...", "... e-Governance does not make sense for 95% of our citizens. I doubt they will have internet access in their lifetime!" were some of the comments heard in a series of workshops on e-Governance for senior and mid-level policy makers and deputy commissioners conducted throughout 2007 at the Chief Adviser's Office, Planning Commission and Bangladesh Computer Council. These comments were testament to the fact that Bangladesh's planning for e-Governance is largely influenced by the thoughts, choices and decisions by our western counterparts without critical analysis of whether their context applies to the reality of our country. Many of the workshop participants agreed that changing mindset about e-Governance in the context of our country is a necessary first step for them.

Time has come to break down some of these myths that exist in the minds of our policy makers.

Myth 1: e-Governance is only a website. Many e-Governance projects in our country popularized the idea that e-Governance means setting up websites for the service provider organizations. That kind of e-Governance frenzy started the trend of establishing websites for many of the ministries and other agencies. The good aspect of the frenzy was that these government organizations were inspired by the message of being technology oriented. However, the bad side was that the frenzy has stopped at setting up websites with no more than introductory information serving as mere web presence of the organization but does not come to the aid of common citizens. Some common questions from a citizen are: How useful is it to know the mission and structure of an organization if I cannot download the form I need from that organization. I still have to waste the time and money by making a trip to the nearby district headquarters? What good is a website if it cannot serve me? Shouldn't e-Governance really be about providing services to the people any time and anywhere? If it does not do that, it can be electronic, but it certainly isn't governance.

There was a time when people had to travel to a limited number of designated centres to get government services. The great democratization effect of technology is increasingly levelling the playing field in favour of the citizens. As a citizen, I can get my SSC and HSC results through the Ministry of Education website now from any location which has an internet connection. I don't have to travel a great distance like I used to before, I don't have to fight a crowd of a few thousand people in front of the results notice board. Through the Hajj Information website, I can find out where my father, who has gone for Hajj, is, at a given time; I can even send him a message through the site.

That kind of website makes sense for me, not the kind that features merely a message from the head of the organization, the mission of the organization and a few phone numbers. I want my most needed information and services through the web. That is establishing my right to information, and my right to services at my location. That is good governance.

Myth 2: You must have a desktop computer for e-Governance. The majority of the country's population does not use desks they work in fields, they work in factories, they work in small shops. It should not be a surprise to the policy makers that a desktop-centric e-Governance paradigm does not make too much sense for our citizens. If e-Governance is really about delivering services to the citizens to their locations, it cannot be through a mechanism that we impose on them. Who said that the 'e' in e-Governance is really about computers? Why can't it be about other forms of e-devices such as the mobile phone, TV and radio, the kinds of 'e' they already have access to? Why should we be influenced by the e-Governance technology options of USA, Canada, Australia and Singapore where computers do make sense because that option is already a part of the established infrastructure? The technological reality is very different in our country. That doesn't mean it doesn't exist. It just means it exists in a different form. It exists in the hands of the people in the form of mobile phone, TV and radio. That is why it makes tremendous sense for our citizens to pay their electricity bills through a simple mobile phone recharge mechanism from the nearby 'mudi dokan', or check their SSC and HSC results on the phone. That is why the fishermen listeners of Kothmale Radio in Sri Lanka are very happy to get life-and-death weather information in their specific deep-sea localitions. They don't have to log onto the website to get it. They call the radio station from deep sea with their mobile phones, the radio station finds the information from the internet and makes a radio broadcast of that vital information to a large number of fishermen. In this case, the combination of mobile phone, internet and radio is serving a community who cannot be served if they depended on desktop based e-Governance.

The immensely popular and useful 'Mati o Manush' could increase its usefulness if it included phone-in option where the farmers and agriculture, fisheries and livestock field officers could call in with real questions from the field to be answered by experts on the spot. This programme has the potential to act as a greater social mobilizer to gather members of agriculture co-operatives and farmers' clubs during the programme for collective brainstorming and interaction with the experts at the studio.

Several private sector and NGO initiatives in our country are using mobile phone and digital camera for the patients to access a call centre of doctors, and exchange relevant pictures of patients for remote diagnosis and consultation. These are all models of service delivery through e-Governance that do not depend on desktops and leverage technologies that are already available, accessible and affordable.

Using text messaging (SMS) in many countries has become a very vital and viable choice for citizens' communication with the government for policy debates. In times of natural disaster, text messaging is often the most rapid and direct means of communication to a large number of people. If the citizens can vote for their favourite music star and send comments on political issues to TV stations through mobile phones, why can't the government employ similar mechanisms for public consultation on policy issues?

Myth 3: Connectivity is enough. A few years ago, the e-Governance demand mostly focused on the unavailability of adequate hardware aka desktops. With the falling desktop prices and the acquisition of desktops by various government offices, the new demand is that of connectivity: these offices have hardware but they are not connected to the internet. While this is a legitimate demand of the government offices that they be connected to the internet with bandwidth that is usable and dependable, the next obvious question is what will happen if these computers are all connected. As a result of the spread of online access using wireless connectivity options including the ones provided by the mobile phone operators, connectivity is becoming a reality at a much faster pace than was projected even two years ago. So, we need to plan very quickly on how we will use this connectivity.

Email will be a good use. It will certainly speed up communication and decision making. However, the large are of e-Governance which is a matter of having the right type of software and the right type of content will still be missing if concerted efforts are not made to develop them as quickly as possible. Databases and GIS (geographic information system)-based systems that will support decision making need to be planned, designed and implemented as soon as possible.

Just as the hardware in our offices are being used as 'better type-writers' and not for better administration and service delivery, the connectivity may fall into the same 'non-planning' trap and find its farthest use in email. It will be another case of not being able to reap adequate return on our national investment.

Looking at the connectivity-content equation from the perspective of the citizens, the lack of content in our local language becomes glaringly obvious. A lot more of our citizens have connectivity through mobile phones and cybercafes / telecentres nowadays, but there is very little for them in Bangla to make use of. The website run by the Department of Agricultural Marketing publishes daily price information of many commodities from over forty districts. While this information is valuable to the researchers and agriculture economists, the intended primary target group namely the farmers do not derive any benefit from this website. Apart from the obvious limitation that they don't have access to the internet, they would not understand the content, even if they were given access, because the content is all in English.

Myth 4: e-Governance is expensive. There is no denying the fact that technology comes at a fairly high start-up cost. The good news is that a large part of this cost is already borne by the government and private sector mobile infrastructure companies. The other good news is that e-Governance has reportedly reduced cost of transaction worldwide, and it can, too, in our country.

If we start making use of the computers in our offices as more than mere type-writers by developing and using databases for our decision making, we will be well on our way towards efficient e-Governance without incurring any extra cost. If we start making greater use of the connectivity infrastructure laid by the mobile operators in the form of GPRS and EDGE for our office instead of waiting for a 'broadband' connection, we can be connected rather quickly and inexpensively. If we can factor in private investment in the form of public-private partnership for our upcoming e-Governance projects just like the Hajj Information website and the Railway Ticketing System did in the past, we can gain at least two advantages: the government does not have to put up initial investment, and the marketing / publicity effort will take on a proactive life of its own which is often weak in purely government efforts. The 'forms' website established by the government two years ago is largely unknown to many quarters of the government even today. A private sector marketing effort of this site probably could make it known and usable to all ministries, district and upazila offices in a shorter time.

Myth 5: Technologists should lead. e-Governance has a small 'e' and a big 'G' indicative of the importance of technology versus that of governance. e-Governance is about establishing good governance by using technology. It is very much about prioritizing governance issues and determining how technology may address them. e-Governance is not about starting with a technology focus. It is not about force-fitting technology options to a development or governance problem. It is not about believing that technology is a panacea. Letting e-Governance initiatives be led by technologists often emerges into the situation that "... when the only tool you have is a hammer, you see every problem as a nail."

This is often the perspective that has ensured the demise of many an e-Governance initiative not only in our country but also in many others. The governance experts and the policy makers should lead e-Governance; the technologists should present the relevant technology options and impact of those options in solving a particular development or governance problem. For example, how technology should address the problem of lack of transparency such as publishing of budget and expenditure publicly and filing of complaints should be guided by a policy maker while the technologist points out where the internet or mobile phone options may be relevant and efficient. Starting the problem resolution process with a hammer may find a nail that is not even part of the problem.

Keeping the end users involved from the inception of an e-Governance initiative ensures that it will be designed through their eyes. The failure or poor impact of many e-Governance projects finds their root cause in the issue that the citizens or government end users were not sufficiently involved. The English website of the Department of Agriculture Marketing would have been in Bangla and mobile phone accessible if the farmers were involved in the design consultations.

Conclusion

If we fail to plan e-Governance in terms of more efficient, transparent and accountable administration and more effective service delivery to citizens, we are actually planning to fail in establishing good governance. Emanuel C. Lallana, ex-Commissioner, Commission on ICT, Office of the President in Philippines commented, "Any eGovernment program in developing countries runs the risk of failure if they ignore mobile phones." He identifies that it is often the limitation of imagination on the part of the policy makers that fail to leverage public innovations such as payment systems over mobile phones to be utilized for payment for government services. It is heartening in Bangladesh that the policy makers are starting to take such innovations very seriously for service delivery and administration. On our valiant national journey towards better governance, e-Governance is an essential vehicle. Leadership and mandate must come from the top. However, at the same time, without enthusiastic buy-in of the mid-level and junior officials no e-Governance effort can be sustainable; without involvement from the citizens from inception to design to implementation, no e-Governance effort can be meaningful.

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