eGOVERNMENT CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER AND BEST PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract: This paper outlines an applied research project which was successfully conducted in Bangladesh. Prior research has shown that attitudes and a lack of knowledge have been the major stumbling blocks preventing ICT adoption in Bangladesh's public sector. Accordingly, this one year pr oject unde r t he a uspices of t he A ustralian Government's P ublic S ector Linkages P rogram (PSLP) addressed two critical is sues; f illing the ' knowledge g ap' on eGovernment pr ocesses a nd e mpowering g overnment of ficials a nd decision makers to prepare them for successful i mplementation of e Governance. I n addition t o pr eparing a strategy ba sed on the pr ior r esearch, the pr oject ai med to bui ld t he c apacity of government officials through a comprehensive but concise training program. The training was supported by a ha ndbook specially pr epared to suit t he con text tha t is like ly to serve as a cons tant companion and guide for day-to- day IT management for government officials.
Keywords: capacity building, eGovernment, ICT4D, public sector

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1. INTRODUCTION

The least developed countries (LDCs) are the victims of an increasing digital divide. Many struggle to find a workable modality to bridge or reduce this gap in the global information race. Initiatives at both the national and international level have created a lot of rhetoric but have failed to deliver programs that promote the adoption of Information and Communication Technology ICT (Heeks, 2002). Often it is the bureaucratic tradition of the colonial system with its stubborn hierarchical structure that is slow to respond to the changes that modern ICT offers.

Prior studies indicate that correct use of ICT has the potential to improve efficiency and productivity in the public sector in LDCs, which can also have flow-on effects to other sectors (World-Bank, 2005). It is encouraging to find that e Government has gained an importance on the Bangladesh government's agenda (Sobhan et al., 2004). However, the government lacks the required knowledge, expertise and resources necessary for the adoption of ICTs (Imran, 2006). Greater strategic direction and institutional help supported by strong political will is necessary to take eGovernment forward. While the developed countries are engaging themselves in fine tuning government services at higher stages of eGovernment, LDCs like Bangladesh are struggling to overcome the initial stages of eGovernment adoption (Imran and Gregor, 2007).

The project described here aimed to first develop "know-how" among key decision makers and government officials in Bangladesh for the effective use of ICT in modern public organizations through a comprehensive, concise training program supported by a handbook as a constant companion and guide for daily IT management issues. The handbook is expected to equip officials with sufficient knowledge to prepare requirement documents for software developers, pre- and post- evaluation procedures, ICT governance, ICT auditing and some project management skills specifically for eGovernment projects.

This project stands out by focusing on the critical issue of filling the 'knowledge gap' on eGovernment processes and process reengineering, in a systematic way to achieve successful implementation of ICTs. It was found that government officials with a good understanding of the effective use of ICT and eGovernment can be important drivers in the implementation of eGovernment in a LDC.

This paper briefly narrates the project, its goals and objectives, major deliverables, challenges and some lessons learnt to date.

2. THE PSLP EGOV PROJECT

The project reported here was initiated by the National Centre for Information Systems Research (NCISR) at the Australian National University (ANU) in 2008 through a competitive AusAID Public Service Linkage Program (PSLP). PSLP is a special scheme of AusAID, which aims to improve public sector capacity in selected Asian countries for governance and management for nationally determined development outcomes (AusAID,

2008). Improving internal government process (G2G), which is an important part of eGovernment is the major focus of this project. The project was based on PhD research on ICT adoption in the public sector of an LDC largely motivated by the personal experience of the lead author while working as an IT administrator in the public sector in Bangladesh. Earlier research (Imran, 2006) found a lack of knowledge and the attitudes towards ICT of senior public servants as the major stumbling blocks that are preventing ICT adoption in Bangladesh's public sector. These deep-rooted underlying causes have not been addressed adequately or systematically by any past eGovernment initiatives in Bangladesh, where the focus has been mostly on technological aspects. Based on a framework taking insights from Roger's (1995) Diffusion and Innovation theory, Scott's (2001) Institutional theory and Attewell's (1992) Knowledge Building framework, earlier research recommended a slow and steady approach to overcome the institutional inertia prevailing in the public sector environment in Bangladesh (Imran, 2006).

The counterpart public service agency of this project was the Ministry of Science and Information and Communication Technology (MOSICT) of Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS) provided support as a third party organization. The one year project was implemented in three phases.

2.2 Goals and Objectives of Project

The activity was aimed towards adoption of effective eGovernment in Bangladesh, focusing on capacity building of government officials to improve government processes (e-Administration) or G2G (Government to Government) services.

The objectives of the activity were:
- To develop "know-how" among key decision makers and government officials in Bangladesh concerning the effective use of ICT in public sector organizations.
- To develop strategies for the effective uptake of ICT and eGovernment in Bangladesh.
- To support ongoing projects in eGovernment in Bangladesh.

2.3 Major Deliverables

The project had two major deliverables:

2.3.1 *eGovernment for Bangladesh: A Strategic Pathway to success*

This was a comprehensive report with a strategic direction (Imran et al., 2008), which gives an outline for long-term eGovernment adoption and implementation for Bangladesh based on the findings of ongoing research and detailed review and recommendations by the project team. This significant part of the activity will have long-term implications. Despite many initiatives over the past few years in Bangladesh, satisfactory progress has not been achieved in this area. As such, this strategic direction will be an important starting point towards attaining eGovernment capacity in the public sector of Bangladesh which will serve as a constant reference and guideline for future eGovernment initiatives in Bangladesh. The report included details of the PSLP activity, including the training plans.

2.3.2 *ICT Management Handbook and Training Package; A Guide for Government Officers of Bangladesh*

This concise handbook (Gregor et al., 2008) includes four modules: (a) Introduction to the eGovernment Framework (b) Making an ICT Business Case (c) Project Management and (d) Managing Outcomes. Each module has been developed by expert consultants in the respective areas based on research findings and, through close consultation and extensive local involvement, tailored to suit local conditions. The training package includes Teaching Material with PowerPoint slides, Exercises and/or Quizzes with suggested answers, and Video clips, all of which take two days to deliver. The Teaching Package is a self-contained package that can be re-used over multiple offerings of the teaching program and be able to be delivered by people other than the original developers.

3. PROJECT PHASES

3.1 Phase 1 (Jan – Sep 2008)

Review of existing eGovernment strategies and training needs was carried out with extensive local involvement and previous empirical study. Input was sought from current collaborators such as the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO) and other agencies. Two mini-workshops were arranged with stakeholders to prepare the schedule and task list; one in Bangladesh and one in Canberra. The aim of the workshops was to build a common understanding through the exchange of views on strategies and training needs to initiate the project and also to share best practices and develop strategies for continued effective utilization of ICT in eGovernment in Bangladesh. During Jul – Sept 2008, the package for the "ICT Management for Government Officers" – the 2 day program – was developed with extensive local involvement to suit local conditions.

3.1.1 Road Test

The entire Program Package was piloted and refined. A preliminary road test was carried out with the team and some invited participants (Bangladeshi-born students studying at ANU). A further revision was carried out based on the feedback and evaluation of the road test to suit the local condition.

3.2 Phase 2 (Oct 2008)

A seminar was delivered followed by the launch of the Strategy in Bangladesh, where the final report with a road map for the project was presented to the Minister for Science and Information and Communication Technology (MOSICT) of the Government of Bangladesh.

The training package was delivered as a two-day workshop over multiple offerings. Participants (total 107) were senior and middle managers from the public sector selected by MOSICT. The participants fell into two groups: (a) potential champions, from among relevant department Heads and similar positions of influence and (b) people who are likely to become trainers in the follow-on stages. The 3 Training Programs had about 35 participants on average, with a mix of "champions" and potential "trainers". Workshop attendees then returned to their agency to act as a nucleus for further change. Prior experience and innovation literature suggest that having a group rather than a single 'change' agent in an organization provides more credibility and leads to more effective uptake of ideas.

3.3   Phase 3 (Nov 2008 onwards)

Phase 3 is a follow-up rather than an immediate part of the activity. This however depends on the interest and willingness of all the parties involved. In Bangladesh the follow-up activities could include further knowledge delivery programs and mentoring of key eGovernment development projects. Engaging in these follow-up activities fits well with the mission of NCISR, which is to engage in applied research that has practical and societal value. Follow-up studies are being planned to evaluate and monitor the training outcomes and the change of attitude and mindset of the government officials after the activity. The result of these evaluations and best practice guides will also be published in the print media and Government media in Bangladesh, so that the stakeholders can derive benefit.

The willingness of the counterpart organization to support further offerings of the program by local trainers will also be evidence of its effectiveness. An early positive sign is that MOSICT has taken initiative to reprint another 500 copies of the handbook at its own cost to be distributed amongst the public servants and departments within the government.

4.   DISCUSSION AND LESSONs LEARNED

The reported activity is an initial step towards adopting sustainable and workable eGovernment in the context of Bangladesh. It offers a holistic approach that addresses the major issues and barriers to ICT adoption in this country. These issues and barriers need to be addressed before infrastructure and technological solutions can be effectively implemented.

The 'Educate to Innovate' activity to raise awareness through targeted training is expected to build the capacity of the key officials who will be dealing with future eGovernment projects undertaken by the government. It is not expected that participants attained an in-depth knowledge of IT management with this intensive two-day training module. Rather the program is designed to enable the important officials who are sparing two whole working days to utilize their acquired skills in the best possible manner. Such courses are often effective in bringing the participants in line with the contemporary and modern changes in public sector management.

Using an initial execution of the training program for senior officials as an 'ice breaker' was found to be very effective. Many of them shared their experiences at the training workshop with their colleagues in their department, which created a very positive impact. Personal responses, both verbal and email, were very satisfying and evidence of the training's effectiveness.

Dealing with bureaucracy and public sector officials in a developing country is always a challenging task because of the hierarchy and complexities that the procedure involves, especially in implementing an applied research project from overseas. This challenge was met through prior connections established through the lead researcher's previous working experience in the Bangladesh Government and a continued relationship, persistence and, above all, strong motivation about the novelty and impact of the outcome of the project. A willing and committed champion within the counterpart organization was also found to be essential.

In the LDCs, a majority of the population are under the poverty line, deprived of education and knowledge, and are heavily dependent on government or their leaders (UN-OHRLLS, 2007). Often they tend to be good followers rather than exercising their own rights. As such, a top-down approach can be effective to bring change. A single good government decision affects millions in LDCs. These millions would otherwise be difficult to reach through a bottom-up approach, which would also be a lengthy and time-consuming procedure. Thus, educating a single government official or decision maker is sometimes equivalent to educating millions because his/her one good decision could bring change to the lives of millions (Imran et al., 2008).

A working experience and immersion in the context of the public sector environment in an LDC helped to address the challenges and also to capture the underlying issues that are often overlooked. Reputation, trust and working experience of the researcher in the context was instrumental in this project. Having the support of NCISR of ANU which has been designed to be able to carry out such a project and its experienced and capable researchers and members to work as a team provided the means to take this forward. ANU's world class research capability and reputation is widely recognized. Further, the topic and project being originated from PhD research; the rigor and relevancy required for such an important national level project was obtained through sound theoretical and academic foundation. Good access and personal liaison with the stakeholders of ICT in the country, some national policy makers, and Government agencies were instrumental for the project to be a success.

5. CONCLUSION

The activity in Bangladesh has a strong potential to contribute to the overall development of the country by addressing one of the key hindrances in the development of public sector organizations: a lack of efficiency and transparency. This activity focused on an important underlying issue of bridging the knowledge gap, which is likely to resolve a lot of other associated issues with ICT adoption in the public sector such as, attitude and typical mindset, lack of willingness to change the status quo, procrastination in decision making, and motivation for such innovation. It is hoped to build the capacity of government officials who are expected to deal with future eGovernment projects in Bangladesh. Institutional strengthening is a long process but the right direction and progress toward this is extremely important. Adoption of eGovernment will not only improve the internal efficiency of the Bangladesh public service, but will also facilitate international business connectivity and transactions, as well as fulfill other international agenda including poverty alleviation and attainment of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) set by the United Nations.

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