

Creating a Digital Bangladesh

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SHEIKH HASINA is the daughter of Bangladesh's founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Following his assassination in 1975 she went into exile, only returning in 1981. She was a leading figure in opposing military rule in Bangladesh, and after serving in opposition was elected to her first term as Prime Minister in 1996. Following more time in opposition and exile during the subsequent political upheavals and military and caretaker governments in Bangladesh, her Awami League party won an overwhelming majority in the December 2008 election. She has vowed to build a Digital Bangladesh by 2021.

Human development, in my opinion, is a process of expanding possibilities and choices through widening human capacity. The pace of economic development cannot be sustained in the longer term without adequate improvement in human development indicators. The Digital Bangladesh Vision 2021 agenda is a long-term vision of poverty reduction and human development by leveraging the flexibility and ubiquity of indigenous information and communication technologies (ICTs). Through it, for the first time in the country's history, such a vision to reach middle-income status by 2021 was presented to the nation to inspire unprecedented innovation and widespread collaboration. It is a unique vision as it proposes to drive the country's sustainable development agenda by striking the right balance between equitable human development and national economic progress. We believe this was a primary driver for our forming the government in 2009 and our re-election in early 2014.

In this journey, we are already witnessing the potential of ICTs as a critical enabler to the nation's struggle to achieve economic, cultural, and social emancipation. Bangladesh's achievement of the lower-middle income status was heralded by the fact that it now boasts the world's fifth-fastest growing economy with a consistent GOP growth rate of around 6 per cent for the last five plus years. It has also become the world's 37th largest economy with a GDP of over US\$500 billion. With the capital Dhaka ranking third in freelance IT and IT-enabled services outsourcing globally, over 125 million mobile phone users, 43 million internet users, 14 million Facebook users and 99 per cent geographical coverage invoice and data connectivity, the country is in the fast lane towards massive digitisation. Registered mobile money accounts in Bangladesh are growing faster than in any other country and contributing immensely to the cause of financial inclusion. The impact of this digitisation process on human development is visible already – Bangladesh's social indicators such as gender equity, women's empowerment, life expectancy, primary school enrolment, reduction in child and maternal mortality rates and health hazards are remarkably better than those of neighbouring countries with much higher GDPs.

In recognition of these remarkable achievements,

Bangladesh received the MDG Award from the UN in 2010 for reduction of child mortality; South-South Visionary Award in 2011, also from the UN, for best use of ICT in the health sector; an award from the International Organisation of South-South Cooperation in 2013 for special contribution to poverty reduction; Global ICT Excellence Award from World IT and Services Alliance in 2014; and the World Summit on the Information Society Award from ITU in 2014 and 2015 for best use of ICT for information and service delivery to the underserved.

With 'Digital Bangladesh' as a driving national agenda, our goal is to build a Golden Bengal – poverty free, steadily progressive and steeped in democratic values – a goal cherished by the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

A Top-Down Strategy Coupled with Bottom-Up Implementation

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) allow unprecedented leapfrogging – something that can disproportionately fast-track the rate of development of countries. This realisation has prompted my office's Access to Information (a2i) Programme, with technical support from UNDP and USAID, to directly spearhead the digital transformation. The Cabinet Division provides coordination amongst all line ministries and field administration for widespread administrative buy-in; the Local Government Division hosts one-stop digital centres in all of the thousands of local government offices and institutions across the country for deeper citizens' access; the ICT Division and Posts and Telecommunications Division are aggressively laying connectivity in all nooks and corners of the country. All line ministries have signed Annual Performance Agreements that incorporate simplification of service delivery along with digitisation.

To ensure that the dividends of a Digital Bangladesh's progress were shared equitably by all, especially the most vulnerable of citizens, we formulated a 4-pronged strategy: i) developing human resource that can take a Digital Bangladesh forward; ii) ensuring high-speed internet connectivity to extend access to Digital Bangladesh for all citizens; iii) establishing a Digital Government to improve and increase pro-poor services; and iv) leveraging ICTs to promote access to markets by disadvantaged producers and businesses.

Nurturing our Biggest Asset: Human Resources

We are fully aware that without enabling conditions, knowledge, skills and capacity, we will not be able to go far in achieving our Digital Bangladesh vision. Taking advantage of modern and cost effective delivery tools and digital learning contents, the aim was to build the competencies needed to compete in the globalised 21st century world.

The 'National ICT in Education Roadmap' has been able to take the nation towards unprecedented adoption of ICTs in both public and private classrooms. In fact, it is not 'ICT Education' but rather 'ICT for Education' that is the principle that underpins our government's initiatives. We have established multimedia classrooms in over 4,500 primary schools, 18,500+ secondary schools and 5,000+ Madrassas. The initiatives have led to the enhancement of learning and played a role in reforming traditional education systems, increasing access to pedagogical resources and enhancing pedagogical techniques. Over 70,000 teachers are co-creating digital content and collaborating on a virtual platform known as the 'Teachers' Portal'.

Socioeconomic development with the use of ICTs is visible in many respects. As part of the process of developing human resources in ICT, we have trained over 55,000 youth. Other ICT-focused projects have also been initiated to link the country's youth, especially women, to local and international markets through freelance and outsourcing training and to generate sustainable livelihood opportunities for all people with disabilities.

Connecting the Unconnected

Ensuring access to a Digital Bangladesh for all citizens, poor or rich, literate or illiterate, urban or rural is another foundation stone of our strategy. The key objective of this component was to find sustainable channels so that people could benefit from all that the country had to offer in a manner that was easy to use and affordable. We have reduced the price of international internet bandwidth by about 90 per cent in the last six years making the internet affordable to the marginalised. 3G services are being provided in telecom and internet services while 4G is in the pipeline. Our own satellite is in the works to be launched by 2017. We have already established submarine and on-the-land communication infrastructure, including the establishment of over 25,000 km of fibre optic cabling.

A particular emphasis was laid on establishing two-way channels to promote participation of the grassroots in policy discourse and provide feedback to policy makers. Our ICT Division has taken a number of large initiatives to develop robust high speed connectivity within the government, to allow much more transparent and faster decision making.

Bringing Higher Accountability, Transparency and Efficiency to Government

The key objective of pursuing the establishment of a 'Digital Government' was to leverage technology to ensure delivery of much needed services to those who were the least served. Over 5,000 ICT-empowered one-stop service delivery outlets popularly known as 'Digital Centres' are operating in rural areas, with financing from the government, private sector and local entrepreneurs. These centres were established with the aim to a) bring services to citizens' doorsteps, b) redistribute knowledge and expertise from urban to rural, c) pave the way for an inclusive economic sphere, and d) create linkages to government processes through decentralised local governance. Many ministries have redesigned their services to make them 'e-deliverable' through these centres. Every month, over 4 million hard-to-reach citizens electronically access diverse critical services including over 60 public services such as birth registration, land records, exam results, and registration for work permits abroad through these digital centres conveniently located only about 3 km from a typical rural citizen's home, whereas district government offices can be 40 km away.

Innovations like 'e-Filing' and Digital Land Records system are replacing archaic bureaucratic traditions that saw a service request by a citizen spend numerous months crisscrossing myriad government officers' desks. The whole process now takes place online. While villagers used to have to travel to the district government office multiple times to get a certified copy of their land records, the rural Digital Centres now allow online submission of requests and doorstep delivery saving tens of millions of dollars and precious workdays for them.

We launched the National e-Infopedia, the country's largest e-content repository of livelihood information in the vernacular, created in partnership with 300+ universities. Moreover, my government has created one single address, www.bangladesh.gov.bd by virtually uniting all forty-two thousand of its offices, detailed information on nearly 400 services from forty ministries and agencies and a thousand government forms in one virtual location. Possibly one of the largest government information portals under one umbrella in the world, this is the most visible implementation of proactive information disclosure under the Right to Information Act in Bangladesh.

The legal and policy facilitation for all this was achieved through the formulation of functional laws, policies and directives. The age-old Secretariat Instructions, considered the bible for the bureaucracy, has been revamped to include massive digitisation. The ICT Act 2006 has been amended in 2013; a 'Cyber Security Strategy' by the ICT Division and 'Proactive Information Disclosure Guideline' by the Information Commission are being adopted. E

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