Does Access to Information Facilitate Empowerment of Citizens? Answer Lies Within- A Recent Example of Bangladesh

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Abstract

This particular paper investigates how access to information empowers people. Using the example of Union Information and Service Centre (UISC) the paper argues that better accessibility to information can have a major influence in empowering citizens in Bangladesh since there is a correlation between information access and empowerment. The paper also argues that access to information increases people's ability to make their own choices, which validates Kabeer's proposition on empowerment. Thus, it can be claimed that UISC can be a model to other developing countries, and similar findings can strengthen its application and generalization as an independent theory.

Key Words

Empowerment, Information access, Public choice, Bangladesh

Introduction

How different is today's world in development disclosure and how have been the definitions of development changed over the years? Probably, the most appropriate word to refer to development in the twentieth century is, 'knowledge'. Living in today's world, if a country fails to understand the importance of knowledge, it is really difficult for them to find out a better way to sustainable development. Information is knowledge and knowledge can contribute to a society in many

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different ways. Access to information can make people enlightened about so many things, through which, they can actually avail various opportunities from public offerings (Neuman, 2002 cited in Baroi, 2013). They can negotiate with state and non-state actors and also exercise their rights through the knowledge they gathered, which can help them improve their standards of living (ibid).

Bangladesh, though emerging as an economic force in South Asia, its development has always been affected by natural disasters, political instability, and corruption. World Bank (2003: 36) asserted, "When the crucial information and communication needs of the poor go unmet, quality of life may significantly degrade, resulting in social exclusion, marginalization, isolation, alienation and humiliation". Thus, it has become a challenge for Bangladesh to keep a large number of populations out of poverty, something also manifested in the Millennium Development Goals and country specific strategy papers. To come out of this situation, it demands a dynamic change in the way of defining society and development. Therefore, it is very important for Bangladesh to take necessary initiatives not only to make information available, especially for people living in the rural part, but also make its best use. In connection with that, the government has a major role to play. It should take the right kind of policy, place proper infrastructure and make the best implementation they could ever do. The Union Information and Service Center (hereinafter UISC) is an initiative taken by the government of Bangladesh as a part of its long term vision for establishing 'Digital Bangladeshi' by 2021. The main objective of the initiative is to make information and services available at the doorstep of an ordinary person by incorporating information technology into different spheres of life (Manik & Zaman, 2011). Building upon the concept of Public Private Partnership (PPP), UISCs are run by young boys and girls, known as entrepreneurs. They are basically self-employed, not paid by the Government of Bangladesh (ibid). It is expected that the introduction of UISCs would save time, energy, and money. By making various kinds of services available to people, it actually bridges gap between urban and rural population. Here, this particular paper is an attempt to understand, how far better accessibility to information empowers people to make their own choices. In order to attain this general objective, two specific research questions have been raised in this paper that includes: (1) whether or not access to information contributes to empowerment? and (ii) how empowerment is related to access to information?

The study is based on empirical data collected from 4 UISCs under Rajshahi district that were chosen on a random basis in 2013. The sample technique applied in the study was simple random and occasionally judgmental. Semi-structured interview, direct observation and focus group discussions were the

main tools used in the study for data collection. The data collected and used in the study, were mostly qualitative. However, quantitative data have been used on a limited scale to supplement conclusion drawn from qualitative data.[ii]

Study Background

Bangladesh has been in the development discussions since independence. It is often claimed that, a lot of changes, which have been taking place in Bangladesh over the last few decades, are a result of development actors, especially NGOs, who have been actively involved in addressing poverty and community development. There is no denying the fact that NGOs have reached wider population through micro finance, maternal and child health care, and immunization. However, it is almost impossible to expect NGOs to do wonders in different and diverse areas. It is, in fact, the responsibility of the state to provide services of different kinds to the citizens.

Literatures on political and social sciences suggest that, one of the main challenges of public administration in Bangladesh is lack of transparency and accountability, which is also the reason why Bangladesh has been found as one of the most corrupted countries in the world in successive years (Khan, 2003). The approach towards service delivery in Bangladesh is secretive and the amount of transparency needed is missing. The Social Safety Net Program iii in Bangladesh is a great example of how secretive the service delivery approach could be and in the recent years, it is quite often that reports of mismanagement and misappropriation are published in the newspapers and in the development literatures (Shoban, 1998; Mannan and Paul-Majumder, 2003; Bode, 2002; Hobley, 2003; Matin and Hulme, 2003, World Bank, 2003a cited in Baroi, 2013). Lack of information about the services is one of the major reasons of such irregularities (Halim, 2011). Often, there is no or insufficient information regarding various services available in different government as well as non-government institutions (ibid). People hardly have any idea of how much food grain is allocated to each beneficiary or how the lists of beneficiaries are prepared at community level (Baroi, 2013). Unless people are aware of what is happening around them, it is impossible for them to make their own choices in availing services from government institutions (ibid).

Access to information is a pre-requisite for a transparent and accountable governing system. It allows common people to get opportunities to think about alternatives, use whatever capacities they have and mobilize resources to initiate development interventions in the development process. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) plays an important role in a country's devel-

opment. Information creates awareness among people which make them to believe in themselves and most importantly, with the knowledge they can contribute to their own development and also to the overall development of the country (Chakma, 2000). Many of the neighboring countries like India and others have realized the importance ICT in addressing poverty (Manik & Zaman, 2011). Bangladesh is also trying to match up with these countries in the region by introducing various initiatives and making ICT work for the disadvantaged rural population. The introduction to 'Right to Information Act 2009' and the vision of 'Digital Bangladesh by 2012' reflect the country's willingness to bring about changes in this direction.

Theoretical Discussion

From Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy theory, which focuses on the transformation of the way educators viewed the poor and marginalized, to Taylor's Scientific Management Theory, a theory, which, though, has been incredibly successful in increasing productivity, failed to satisfy workers, or Elton Mayo's Human Relation Theory, all have their shares which contributed to the concept of empowerment. Various disciplines with different perspectives, for instance, social, economic, cultural and political, have interpreted empowerment in own ways. Due to the kind of importance it has received in development agenda in the recent years, there has been the tendency to introduce empowerment as a new concept (Wilkinson, 1998). The concept of empowerment has been there for many years, but it emerged as a concept that replaces unauthentic participationiv in the 1990s. Empowerment attempts to promote meaningful or authentic participation, which ensures decision-making authority to people, who also have to bear the consequences of the same (McArdle, 1989).

Empowerment as a concept has gone a step further, encompassing both weak and strong forms of participation. It represents strong forms of participation, trying to see people involved in development interventions from need identification to decision making and resource mobilization to action (Onyx and Benton, 1996). It is not only about the achievement of goals but also about deciding the process (Gergis, 1999). People's Empowerment talks about creating opportunities for participation and both participation and empowerment are interconnected, since for meaningful participation, it is important that, people are empowered to contribute in the development process (Sidorenko, 2007).

Empowerment in different socio-economic, cultural, political contexts, takes different meanings and lots of these variations are due to local value system and

beliefs. However, if we combine these perspectives and try to develop a unified meaning of empowerment, it could be defined as improvement of people's participation, which might come with an increase in productive asset and human capacities (Narayan, 2002). This could give people opportunities to negotiate, influence or control and hold various government and other institutions accountable (ibid). Pritchett and Woolcock (2004) have defined empowerment as a process that changes existing power relations and try to establish greater control over power (Pritchett and Woolcock, 2004: 16).

Kabeer (2001) in her framework has seen empowerment under three major dimensions, namely; access to resources, agency and achievements (Kabeer, 2001). According to Kabeer (2001), Empowerment can be also seen as "the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was denied to them" (Kabeer, 2001:19). Agreeing with Kabeer's proposition, which sees empowerment as people's ability to make choices of their own, this paper has seen empowerment as enhancement of people's capacity to make choices. Kabeer (2001) in her study argues that resources not only material resources, but also human and social resources play an important role in enhancing people's capacity to make choices. Agency on the other hand represents the sense of power or ability to take decisions. Achievements refer to outcome of empowerment.

Empowerment is influenced by various factors. Access to information is one of the most important elements, which determine empowerment as people's ability to make their own choices in availing services. Kabeer (2001)'s work sees resources as a precondition to empowerment. Access to information as resources allows people to make choices and involve in the decision making process. The general hypothesis to carry out establishing relationship between empowerment and access to information, set here is: Empowerment is connected to information access and the question to make their own choices to avail public services depends on, how well procedures and arrangements are made to make information accessible to the people.
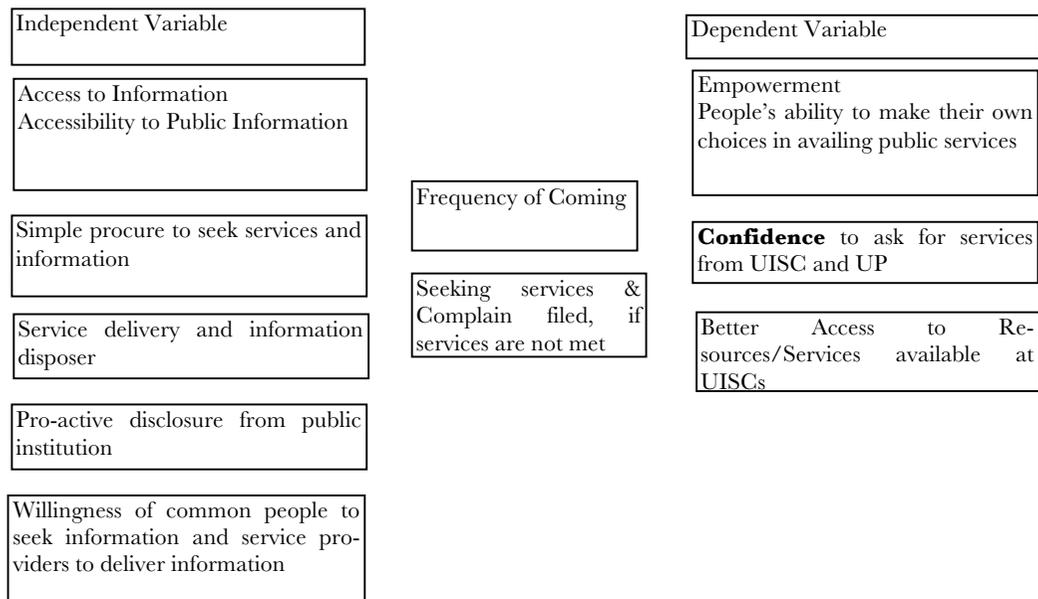
Hypothesis: The more accessible public information is the higher will be the possibility of people to be empowered.

In this particular paper, access to information has been considered as an independent variable. It has been operationalized as people's ability to access public information, which is dependent on how simple the procedure for seeking information and how services are delivered to service recipients and also on provision of pro-active disclosure of information without application.

On the other hand, empowerment is the dependent variable. Here empowerment is operationalized as people's ability to make choices in accessing services from UISCs. Going back to Kabeer's framework, empowerment as people's ability to make choices is based on three resources, agency and achievements. Here, the achievement as outcome of empowerment in the context of the study is further measured by the confidence of the common people to ask for services from UISCs and Union Parishads[v] (UP) and better access to various services and resources. The operational indicator of empowerment is based on the facts, how confident people are to seek various services, how frequently they come to visit UISC or how quickly their queries and demands have been served. If the study findings reveal that, people have become more confident to stand up for their rights and get quick responses from supply side actors, not only once but at regular intervals, is definitely is empowering them. The argument of Kabeer (2001) on resources stands for capacity to strengthen the empowerment process. Here in the study, resources represent people's capacity to seek services and information. Access to information as resources and agency, is the independent variable. Resources is operationalized as to procure to seek services and information and implementer's disposition at service delivery and information disposer, whereas agency is seen as the willingness of people at supply and demand side to seek and deliver information.

Figure-1: Analytical Framework of the Study

| Independent Variable |
| Access to Information
Accessibility to Public Information |
| Simple procure to seek services and information |
| Service delivery and information disposer |
| Pro-active disclosure from public institution |
| Willingness of common people to seek information and service providers to deliver information |

| Frequency of Coming |
| Seeking services & Complain filed, if services are not met |

| Dependent Variable |
| Empowerment
People's ability to make their own choices in availing public services |
| **Confidence** to ask for services from UISC and UP |
| Better Access to Resources/Services available at UISCs |

If this is so, then does it have anything to do with access to information? If yes, then, is it because of the procedure that has been followed at UISCs and disclosure of important information proactively and also due to the clarity and understanding the people at service delivery have about their roles and particularly responsibilities regarding the dissemination of information and providing services at UISCs. When that is established, the correlation between empowerment and information access can be justified. As the discussion progresses, the paper tries to find out answers to those propositions and justifies the stand it takes as the paper ends (The details of analytical framework is given in Figure 1).

Table 1: Have you ever been to the UISC since it started?

Response	Number(Percentage)
Yes	27 (75%)
No	9 (25%)
Total	36 (100%)

Source: Field interview, 2012

Empowerment: People's ability to make their own choices

When a particular policy is taken, it is really important to understand, how the target population thinks about the program and how they accept the entire process. The outcome of the program or policy depends on how its target population takes on board. UISC definitely has a vision, which is, to reach the common people and provide them all the necessary information and services available. To what extent, the capacity of the people to make their choices and ask for a particular service, has been fulfilled by UISCs, is something that has been the focus of this paper.

Confidence

People, to make their own choice of particular public services, need confidence and once people have that confidence to make decisions about choosing what service they want to avail and what not to. To measure confidence, the dimension in the study has been to examine how frequently people are coming to UISCs and what are their perceptions towards the service providing unit, here UISCs. Therefore, it is assumed that, the more people come to UISC the greater will be the possibility of them to feel confident about the institution and the services they provide. The table shows that, 75% of the participants who have been interviewed have come to UISC, at least once in their lifetime (Table-1).

This clearly gives an indication that people are aware of UISC and have started accessing services from UISCs. Such proposition seems convincing when it was found that a respondent expressed that: "I was not aware of the kind of services available at UISC. One day, I went to the UISC to collect a Birth Registration Certificate for my son. I never had an idea of what and how UISC was operating. When I reached there, I was very happy about the services they offered me. I had to spend a little time to get my work done. It actually reduced my cost as I didn't have to go to the city to get things done from there. When I came back to my village, I did inform my friends and neighbours about UISCs. People from my place are going to the UISCs quite regularly these days (Interview Data, 2012)".

Thetable-2 here shows that 45% of the respondents visited UISC once in 6 months, while 19% and 30% visited UISC almost every month and at least once in every three months respectively. This indicates that people are coming to UISCs on a frequent basis. The finding seems convincing when a respondent mentioned that: "When I first came to UISC, was just to fill up a form which I needed for my visa purpose. My father who was suffering from some cardiac problem needed to see a doctor in India. I never had an idea, whether the people who are working at UISCs would be capable enough to do that. But, I am very convinced now, they can do it efficiently and I have actually recommended my friends to visit UISC whenever they need to fill in any forms regarding visa or even for other applications (Interview Data, 2012).

It was also found that services at UISCs were delivered very quickly. 63% of the respondents replied this question positively as compared to 22% who felt that services were delivered at a moderate speed (Table-3). This is indicative of a very positive result when it is seen that a primary school teacher expressed that "Yes, I do feel that the way UISCs are performing, is praiseworthy. I went there twice and I didn't have to wait long. I remember there was a time when we had to come twice or thrice to receive a certificate from Union Parishad. So I'm quite happy with their services" (Interview Data, 2012).

Table 2: Q. How often do you visit the UISC?

Response	Number(Percentage)
Once a week	1(2%)
Once in 15 days	1(2%)
Once in a month	5(19%)
Once in every 3 months	8(30%)
Once in every 6 months	12(45%)
Total	27(100%)

Source: Field interview, 2012

One of the encouraging finding is that the quality of service was also satisfactory along with quick delivery of services as 89% of the respondents found either very happy (22%) or happy (67%) about the quality of services (Table-4). Such findings can be substantiated by a response of a female respondent who mentioned that "I first heard about such services from my UP member (Female). She used to come to our village and told us about UISCs. She even told us that there is a female attendant at the service centre. This was the first time I went there to get service from them and I'm glad that I went there. Now I feel confident and I have also recommended many of our villagers to visit UISC and ask for different services (Interview data, 2012)."

Table 3: How quickly do you think services are provided?

Response	Number (Percentage)
Quick	17 (63%)
Moderate	6 (22%)
Slow	2 (7.5%)
Very Slow	2 (7.5%)
Total	27 (100%)

Source: Field interview, 2012

Thus, it can be claimed that the introduction of UISC has definitely brought something very new to the service receivers, something they have never experienced in the past. Experience of service delivery at UP level has always been questioned in the past and people had a kind of a negative perception about local government institutions. They had to wait for particular services for a long time, and that too didn't guarantee to have access to those services. From the discussion here, it is visible that UISCs with different approaches to service delivery, has managed to draw attention of the people and most of the people feel confident about going to UISC and asking for services. It can be concluded here by saying that, people now have the choices to make decisions about the services they want to avail. They are coming to the UISCs at a regular interval. It is indeed a sign of empowerment and people now feel confident in making their own choices and they can now ask for their services and right to access information.

Table 4: How do you describe your experience of service delivery at UISCs?

Response	Number(Percentage)
Very happy	6(22%)
Happy	18(67%)
Unhappy	1(4%)
No Comment	2(7%)
Total	27(100%)

Source: Field interview, 2012

Better Access to Resources and Services

UISCs, as a service delivery unit, have been providing numerous services at community level. With an objective to reach people living in rural parts of the country, UISCs has introduced these services. Now, there have been lots of services which, a villager could not even imagine a few years back. Whether it is information related to agriculture or legal issues like domestic abuse, the UISC, now, has started delivering different kinds of services for which, a villager is no longer required to go to the city.[vi] There have been some common services which were available in all the UISCs. In terms of diversity and the way they delivered it, varied to each other, as UISC is built on the concept of Public Private Partnership (PPP) and people at service delivery who are not paid by any government or non-government agencies, have to rely on the income they generate from services they are offering. As a result, each UISC has its unique way of providing services and the intention has been to attract as many as people it could. The encouraging part of UISCs is that, people do not have to travel a long distance to avail that, usually walking a distance of a few kilometers from where they live. Thus, it can be said that UISC has brought a new dimension to the service delivery pattern in rural Bangladesh that can surely be considered as the 'Local Knowledge Hub[vii]' where information and services are made available at the doorsteps of the people.

Table 5: What was your purpose of visit to UISCs?

Type of Services	Number(Percentage)
Certificate/ Forms Others	17 (63%)
Information (Agriculture, Test Relief & other kinds)	2 (7%)
Photocopy & Print1	(4%)
Filling up forms/application5	(19%)
Others	2(7%)
Total	27(100%)

Source: Field interview, 2012

While identifying specific purposes for which people usually visit UISCs and the kind of services that they want to avail, it was found that the majority of the service receivers (63%) usually visit UISCs for the purpose of collecting certificate of different types. This is followed by 7% and 19% of the respondents who visited UISCs for the purpose of collecting information related to Test Relief (TR)[viii], agriculture and other services like photocopies, and for filling up forms and applications respectively (Table-5). The response of a student clearly specifies that the introduction of UISCs has made different services available to them that were not even made available at the Upazila headquarters a few years ago. He said: "I'm a first year Bachelor of Social Science (BSS) student. I'm studying in Rajshahi College. I often go to the UISC especially when I need to make photocopies and also

print reading materials. But this was different few years back when I was in the school. During that time, my father used to take me to Upazila whenever I needed to make some photocopies. I also collected my Higher Secondary Results from my Union Parishad. This is really very good for students like me or many others who are studying in my union. They can now, not only avail these services from UISCs at an affordable price, but also can get them at their doorsteps (Interview Data, 2012)."

The discussion here can clearly indicate that there has been significant improvements in the way services have been provided and the kind of services these institutions are providing. The entire outlook of service delivery has been changed and most important people now know how and where to ask for services and what they are entitled to. The services are provided within a reasonable time frame, which is impressive and it definitely contributes to empower people to come out from their comfort zone and ask for services they are entitled to.

Access to Information and Empowerment

The discussion above has made the point very clear that, people have become empowered as they can now make their own choices in availing services at UISCs. However, it is yet to be seen whether it has to do with the way information is made accessible to UISC, the procedures which have been followed at service delivery and information disclosure and most importantly, the people at disposal. This particular section explores the correlation between access to information and empowerment of people.

Procedure to seek services and information

The study finds that, each UISC maintains a list of services, which is displayed in the office and they also have individuals to assist service recipients. There is one male and one female entrepreneur in each UISC, which makes it easy for both male and female recipients to ask for services they want from UISC entrepreneurs. In most cases, the office opens at 9 a.m. and closes at 5 p.m. It was even found that on some occasions the office remained open after office hours depending on the demands. In general, it has a very simple procedure to follow and the services are provided following 'first come, first served' principle. There is hardly any pressure and people who have been interviewed were found happy with the way it operates. While expressing his satisfaction, one respondent expressed that: "I think this is a very good idea to bring services to the doorsteps of the people. What we haven't dreamt of a few years back, is now in our hands. All I have to do is to come and ask for services and they are ready to help me out. However,

there are people in our area who are unaware of such services and that should be taken care of. People's representatives and educated people should take up the responsibility to make maximum number of people aware of this (Interview Data, 2012)."

One encouraging finding is that the entrepreneurs were mostly students from the colleges and universities, who work at UISCs on a part time basis. This gives them an opportunity to earn some money, which they can use for their studies. This is a big motivational factor for them to contribute to UISCs in delivering timely and quality services. An entrepreneur expressed that: "The whole concept of UISCs is very unique. I'm a student, and when I do not have classes, I spend my time here. I don't have to depend on anyone for the expenses of my studies. I even contribute to my family. I own this centre and more than that, I'm able to provide services to the people. The most important thing is that, people who stopped coming to the Union Parishad some years back are now coming back here in good numbers and that makes the difference (Interview Data, 2012)." The entire system, around which the UISC is operating, is simple and both service providers and service recipients have found it useful. This goes with the proposition that simple and easy procedure can make information access easy and easy access to information can empower people.

Implementer's disposition at service delivery and information disposer

A successful programme cannot be run without the support of people who are implementing it. It is very important thus for UISC that the entrepreneurs maintain consistency in delivering services. The study finds that, possibly the best thing that happened to UISCs was entrepreneurs who were young and energetic and the idea of self-reliance worked very well with UISCs. They were quick to respond and training course they were receiving had contributed to their performances. While commenting on UISC, one UP secretary expressed:

"There was a time when Union Parishad was dying. Nobody used to come to Union Parishad. Even the representatives were irregular in the Union Parishad. Actually, Union Parishad was lacking responsibilities and funds. Things have changed over the years. Unions are receiving funds from Local Governance Support Project (LGSP), Sharique and even NGOs are coming with ideas where they are expressing their willingness to work with Union Parishad. UISC is the newest addition, which brings lots of changes in the entire outlook of the service delivery at Union level. Now we are not only providing Birth Registration certificates

here, but we have introduced a whole range of services which include photocopying, print, online registration, results of public examination etc. People are coming in good numbers to Union Parishad. This has simply brought a revolutionary change, something which I haven't seen before during my service tenure (Interview Data, 2012)".

It is also encouraging to note that entrepreneurs have a clear understanding of what their roles are and how they should be discharging such responsibilities. The study reveals that 100% of the respondents received training on UISCs, which, according to them, helped to understand their responsibilities. All respondents (100%) expressed that they have a clear understanding about the role. Here, it is evident that, as people who were well aware of the roles and responsibilities, the performance of the UISCs in terms of making people happy and satisfied with the services at UISCs, has gone up. This has built trust among the people on the system and the confidence among people has been increased. A highly motivated employee at service disclosure has ensured better access to information and better access to information has contributed to better access to services. This justifies the correlation between better access of information and empowerment of people.

Proactive Disclosure

In most of the UISCs, they maintain a list which is usually hung in front of the centre or in a place which is visible to everyone. It has all the relevant information about the services, the cost of services and contact details of service providers. There are also billboards, and display boards within and outside UP premise that are providing relevant information about different services and arrangement of UISCs. This actually helps people to know about services and relevant information they find necessary before asking for a particular service. While expressing his feeling on information disclosure, a respondent said: "I am very happy to see that they have put the necessary information displayed on a board. This is useful. Now, you don't even have to ask them, whether they are providing a particular service or not, you can see from the list whether they have it or not. Once you are convinced, you just need to ask them to serve. It's very simple and effective (Interview Data, 2012)"

The above discussion justifies the point that accessibility of information in an easy way can build confidence among the people. This gives them a feeling that there is nothing hidden from them and pro-active disclosure can build trust among people towards the institution. Once they find that, they start building confidence and feel empowered to go for the service they want to buy.

Willingness of common people to seek information and service providers to deliver information

As Kabeer pointed out, the agency is important, since no matter how resources are placed, outcome of empowerment is strongly related to willingness, here willingness of people at recipients' end and those offering services and information. The study found that 67% of the respondents felt that it is important to seek information from public institutions. At the same time, 88% of those who felt that seeking information from public institution is important, we're also ready to take up the responsibility of asking about the services by themselves. This indicates that, most service seekers have the willingness to seek information and want to have better access to information. On the other hand, 100% of the respondents from supply side actors like UISCs entrepreneurs, UP representatives and UP secretary show willingness to make information available. While expressing his feeling on willingness, a school teacher said:

"I have been working my whole life in the villages and have seen how local institutions have worked in the past. People have to be blamed for not being willing to stand for their dues. The idea of UISC has definitely changed the way service delivery has been over so many years. People at the service disposal have also come out well with a very positive mindset to service delivery. The good thing about the whole thing is the way. Access to various kinds of services and information has generated a sense of ownership among people and they are now more willing to take part in various activities at the UP level (Interview Data, 2012)."

As pointed out earlier that in the process of empowerment, people get involved and willing to participate in the process. The study revealed that, people have actively participated in seeking various kinds of information from the UISCs, which made the program extremely popular among various stakeholders and brought service at the doorsteps of common people. Thus, it can be claimed that information access has a correlation with empowerment. This justifies the hypothesis and has convincingly come out of the discussion that the more accessible public information the higher will be the possibility of people to be empowered.

Conclusion

Information is knowledge and knowledge is the ultimate source of empowerment. In today's world, a citizen without having information in place cannot make important decisions, which could change their lives. UISC has proved to be an innovative concept in the context of service delivery in Bangladesh. It has changed the traditional service delivery approach and has taken service delivery to a new

level in Bangladesh. The study has established the correlation between information access and empowerment. UISC can be a model for other developing countries and similar findings can strengthen its application and generalization as an independent theory. The study, however, could not find any variation regarding diversity in background of the respondents. One of the reasons might be that the respondents were selected purposively where only those were chosen who had been to UISCs and received services. The study is not denying the possibility of variation among people who have not been aware of the UISC and have never been to UISCs before.

The finding of this study also proves Kabeer (2001)'s proposition who sees empowerment as people's ability to make choices of their own. In the context of this paper, access to information has proved to be an important actor that has increased people's ability to make their own choices in availing services from the local government bodies which were almost dying a few years back when the UISC was not in existence.

End Notes

i. *'Digital Bangladesh'* is a vision of the Awami League (AL) led-alliance set for the youth during the national election in 2008. This was a part of a transformative vision they have set as a commitment to make Bangladesh a modern, technologically sophisticated and networked country by the time of the fiftieth anniversary of its independence in 2021.

ii. Both demand and supply side respondents were interviewed in this study. From demand side, a total of 36 community people were interviewed purposively. Among them, 27 were common people, 4 were students, 2 were small business owners, 2 were school teachers, and 01 was journalist. In addition, 8 entrepreneurs 2 from each UP, 4 UP secretaries and a total of 15 UP representatives including 3 UP members were interviewed purposively. Random or judmental?

iii. Social safety nets, or "socioeconomic safety nets", are non-contributory transfer programs seeking to prevent the poor or those vulnerable to shocks and poverty from falling below a certain poverty level. Safety net programs can be provided by the public sector (the state and aid donors) or by the private sector (NGOs, private firms, charities, and informal household transfers). Safety net transfers include Cash transfers, Food-based programs such as supplementary feeding programs and food stamps, vouchers, and coupons, In-kind transfers such as school supplies and uniforms, Conditional cash transfers, Price subsidies for food, elec-

    tricity, or public transport Public works, Fee waivers and exemptions for health care, schooling and utilities.

iv.   Unauthentic participation refers to a state where could participate in a project, but have no power to take decision on different issues related to the project.

v.   Union Parishad is the lowest tier of Local Government System in Bangladesh.

vi.   Services that have been made available at UISCs include: (1) Citizenship certificate, birth registration, death certificate, and marriage certificate; (2) VGD/VGF lists and information related to TR, Food for Work etc.; (3) Registration for university exams and results of public examinations; (4) Government circulars and notices, (5) Government Forms; (6) Agriculture and Health related information; (7) Licenses and NGO Certificate; (8) Revenue (Porcha, Khas land distribution, Ashrayon, Non-agricultural land; purchase, land acquisition money, requisition, certificate suit, hat & bazaar, vested property, exchange property, stamp vendor license, land survey); and (9) Government life insurance and Relief and Rehabilitation (Donation and Grant related). In addition to these services there are some services that are being delivered at UISCs include: (1) Email and internet browsing; (2) Mobile Banking (bKash), Dutch Bangla Bank; (3) Mercantile, Trust Bank, One Bank); (4) Computer Training & English Learning Course; (5) Soil and Arsenic testing; (6) Job information; (7) Passport processing, Visa application and tracking; (8) Service camp; (9) Videoconference; (10) Printing, Scanning, and Laminating; (11) Composing, Photocopying; (12) Mobile servicing; (13) Height & weight measurement; and (14) Deed writing.

vii.   Local Knowledge Hub, here, refers to a place, which has all the relevant information, can be considered as information bank in rural local government structure.

viii.   TR is a special grant allocated by the government for the Member of Parliament (MP) for distribution among poor people.

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