E-governance Initiatives in Bangladesh: Some Observations

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Abstract
Even though e-governance is not a new phenomenon, it has been discussed much as a strategy of combating corruption, ensuring people’s participation, transparent and citizen-centric administration, providing better services at the least cost and thus in ensuring good governance in developing nations during the last two decades. Like in many other countries, the present Bangladesh government has taken e-governance as one of its major development policies in ensuring good governance. Surprisingly, regardless of enormous flow of e-governance, it has been claimed that its goals are not easy to achieve due to various administrative, organizational, contextual and technical reasons. This paper tries to explore the initiatives of e-governance in Bangladesh i.e. how much e-governance initiatives have been taken? Are the existing institutions capable enough in implementing the e-governance initiatives? And what are the challenges of practicing e-governance initiatives? Answers to these questions have been explored from both the primary and secondary sources. The findings suggest that lack of awareness on e-governance, lack of long-term strategic plan, centralization of e-governances, lack of e-based public official culture and conflicting political culture are the major threats in implementing e-governance initiatives in Bangladesh.

Introduction
Albeit e-governance is not a new phenomenon, it has become a promising and a fundamental issue in the contemporary development debate of developing countries. Undeniably, e-governance is a great innovation of science. It has changed the way of living, the way of thinking and the way of designing social, political, economic and administrative aspects of the state tremendously. The contribution of information and communication technologies (ICT) into administration has led to believe that e-government could bring about the realization of democracy through more direct forms of people’s participation and make administration more people and service oriented, transparent and accountable (Jho, 2005:151). It is a government that delivers better programs and effective services. E-Government is about people: new skill sets, mindsets and leadership approaches. It will transform how public servants work, relate to each other, do business, and engage citizens and others (Kalsi et al, 2009). Thus, it has facilitated the globalization of the economy, business, finance and culture (Haque, 2006). During the last decade and more, e-governance
has contributed to dramatic changes in
global and local politics, state institutions,
performance management, red-tape
reduction and reengineering in both
developed and developing nations. Development practitioners believe that
ICT will emerge as a magical antidote to
reduce massive corruption, red tape,
bureaucratic elitism and inefficiency,
favoritism, lack of accountability and
transparency (Hasan, 2009:111).

Thus, e-governance aims to establish a
relationship between government officials
and citizens, providing greater access to
government information and services by
making the government accessible online;
promoting citizen participation by
enabling citizens to interact more
conveniently with government officials,
such as by requesting government service
and filing required documents through
website; increasing government
accountability by making its operations
more transparent, thereby reducing the
opportunities for corruption; and
supporting development goals by
providing business, rural and traditionally
undeserved communities with
information, opportunities and
communications capabilities. It is
therefore hoped that e-governance might
promote good governance of developing
countries. As a result, the current trend of
administrative reform is about e-
governance. In order to provide better
services to citizens and ensure people’s
participation in administration, almost
every nation particularly developing
nations has been trying to adopt ICT to
restructure their political and
administrative institutions (Haque, 2002).

Although e-governance scheme has been
taken as one of the leading development
policies by many developing countries
during the last decade, it seems that the
result is not pleasant and goals are not
easy to achieve due to various
administrative, organizational, contextual
and technical problems. More specifically,
the reasons are corruption, lack of
coordination, lack of infrastructure and
resources, limited transparency,
handicapped strategic vision and illiteracy
(Backus, 2001, Hossain, 2005). It has also
been claimed that ICT may have created a
new class of untouchables living in the
information poverty, compromised equal
access to government services and eroded
accountability and individual privacy
(Haque, 2002:232). As Kofi Annan
(2000), the former UN head, expressed
that the gap between haves and have-nots
is widening, and there is a real danger that
the world’s poor will be excluded from
the emerging knowledge-based global
economy. Nobel laureate Mohammed
Yunus (2004) also expressed fear that ICT
can be visualized as an Aladin’s Lamp in
the hand of poor people (in Hossain,
2005:17).

During the last decade and more, the
successive regimes of Bangladesh have
taken initiatives to introduce ICT in
administration. The present regime
declared the “vision 2021” in the election
manifesto aiming to establish a
resourceful and modern country by
effective use of ICT in the name of Digital
Bangladesh. The objective of “Digital
Bangladesh” comprises ensuring people’s
democracy and rights, transparency,
accountability, establishing justice and
ensuring delivery of government services
in each door through maximum use of
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technology—with the ultimate goal to improve the daily lifestyle of the general people. It promises to include all classes of people and does not discriminate people in terms of technology. Consequently, the government has emphasized on the four elements of “Digital Bangladesh Vision” which are (1) human resource development, (2) people’s participation, (3) civil services and (4) use of information technology in business.

This paper aims to explore the initiatives of ICT which have been taken by the government of Bangladesh and its challenges. ICT movement and activities in Bangladesh is very recent and time has not yet come to assess its result. However, we intend to find the problems of e-governance based on both secondary and primary information. Therefore, we have interviewed 20 e-governance related stakeholders using a formal questionnaire and two PRA sessions have been conducted at village level in order to know the grassroots views on the issue. The questionnaire has been sent to the participants through e-mail and they also sent back their feedback through e-mail as well. The participants of the PRA session were from various sectors such as Union Council Officials, school teachers, shop keepers, farmers, university students and NGO officials. In addition, secondary information has also been collected from the net (www). Primary data has been collected during November-December 2010 and March-April 2011. The paper is divided into three sections. Theoretical note on governance has been presented in the first section. Empirical observations are analyzed in the second section, and conclusion is presented in the third and final section.

**Theoretical Notes on E-governance**

E-governance is the most attractive, interesting and growing phenomenon and has become one of the central parts of administrative reform and good governance (Moon, 2002). Research (Jho, 2005) expressed that breakthroughs in ICT have promoted to inspire hopes of positive correlating the development of the internet with a deepening of democracy due to increasing people’s participation in the political arena. It is also believed that e-governance facilitates reinstate public confidence by allowing for decreases costs and barriers to political participation and the devolution of power to local institutions (Barber, 1999 in Jho, 2005:152).

According to the E-Government Act of 2002, it is the use by the government of Web-based Internet applications and other information technologies, combined with processes that implement these technologies, in order to enhance the access to and delivery of government information and services to the public, other agencies, and other government entities; or to bring about improvements in government to operations that may include effectiveness, efficiency, service quality, or transformation. In a broader perspective, e-governance is the application of ICTs for enhancing the performance of government functions and services through the utilization of digital technologies. Thus, it is a long term evolutionary process of transforming government to focus on citizen services and their participation in governance (APCICT, 2010). Another definition of E-government emphasizes that E-government differs from traditional public service delivery, because: it is electronic,
not paper based; it is available to
citizen/customers 24 hours a day, seven
days a week; and it provides information
and service delivery of various types and
degrees of complexity (Teicher et al,
2002). However, Backus (2001) states that
e-governance is more than just a
government web site on the internet. It is a
form of e-business in governance and
refers to the process and structures
pertinent to the delivery of electronic
services to the public (citizens and
business), collaborating with business
partners and conducting electronic
transactions within an organizational
entity. And it is the interaction between
government and citizens and government
and business, as well as in internal
government operations-which claims to
simplify and improve democratic,
government and business aspects of
leadership (Hossain, 2005: 9).

United Nations and American Society for
Public Administration (2001, 1) offers
insight of e-governance very broadly that
is “e-governance contains the use of all
ICTs, from fax machines to wireless palm
pilots, to facilitate the daily administration
of government. However, like e-
commerce, the popular interpretation of e-
government is one that defines it
exclusively as an Internet driven
activity… to which it may be added that
improves citizen access to government
information, services and expertise to
ensure citizen participation in, and
satisfaction with the government
process… it is a permanent commitment
by government to improving the
relationship between the private citizen
and the public sector through enhanced,
cost-effective and efficient delivery of
services, information and knowledge”.

Quite similarly, Riley (2001) defined it as
the commitment to utilize appropriate
technologies to enhance governmental
relationships, both internal and external,
in order to advance democratic
expression, human dignity and autonomy,
support economic development and
encourage the fair and efficient delivery
delivery of services. In this perspective, e-
governance consists of four internal and
external aspects (Moon, 2002) such as;

1. The establishment of a secure
government internet and central
database for more efficient and
cooperative interaction among
governmental units;
2. Web-based service delivery;
3. the application of e-commerce for
more efficient government transaction
activities; and
4. Digital democracy for transparent
accountability of government.

E-governance has been defined more
broadly by Gatner (2000). He says that e-
governance is the continuous optimization
of service delivery, constituency
participation and governance by
transforming internal and external
relationships through technology, the
internet and the media. Thus, he has given
four-phase model of e-governance:
1. Information – Presence: E-governance
means being present on the web,
providing the public with relevant
information.
2. Interaction – Intake processes: The
interaction between the government
and the public is stimulated by various
applications.
3. **Transaction – Complete transactions:**
   The complexity of technology is increasing, but customer value is also higher. Complete transactions can be done without going to an office – e.g., online services for income tax, property tax, renewal of licenses, visa and passports and online voting.

4. **Transformation – Integration and exchange:** All information systems are integrated and the public can get services at one virtual counter (Hossain, 2005: 9-10).

Based on the literature review, we can present a broad picture of e-governance with its functions such as:

- **Citizen access to government information:** Providing access to government information is the most common digital government initiative;
- **Facilitating general compliance:** E-government can also mean providing electronic access to services that facilitate compliance with a set of rules or regulations;
- **Citizen access to personal benefits:** Electronic benefits transfer and online application for public assistance and worker’s compensation are examples of services that provide the citizen with electronic access to personal benefits;
- **Procurement including bidding, purchasing, and payment:** Procurement applications allow government agencies to reap the benefits being realized in the private sector through electronic commerce applications. Electronic vendor cataloging, bid submissions and tabulations, electronic purchasing, and payment are government-to-government and government-to-business transactions that serve both the needs of government agencies as well as their private trading partners.
- **Government-to-government information and service integration:** Integrating service delivery programs across government agencies and between levels of government requires electronic information sharing and integration;
- **People’s participation:** Online democracy includes access to elected officials, discussion forums, “town meetings,” voter registration, and ultimately online voting. These services are intended to serve the community at large (Pardo, 2000)

### E-governance: Bangladesh Context

Now, e-governance is a very popular phrase in the development debates of Bangladesh. The term e-governance is known to the people by different names, for example, to the mass it is computer, to the academics it is e-governance, to the specialist it is ICT, to the students it is a discipline of computer sciences and to the politicians it is digital Bangladesh. The government realizes the strategic importance of ICT sector and had declared ICT a ‘thrust sector’ (Alam et al, 2008). Since the last national election of 2008, the term ‘Digital Bangladesh’ has become more popular in the nation.

**Digital Bangladesh a moderated concept of e-governance**

The very idea of a ‘Digital Bangladesh’ started as part of the election manifesto of the present ruling party. After the landslide victory of Awami League-led great alliance, the Prime Minister declared to transform the country into "Digital Bangladesh by 2021” (Vision, 2021) which targets the establishment of a resourceful and modern country by 2021 through effective use of ICT. The idea
captured the imagination of the whole nation even without understanding the depth or scope of the issue by the people. It generated enormous enthusiasm among the people and they started thinking it as a magic wand that might help in improving the poor governance features of the country and thus ensuring good governance.

As a comprehensive term, ‘Digital Bangladesh’ means the modern philosophy of effective and fruitful use of technology in terms of implementing the promises in education, health, job placement, poverty reduction etc. Therefore, the government underscores a changing attitude, positive thinking and innovative ideas for the success of “Digital Bangladesh”. The philosophy of “Digital Bangladesh” comprises of ensuring people’s democracy and rights, transparency, accountability, establishing justice and ensuring delivery of government services to each every door through the maximum use of technology-with the ultimate goal to improve the daily lifestyle of the general people. The government’s “Digital Bangladesh” includes all classes of people and does not discriminate people in terms of technology. Hence, government has emphasized on four elements of “Digital Bangladesh Vision” which are human resource development, people involvement, civil services and use of information technology in business.

Therefore, ‘Digital Bangladesh’ or ICT is a popular term in Bangladesh. Computer, both portable (laptop) or desktop is available and it is claimed that almost every middle class family owns a computer. It is very difficult to find an office without computers. The demand of computer has been increasing dramatically and it is said that the growth rate of computer sale has averaged approximately 32.4% annually (Hasan, 2003).

Internet service is available across the country. Internet-based activities are becoming very popular among the people of every age, and become a part of IT culture in Bangladesh. Nowadays, anyone can browse or access the internet services from any place at the minimum cost. Grameen Telecommunication has played a pioneering role in this regard and made internet services available to the mass. Over the years, Grameen philosophy has confirmed that ICT could be very useful to uplift the rural communities in Bangladesh and beyond (Hossain, 2005). Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus (2004) identified three vital areas that ICT could play an important role in helping the poor and thus eradicating poverty:

1. Integrating the poor into the mainstream economy by expanding their market, eliminating the middle-men in their business, and creating international job opportunities through service out-sourcing;
2. Bringing information, educational programs, skill training, and healthcare services, etc, all in a very user friendly way, even to the most remote villages;
3. Empowering the poor, particularly poor women, with a stronger voice that can be heard behind the borders of their villages, better access to information, and improvement in the
democratic process (cited in Hossain, 2005).

Research (2003) found a positive correlation between the uses of ICT and poverty reduction in Bangladesh. According to the findings, at the individual level, the Village Phone (VP) of Grameen Bank has contributed significantly to income generation of rural women. It has promoted their social and economic life. Socially, it has given a new status and image to those women who are getting Bank’s support to start this venture both at the family and community levels. Moreover, at the community level, it has narrowed gaps between cities and villages by enhancing frequent communication between family members. Economically, it has increased business transactions and dissemination of information (Aminuzzaman et al, 2003, cited in Bhuiyan, 2009: 41).

Alongside, many IT organizations have already been started to provide internet services to the nation. The government decided to allow private IT companies to act as ISPs using VSATs (Very Small Aperture Terminal). In 1999, there were 10 ISPs (8 in Dhaka and 2 in Chittagong), while in 2007, there are about 203 ISPs in Bangladesh among them 77 are nationwide ISPs (Alam et al, 2008). IT fairs and workshops are held throughout the year in cities, districts, and even villages. IT education has become very popular among the young generation of Bangladesh. Almost all public and private universities have four years’ bachelors program in computer science. In addition, many public and private training institutions of the country including some national and international NGOs are providing professional and basic IT training and education. Online edition of the daily newspapers both English and Bengali are available now.

As a part of the commitment, government had taken initiatives to introduce ICT for all ministries and divisions. It took a good number of initiatives to introduce e-Governance in the country. Some of them are providing greater access to government information, promoting civic engagement by enabling the public to interact with government officials, making government more accountable by making its operations more transparent and thus reducing the opportunities for corruption, poverty and providing development opportunities, especially benefiting rural and traditionally underserved communities (Alam et al, 2008).

Most of the ministries have their own websites. It is seen that the offices are equipped with sufficient computers, printers, scanners and other tools. Most of the offices are Internet connected with broadband or dial-up connections. LAN, WAN & MAN connections are available in some of the ministries. Some ministries already provide web-based services to the citizens.

Recently, the government provided computers with internet and other facilities to almost every Union Council of Bangladesh called Union Information Service Centre (UISC). Now, all unions of Bangladesh are connected with the internet. Two entrepreneurs (one male and one female) are engaged in providing services to the local peoples. They are trying to make the centre as a business centre. They are also involved in training the local people.
In addition, the government of Bangladesh has taken many initiatives to practice e-governance under the umbrella concept of Digital Bangladesh, such as automation of internal processes (in banking sector), electronic birth registration system, financial management system/forms are available through online, Hajj Web Site, MIS for project management and transparency, the Bangladesh law commission on the global information highway, personnel database, railway ticketing, e-tendering, online submission of application for admission at the public and private universities, publishing HSC, SSC and other competitive exam results for example BCS in the website etc.

**Introducing e-voting: a recent initiative/debate**

E-voting is an election system that allows a voter to record his or her secure and secret ballot electronically. The Election Commission (EC) of Bangladesh has decided to introduce e-voting in the next 10th parliamentary elections, if the political parties agree. Journalists and members of civil society have also supported EC’s bid to introduce electronic voting machines (EVM) in the next general polls on condition the people affirm it. They stressed the need of public opinion in its favor and initiation of necessary measures to further develop technology used in EVM to prevent vote rigging and ensure transparency (The Daily Star, 2011).

**Qualitative Analysis**

The total sample breakdown is divided into three parts. The majority were NGO professional (50.0%), ICT professionals and 25% and 25% students who are nowadays the major users of ICT tools.

**Compilation of Answers from NGO Professionals**

After a review of the field questionnaire, it is observed that in terms of working experience all the NGO professionals have clear idea about the e-governance. Among the respondents, 70% of the respondents have 10+ years of experience, and 20% have 20 years and the rest 10% have below 10 years' experience. The analysis shows that 80% of the respondents have extensive knowledge of the ICT related tools. Apart from this, they have clear understanding about the theoretical perspective on e-governance. Most of the respondents are aware of the existing practices of e-governance in Bangladesh. According to the response of the respondents, it is observed that they are very much aware of the challenges of e-governance in Bangladesh. According to the response to the issues regarding the challenges of e-governance in
Bangladesh. Chart-01 shows the picture clearly. Of the total respondents, 30% mentioned the lack of national commitment to strengthen the ICT sector; 20% mentioned the lack of e-bases public official culture; 20% mentioned the absence of bangle computing platform; 20% mentioned the specific management structure of e-governance, the remaining 10% mentioned the present e-governance drives by the ministries and divisions.

**Compilation of answers from ICT Experts**

30% of the respondents have 10+ years of experience, and 20% have 20 years and 50% have below 10 years of experience. In terms of working area, all the respondents (100%) were working in Dhaka.

It was observed that most of the respondents have a clear concept of e-governance. The questionnaire was divided into two parts (one to assess the knowledge of theoretical aspects, the other one for practical aspects) for achieving the research objective. Regarding the challenges of e-governance, 30% said that poor infrastructure is a big challenge for achieving the target of e-governance, 30% mentioned the lack of training on how to avail the e-governance services, 20% mentioned that e-governance activities is operated from Dhaka city, 20% mentioned the lack of information regarding e-governance.

In response to the question on how to promote e-governance, all respondents have given a scenario which could help to move further in the sector. Out of the total respondents (Chart-2), 37% mentioned creating mass awareness on e-governance; 18% mentioned that public servants must be aware of e-governance; 18% mentioned that long term strategic planning needed to be developed; 18% said that local content need to be developed; and 9% mentioned that citizen’s access to ICT tools needs to be ensured.

**Compilation of answers from the students**

It has been observed that the theoretical knowledge on e-governance of the respondents is very good. Out of the total respondents, 40% have clear
understanding about the theoretical knowledge on e-governance. Another 40% have moderate theoretical knowledge on e-governance. The e-governance related theoretical knowledge of the rest 20% is not up to the mark. The new generation is very much used to ICT as a result they are using the ICT based e-governance services. Very few respondents are searching for jobs through the internet, a few of them are getting results through the websites, some of them are downloading forms through websites, and paying the utility bills through the e-governance services. According to the response of the respondents, a salient feature has been given by the students regarding the role of e-governance (Chart-3). Among the respondents, 40% mentioned that the main role of e-governance is to reduce corruption. 20% of the respondents mentioned that ensuring services to the communities is also a vital role of e-governance in Bangladesh, 20% mentioned that operating e-commerce related activities is also a role of e-governance, 10% mentioned that the role of e-governance is also ensuring e-based management and the remaining 10% mentioned that to pay the utility bills is also a role of e-governance.

According to the second part of the questionnaire, which is related to the practices of e-governance in Bangladesh, all the respondents mentioned their ideas on specific issues. After analyzing all the responses, it was observed that utilizing the facilities they have the information on ICT based e-governance related actions by the government of Bangladesh. According to the response to the e-governance (Chart-4) related initiatives by the Bangladesh, 80% mentioned that Government forms are available on websites, 40% mentioned that Bangladesh government has taken different e-governance related projects such as Access to Information (A2I) project 40% mentioned that the results of the public examinations are published on websites, 20% mentioned that all necessary service related messages are available on the websites of the related ministries.

![Chart- 4 e-governance related initiatives](image)

**Concluding Remarks and Recommendations**

It has been found that e-governance initiatives and practices in Bangladesh faced challenges that can be summarized by three A’s: access, awareness and applications. Being a developing country, it was always a challenge for the country to finance capital intensive endeavors like access backbones and communication infrastructure (Alam et al, 2008). One of the most vital reasons for e-governance being less effective is the problem of citizens’ access to the available information sources such as the internet (Haque, 2002: 244).

Also, ICT tools remained beyond the purchasing power of most Bangladeshis.
According to UNDP (1999), ‘while it might cost more than eight years’ income for an average Bangladeshi to buy a computer, it would cost just one month’s salary for an average American to do so’ (cited in Haque 2002: 245). Some specific challenges of e-governance in Bangladesh can be briefly listed such as: lack of coordination between government agencies, absence of an integrated and strategic national policy for ICT, absence of physical infrastructure, lack of ICT professionals, lack of resources, low rate of literacy, limited access to ICT, absence of e-governance friendly administration and conflicting political culture.

It is believed that e-governance promotes people’s participation in the process of good governance and e-democracy. Using the website, government may seek people’s opinion on various issues of the state. Thus, citizens' active participation can ensure pro-people decisions on the country's resources, environment and other socio-political issues involving public interests. According to the constitution, access or right to information is a fundamental right of the people. Access to information can ensure good governance through e-governance. However, the findings demonstrate that people’s access and participation is very limited due to the absence of citizen friendly administration and lack of e-based public official culture.

In addition, conflicting political culture of the two major political parties might jeopardize the initiatives of e-governance. It is well known that as political power changes hands between the two major parties in Bangladesh, the bitter rivalry between the BNP and AL often results in the abandonment of policies pursued by the previous government. Many are afraid that such political culture might thwart efforts of e-governance initiatives in Bangladesh.

From the above, it can be said that ‘although progress is slow and there is confusion about the means to achieve this, there is no doubt about the goal of attaining e-governance. A coordinated effort by political leaders, bureaucrats, and private entrepreneurs is critical to facilitate the growth of the ICT sector, and, hence, the socioeconomic development of Bangladesh’ (Hasan, 2009). Finally, we would like to conclude by quoting Haque (2002: 247) that ‘there is no doubt that e-governance has been useful for certain services enjoyed by the citizens, especially the affluent high-income families and foreign investors. However, it is yet to be seen whether e-governance can eradicate poverty, reduce inequality and satisfy basic human needs in a poor country like Bangladesh’.

End Notes
v. Among 20 stakeholders 10 are NGO officials, 5 are ICT experts and 5 are university students.
vi. PRA sessions are conducted at two villages: 1. Vatoi Bazar of Shoilokopa Upazila under Jhenaidaha District (Middle Western part of Bangladesh) which is 141 km. away from Dhaka; 2. Mohammadpur village of Pirgonj Upazila under Thakurgaon District (Northern part of Bangladesh) which is 530 km. away from Dhaka. Both PRA sessions are conducted in November-December 2010.


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