BANGLADESH FIRST NATIONAL MULTI-STAKEHOLDER FORUM

REPORT ON FORUM HELD ON MONDAY, 24 JULY 2017

PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE, DHAKA

Opening Plenary

The opening plenary explained the rationale behind the A4AI-Bangladesh forum and the need for a multi-stakeholder coalition. The forum began with addresses from Mr. Anir Chowdhury, Advisor to the 'Access to Information' (a2i) programme hosted by the Prime Minister's Office; Ms. Sonia Jorge, the Executive Director of the Alliance for Affordable Internet; Mr. Shahjahan Mahmood, the Chairperson of Bangladesh's Telecommunications Regulatory Authority; Mr. Ayub Hussain, Joint Secretary representing the Post and Telecommunications Division, and Mr. Banamali Bhowmick, Director General, representing the Information and Communications Technology Division of the Government. The following salient points were highlighted in the plenary session:

- There is a focus on Bangladesh to become a middle-income nation relying on the power of its knowledge-based economy; in this, the Digital Bangladesh agenda towards Vision 2021 becomes a real goal to be achieved, not one to be dreamed. The government's efforts towards making broadband affordable, through its Domestic Network Coordination Committee (DNCC), is of paramount importance.
- The attempt to provide 'Broadband for All' in Bangladesh has been hampered by slow coverage and uptake in rural and remote areas; solutions addressed included public access options such as libraries, telecentres, schools, health centres and union buildings through innovative use of technology, relevant applications and skills to exploit the available technology and services. Innovative business and operational models for sustaining public access centres as multi-purpose service points are crucial. Apart from technology, there is a need to emphasise innovation in using the spectrum, promoting local language solutions and a people-centred approach to service development.
- Public Access solutions should be complemented by a variety of strategies so individual households can access services and skills through broadband. The set of strategies should include pricing, tax reforms, efficient management of infrastructure and spectrum and ensuring income and gender inclusion.
- To be considered as a part of A4AI-Bangladesh's efforts towards recommending best fit policies and regulatory measures are public access, resource sharing, efficient use of spectrum, innovative approaches to maximising the USAFs and broadband plans.
- A4AI's '1 for 2' affordability target is a good benchmark to take note of, and to strive for. However, more ambitious targets would help to resolve issues facing the remote and rural populace.

First Panel discussion

The second session of the day saw an interactive session, moderated by Ms. Sonia Jorge, in which representatives of Telecom Service Providers, Internet Service Providers, Over the Top Service Providers, and consumers deliberated upon the potential solutions to the goal of 'Broadband Access for All.' The panelists included Mr. Vishal Mathur of GSMA; Mr. Rishabh Dara of Facebook; Mr. Mohammed Arif Al Islam of Summit Communications; Mr. Targhibul Islam of Teletalk; Mr. Tapan Sarkar; Dr. Rokonuzzaman and Ms. Tahmina Rahman of Article 19. The following key points emerged in the panel:

- Collaboration and sharing of expertise and resources are key to bridging the digital divide in Bangladesh, especially when one looks to go beyond its dependency on 2G technologies for connectivity and governmental dependency on telecom sector taxes and fees. Furthering the sector reform is essential if one were to achieve the Digital Bangladesh Agenda towards Vision 2021.
- Promoting the industry and the overall sector through tax incentives would not only result in a growth of 3 Billion USD, leading to tremendous growth in the GDP, but also overcoming the three barriers;
    - income and gender inequality;
    - social norms where mobile usage and ownership is dominated by men;
    - lack of local content and application, and the ability to create the same.
- Paying special attention to the underprivileged and those who live in rural and remote areas, this is possible only when one understands and supports the entire ecosystem and by creating competition at all levels in the telecom sector.
- In doing so, it is important to consult with the multi-stakeholders, especially the consumers and protect their rights online, including that of their right to access the internet and their right to express and participate online freely.
- Innovations in broadband space should move the government to consider high altitude platform stations and that of delicensing certain spectrum, especially in areas where market forces do not support and that the private sector is hesitant to invest. Here's where, not only innovative approaches such as community Wi-Fi and people-enabled content and service development should be tried out.
- In the internet ecosystem, special considerations are to be given to internet entrepreneurs and girls who code so the open net principles are really practiced in Bangladesh.

Second Panel Discussion

The second panel discussion took on a different perspective to some of the same challenges, this time involving the practitioners on the ground. The panelists included, Mr. Mohammad Aminul Hakim; Ms. Zeenat Sultana of Bangladesh Centre for Communication, Mr. Hasan Emdad of the access to information (a2i) programme of the Prime Minister's Office, Mr. T I M Nurul Kabir representing the Association of Mobile Telephone Operators of Bangladesh, and Mr. Osama Manzar of the Digital Empowerment Foundation, India. The following ideas emerged as a result of the panel, moderated by A4AI's B. Shadrach:

- There is a need to come up with guidelines for the ISPs so the service standards are met across the nation in a unified manner.
- Government should consider actively promoting active sharing amongst the operators.

- A concerted attempt is needed to promote digital literacy amongst the citizens, especially women and that of promoting local content and applications relevant to people's needs in local and vernacular languages.
- A special focus is needed to promote e-Services among people through the best infrastructure at their disposal. There is a huge demand for services among people. Public Access centres offer interim measures and as grounds to prepare people to enter the digital arena.
- Taxation and tariff structures should be used as enablers of the industry rather than as disincentives.
- Technology neutrality should be considered in the license regime.
- Community-centred innovation leading to community Wi-Fi programmes must be promoted since the infrastructure, if innovatively used, can solve the problems in the last mile. Community ownership of internet resources can help to overcome difficulties in last mile connectivity.

Closing Plenary

The closing plenary witnessed the signing of the MoU between a2i and A4AI, and the concluding remarks by B. Shadrach, Mr Kabir Bin Anwar, Mr. Anir Chowdhury and Minister Tarana Halim. Mr. Chowdhury suggested looking at the public access strategies of government in order to reach the unconnected. He highlighted the successes achieved by public access centres in the last couple of years and the demands expressed by the community for more. He also recognised the challenges associated with scaling up these centres by 30 times over the next two years. He sought A4AI's intervention and pleaded for developing sustainable business strategies for spreading these centres in about 170,000 locations in the nation.

B. Shadrach of A4AI highlighted the four priorities that emerged in the first forum of A4AI-Bangladesh:

a. Developing strategies for scaling up of public access points;
b. Analysing the current taxation, tariff and fee regime to develop strategies for reduction of cost of services;
c. Efficient use of existing infrastructure, including that of spectrum resources for reaching the last mile;
d. Evidence-based policy making through analyses of data.

Minister Tarana Halim in her observations highlighted the achievements of the government of Bangladesh over the last three years. She sought the cooperation of all sectors and the members of the industry towards spreading broadband throughout the nation. She welcomed A4AI's involvement while also promising her department's support to the partnership.

Breakout Group Discussions: Priorities

The participants who were divided to form six working groups consisting of at least ten members in each group deliberated upon the following questions:

1. How does Bangladesh's policy and regulatory framework reflect the best practices recommendations you discussed? What are the key gaps?
2. What are the current challenges that need to be addressed to ensure that best practices are implemented (e.g, regulatory capacity, regulatory instruments, public policy guiding the sector, a broadband plan and strategy, etc.)
3. How would you prioritise issues identified?

Participants were given copies of A4AI's good practice guide, and were also reminded of the challenges highlighted in the two panel discussions. The following issues emerged as key challenges in the breakaway group discussions:

a) **The role of regulator:** The issue of independence for regulators was highlighted as the current telecom policy of Bangladesh is visionary yet lacks implementation will power. The regulator must take more onus to ensure its implementation. Licensing processes are too complex and too layered. The regulator should look at simplified licensing processes. Currently, there are more layers than required, which increases the cost. Taxation & revenue sharing applies in each layer. Vertical ownership of licenses should be avoided. A technology neutral licensing regime is key for Bangladesh.

b) **Tax and fees in Bangladesh:** A need for rationalisation for high fees and tax structures lead to high cost of service provision. A social obligation fund should be utilised efficiently, especially for strengthening infrastructure and services in the last mile.

c) **Affordability:** 1 for 2 target can be met if government can reduce taxes in the ICT sector. A closer look at the tax on devices might help.

d) **Spectrum management:** Government should consider tech neutrality in their licensing processes and at no or little costs the existing operators should be allowed to use spectrum for new generation technologies. Government should consider de-licencing certain frequencies that would speed up reaching the last mile connectivity. This may include 5GHz in U-NII[1] band. The regulator should also consider allocating spectrum to the NGOs and the community networks as service providers at the last mile. Base price for spectrum should be carefully calculated.

e) **Infrastructure management and deployment:** High level of coordination among the various agencies of government should be achieved, mainly for laying the fibre.

f) **Open transmission networks:** There is a need to initiate and effect some structural changes to the telecom transmission business in Bangladesh, including that of bringing in some competition in submarine cable business and that of trading bandwidth.

g) **Connectivity at the last mile:** Service availability and accessibility are key to development in rural areas. Public Access points must be strengthened to stimulate the market. Small entrepreneurs should be encouraged to carry out ICT business

h) **Research:** There is no robust study on customer experiences in Bangladesh. An attempt should be made to collate their experiences and form policy on the basis of the baseline.

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[1] Unlicensed National Information Infrastructure Radio Band

i) **Skill development:** Lack of education, Internet Skill & Awareness (people are not aware of the benefit of Internet). Also Lack of Local apps to help lesser skilled people. Content development Licensing regime to be developed; Local OTTs needed for it takes too long to build apps

j) **Cybercrime & Cyber bullying:**
   a. Regulation & Controlling Policies are there but Implementation is very difficult.
   b. Sexual abuse in internet (Children & women)

k) **Gender Inequality and Financial Inclusion:** A special thrust must be accorded to Mobile Financial Services and the inclusion of women in ICT access and services

SCENES FROM THE FORUM

from Top L-R clockwise: a) Minister Tarana Halim (4th from left) with some of the panelists. b) Second Panel in progress (Standing to speak is A4AI's Dr. B Shadrach) ; c)A4AI team led by Executive Director Ms Sonia Jorge (left) with a delegate; d), Ms Shermin of a2i with Minister Tarana Halim ; e) Participants during the break-away session discussing affordable access in Bangladesh

Next Steps

It was proposed that a tentative plan for further engagement would be developed in the next coalition meeting to be scheduled in third/fourth week of October where members would work on action plans. Of the four suggestive thematic issues on the table, A4AI and a2i shall take

forward at least two issues in the remaining three months of 2017 and tackle all the four in 2018. The two important themes for focus from September 2017 onward are:

1. Scale-up strategies for developing sustainable public access centres in Bangladesh to cover the last mile
2. Efficiency in Infrastructure deployment and management

The third theme on Data and Research and finally Taxation will be tackled in 2018.

A workshop would be organised on (1) and (2) above with working groups developed to ensure that the two themes are actively pursued by the multi-stakeholders in Bangladesh with tangible outcomes .   Outcomes agreed be aimed at developing and recommending appropriate strategies to the government by June 2018.