A4AI-Bangladesh Coalition
March 28, 2018 Meeting Minutes
Prime Minister's Office, Dhaka

Opening remarks from a2i and A4AI

The [second meeting](#) of the A4AI-Bangladesh Coalition opened with a note from Mr Anir Choudhury, Policy Advisor at the Access to Information (a2i) programme of the Prime Minister's Office. Mr Choudhary noted the number of challenges limiting efforts to advance Digital Bangladesh, and which have been dealt with in the last few years, including:

- Developing union digital centres to bridge the digital divide in rural Bangladesh;
- Equipping one female and one male entrepreneur to manage and sustain the UDC as local business and information hubs, meeting the needs of the community members;
- Digitising more than 100 government services for offer through the UDCs; and,
- Encouraging the private sector to offer their value-added services to communities in the fields of education, agriculture, banking and health, among others.

Mr Choudhury opined that the only major challenge that is yet is to be dealt with is that of connectivity, and asked participants at the coalition meeting to take advantage of A4AI's presence and interest to help solve the issue and bring broadband to rural and remote Bangladesh in an affordable manner. Mr Choudhury highlighted some of the efforts undertaken by the ministry and the interventions of BTRC, however, he also stated that all actors involved need to come together to build a cohesive strategy to achieve Digital Bangladesh. He also urged A4AI-Bangladesh to develop strategies within the next six months for the general elections are approaching the nation.

In her opening remarks, Ms Sonia Jorge, Executive Director of A4AI, agreed with Mr Choudhury, while also highlighting the need for A4AI-Bangladesh to focus attention on both digital skills development, as well as local content development. She highlighted the need for policy and regulatory efforts to turn greater broadband access into meaningful use. In order to do so, she too concurred with Mr Choudhury for the need for a clear roadmap of broadband development in Bangladesh and that of also developing an effective use and the scale-up of public access centres.

Panel discussion on public access initiatives for bridging the digital divide

The first panel, moderated by A4AI Asia Regional Coordinator B. Shadrach, opened with a [plenary presentation](#) by Mr Mohammed Ashraful Amin, a consultant to a2i on the achievement of Union Digital Centres and the remaining challenges facing the uptake

beyond the current locations. Mr Amin explained the business and operational model of the functional 5286 Digital Centres at the union, district, municipal and city levels. He highlighted the significance of the 256 eServices that are offered to citizens through the centres, and the latest effort of managing a dynamic teacher's portal that reaches out to more than 100,000 teachers in Bangladesh. These centres have reached out to more than 5 M Bangladeshi citizens with meaningful services since inception.

Mr Amin added that the recently launched financial inclusion scheme through the digital centres have helped to bank more than 97000 unbanked people. He went on to explaining the features of eKSheba and the eKShop initiatives that help the digital centre operators to provide seamless one-stop services as well as eCommerce opportunities respectively to the community members. In the scale-up plan, he spelt out the roadmap for serving four-fold population from the currently served 5M and the aspirations to scale-up the centres also by four fold. He also opined that there was an opportunity to digitise more than 1500 of the government services.

Among the challenges, Mr Amin identified the following:

● Lack of adequate infrastructure facility;
● Lack of high speed internet connectivity for expanding the centres;
● Slow paced domestic transmission network;
● Insufficient broadband wireless access;
● Expensive 2G/3G wireless internet services from Telcos;
● Instability of wireless/broadband connectivity;
● Inadequate domestic online contents and ICT services; and,
● Insufficient power supply

Mr Amin also raised the following pertinent questions which paved the way for raising the debate among the panelists who represented the government, academia, private sector and the civil society:

● How can one ensure fundamental Infrastructure development instead Ad-Hoc connectivity that is offered to these centres at present?
● How would the digital centers' entrepreneurs be facilitated as community broadband service providers in their own strength or in partnership with others?
● How would one ensure low cost internet connectivity for the Union digital centers?
● How could one achieve Public Internet Service Points/zones in Bangladesh?
● How could one prioritize Wireless Data Services (4G/5G/LTE) and how would that be carried out?
● What kind of partnerships with relevant national & International communities required to sustain the centres?
● How would the security of transmission be ensured?

Panel discussion on broadband for all citizens

Moderated by Ms Sonia Jorge of A4AI, this panel discussion kicked-off with a detailed presentation made by Mr Hasan Emdad of the a2i program.

Mr Emdad presentation opened his presentation with a statement that the GoB had already identified over 190,000 locations/sites for installing public access facilities in the nation. This included schools, colleges, government offices, hospitals, agriculture and growth centres. He invited the participants to consider spreading broadband to these locations/sites first as means to bridging the digital divide and expanding broadband in the entire nation. His presentation included the following points of discussion:

- Achievements of the government over the past eight years in the areas of digital inclusion, power supply, spreading literacy and reducing poverty
- The reasons behind Bangladesh's position, despite all efforts, among the least achieved nations in various indices – ICT development index, networked readiness index, telecommunications infrastructure index, inclusive internet index, global connectivity index
- The potential demographic dividend Bangladesh could reap, only if digital technologies are used and harnessed
- Discussion on the complex ILDTS value chain which ranges from actors such as sub-sea cable operators to international terrestrial cable operators and international internet gateway operators to interconnection exchange points, wimax/BWA operators, GSM operators, ISPs, NIXs, and VSAT players
- Discussion on the incremental costs with so many layers in the value chain and the complicated licensing regime that is prevalent in Bangladesh
- Among the other challenges, according to Mr Hasan Emdad, the multi-stakeholders would need to tackle were:
  - Lack of adequate infrastructure facility for FTTx
  - Managing the growth of domestic transmission network
  - Dealing with the complex 'data service value chain' from wholesale to access market
  - Inadequate footprint in broadband wireless access
  - Expensive 3G/4G Telecom wireless internet services from Telcos
  - Inadequate domestic online content and ICT services
  - Lack of local effective application services and ICT business development activities

Mr Hasan Emdad also highlighted the opportunity to develop a high-level national network design. He also presented the ICT infrastructure information system (ICT-IIS) developed using a GIS platform that locates each and every critical and public infrastructure in the country. This tool is highly useful in telecom planning and broadband development of the nation.

Mr Emdad's presentation concluded with some ideas for forward planning in the following:

- Proper broadband strategy and action plan that is focused on citizen-centred public internet access
- Focus on fundamental Infrastructure Development instead Ad-Hoc.
- Establishing capacity in other ICT enablers
- Creating Public Internet Service Access Points/zones
- Prioritising Wireless Data Services (4G/5G/LTE)
- Expanding online contents and services
- Building partnership with relevant national & International communities
- Escalation of institutional capacity to increase digital literacy
- Incentivising infrastructure deployment and resource sharing
- Prioritisation & expansion of public access initiatives
- Developing an actionable strategy and work plan to address the 2025 Sustainable Development targets of ITU's Broadband Commission

Following Mr Emdad's presentation, Ms Sonia Jorge, the moderator of the session sought from the floor any additional challenges/questions the participants might have. To this, the following points were raised:

- Does Bangladesh have a fiscal policy to limit taxation and enhance broadband as a public infrastructure?
- Has there been any attempt to reduce the gender digital divide and are there efforts to collect data on these lines?
- Who are the users of the Digital Centre?
- How safe Internet is for women?
- Are there efforts to help multi-stakeholders to use gender-sensitive words in research, communication and discourses?
- Have there been attempts to compare Bangladesh's challenges with that of other nations and strive to learn from their best practices?
- Have there been efforts to look at business model of broadband of various other nations?

Taking from Mr Emdad's presentation and the challenging questions that emerged from the floor, Ms Sonia Jorge sought clarifications from the Director General of BTRC as to how the regulator was addressing the challenges posing the industry. To this, Lt. Col. Mustafa Kamal responded by saying that the regulator was considering the following:

- Revision of ILDTS policy for its release within the next three months
- A close look at QoS policy and the promulgation of transmission guidelines
- Ways to address duopoly in the market

The APAC lead at GSMA, Mr Rahul Shah responded to the question of how GSMA was looking at Bangladesh as a market and advising member companies to contribute. He

highlighted the results of GSMA's research that women have lower access to digital technologies in South Asia and that in order to reduce the gender gap, the GSMA member companies were initiating certain programs. He also opined that mere access does not translate into individual's use of digital technologies unless and until supported with digital literacy skills, appropriate content and applications. He summed up GSMA's findings also by pointing to the need for network sharing with a view to improving the economy, thus called for regulatory support keeping the citizens' welfare in mind.

The project director responsible for rolling out the InfoSarkar3 project, Mr Bikarna Kumar Ghosh was then posed a question on the efforts of the government to address the infrastructure gap. To this, he ascertained that although the project was likely to benefit only 10% of the population the InfoSarkar3 project was designed to cover almost 60% of Bangladesh in geographical terms. Being a government intranet project, he admitted that the scope of the project had its own limitations. He was of the opinion that the next project of the government, 'Enabling Digital Connectivity' with funding support from the Chinese government, might help to close the infrastructure gap, through the 19,000 KM of fiber that would be laid out during the project phase. He also revealed that the government was planning to invest over USD 250M to address the infrastructure gap in Bangladesh. Having said that, he mentioned that it was the collective responsibility of the industry, led by the government to make broadband affordable to all while also reiterating the need for sharing both passive and active infrastructure. He made a brief presentation on the project deliverables of inforSarkar3.

By way of suggestions, the panellists provided the following:

-   There should be a unified licensing policy in Bangladesh
-   Deregulation is key to affordable access in Bangladesh; hence, following the Indian example, Bangladesh regulators should leave the aspect of price discovery to the market
-   The government should undertake and coordinate with various agencies to achieve affordability, accessibility and security
-   The regulator should attempt to simplify the data value chain so as to reduce the cost passed on to the consumer

At the end, each of the panelists representing the regulator, the government, the telco industry and the civil society pledged to work with A4AI in its attempt to develop a roadmap for broadband.

Ministerial panel discussion

Sonia Jorge made a presentation on the work of A4AI around the world and how the global experience was brought and made available to Bangladesh in its immediate national level priorities. She also outlined the efforts towards developing a roadmap for

Bangladesh's broadband, and discussed how the day-long second meeting of the coalition was likely to contribute to the same.

The honourable Minister for Posts, Telecommunications and ICTs, Mr Mustafa Jaffar highlighted the following in his brief intervention:

- The digital Bangladesh initiative and the availability of broadband internet continue to be seen by the present government as the backbone to their economic development; therefore the government stands committed to increasing connectivity, reducing cost, ensuring online safety and enhancing the quality of broadband in the nation.
- The amount of Taka 1326 Cr which is lying unused in the SOF will be utilised, as decided in the first meeting in this regard held in March this year, for providing connectivity to the 772 unconnected unions and the 111 chitmahals through cable wherever possible but also through satellite connectivity at places where cables cannot reach
- The ministry might consider recommending price caps for connectivity to ensure affordability so also look at free wifi hotspots in hundreds and thousands of locations in Bangladesh. The first meeting held in this regard with the private sector was encouraging and the government is confident of developing a sustainable business model for offering free wifi throughout the country
- The utmost priority of the present government is to use the Internet for educational purposes and are looking at ways to enhance content similar to the teachers' portal developed recently
- The government is also looking at ways to create awareness among people on Internet safety
- And, the bottomline is that the government is committed to access to the Internet from anywhere anytime to the entire content.

The panellists from Summit Communications, BASIS and BTRC too resonated the Minister's sentiments and have assured their fullest cooperation to the ongoing efforts of realising Digital Bangladesh. The ministerial session was moderated by Mr Anir Choudhury who is the Policy Advisor to a2i.

Concluding session

The concluding session witnessed a [presentation on broadband development](#) from other countries by A4AI's B. Shadrach. In his presentation, Shadrach outlined the plans of various countries including the Philippines, VietNam, Ireland, Malaysia and China. He also explained the components of a broadband roadmap and discussed how Bangladesh could benefit from some of the prevailing experiences from the region. He invited the stakeholders to be a part of the working groups on broadband development and on public access initiatives before inviting Ms Sonia Jorge and Mr Anir Choudhury to provide their views on the next steps of the coalition.

Next steps

Ms Sonia Jorge assured the participants of the continuity of the discussions both online and in a face-to-face format and encouraged them to participate in both the forms to mainly develop a) a work plan of the Bangladesh coalition; b) framework for the digital development roadmap; and, c) participation in the next meeting of the coalition in the month of July.

Mr Anir Choudhury thanked A4AI for their focused efforts to help develop a broadband plan. He too encouraged the participants to fully participate in the efforts to help see Bangladesh realise its Digital Bangladesh goals.

The meeting concluded with the participants signing up to be a part of the two online discussion groups, namely a) Bangladesh's broadband strategy; and, b) Bangladesh's scale-up plan of public access centres.