

# undialogue Agenda

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with support from



**Un•dia•logue** [uhn-dahy-uh-lawg, -log]  
*noun*

- 1 Methodical policy advocacy approach that addresses the limitations of traditional dialogues.
- 2 Pre-roundtable 'Undialogue Agenda' identifies the development challenges and sets the agenda for discussion; the Roundtable keeps its focus on finding solutions; 'Undialogue Notes' records the solutions; and a post-roundtable approach follows-up the implementation.

## Development through Public Access to ICTs: Changes and Challenges

The Global Impact Study (GIS) was part of investigating the social & economic impact of public access to information & communication technologies. It was implemented by the University of Washington's Technology & Social Change Group (TASCHA) and supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It was conducted in 5 countries initially, and later another 3 countries were added, which included Bangladesh, Brazil, Chile, Ghana, Lithuania, Philippines.

This policy brief draws on data gathered mainly through the GIS that was conducted in 2010, i.e. before the government of Bangladesh established Union Information and Service Centres (UISCs) in 4501 Union Parishads. The brief also uses the data collected in 2012 during a quick assessment of 'Access to Information (A2I) Program', under which the UISCs were established. The GIS comprised of venue survey, user survey, and non-user survey. A representative sample of 250 venues (cyber cafes, telecentres, and libraries) and 1000 users (4 respondents from each of the 250 PAVs) were selected respectively for the venue and user survey from 25 districts under all seven divisions. Assessment of A2i program included survey of 521 UISCs and field visits. This policy brief seeks to identify challenges faced by the PAVs and suggests on the way forward to further strengthen the access to information initiative.

### Significance of the PAVs

The survey findings show that the PAVs provide many people with their first opportunity to gain experience with computers and internet.

- 60% of the respondents first used a computer at a PAV. For 75%, PAVs gave them their first internet experience.
- 60% indicated that PAVs were the "most important place" to develop their computer skills. 47.5% reported these venues to be the "most important place" to develop their Internet skills. Even majority (over 54%) of the respondents who have computer access at home prioritize PAVs for reasons such as internet access, faster internet connections, being with friends, or access to help from venue staff.
- 30% of the users use PAVs as they have no other options for using internet.
- 88% of all PAV users, including 93% of telecentre users, think their use of computers would decline if PAVs were no longer available.

### User profiles of the PAVs – are they inclusive enough?

The composition of users is different for different types of venues, namely cyber-cafes and telecentres, particularly in relation to users' income level, English skills, computer skills, gender etc.

- Among the respondents who earn less than

8000 BDT per month, 77.6% visit telecentres (rest use cyber-café, home access or other forms of accesses).

- Out of 29 respondents with no English skills, 27 were found to be telecentre users. Lack of local contents in the cyber-café and availability of support from the infomediaries at the telecentres appear to have a significant role in the choice of the English-illiterate.
- 77.4% of the telecentre-visitors have poor computer skills compared to 20.1% of the cyber-café users and 2.5% of the home users. In other words, lower the level of computer literacy, higher the likelihood of choosing telecentres over other forms of accesses.
- According to the benchmark data, a significant gender gap in access exists as female users comprise only 21.7% of the user population. But telecentres with higher ratio of female operators (16.7%) managed to attract more female users (32.2%) compared to the cyber-café (7.5% female users) with a lower ratio of female operators (3.3%). This situation at the telecentres was further improved after the establishment of UISCs through the inclusion of one female operator per unit.

In order to serve the information need of this marginalized community, developing infomediary capacity is no less important than developing content in local languages.

For gender inclusion, it is crucial to provide a gender friendly PAV environment by employing more female infomediaries and ensuring the availability of gender sensitive contents.

### **Usage of the PAVs – do they meet our development goals?**

Communicating with friends and family and pursuing hobbies are routine and the dominating activity, followed by education and employment.

- 68% of the users engage in social activities more frequently than other types of activities.
- Over 40% of all users use PAVs for education purposes.

- About 40% of all users use PAVs for employment and income related purposes. Of them, 65% use it to seek job related information while 31% use it to look for new products and services.
- E-government, healthcare services constitute less than 10% of the use of public access venues. To encourage use of PAVs in support of the more “traditional” development goals, interventions at both the demand side (awareness and motivation) and the supply side (relevant and useful contents) are needed.

Impact of PAVs on the lives of our citizens

In line with the identified usage pattern of the PAVs, perceived level of impact of the PAVs in the lives of the users appear to be highest in social communication, education and income and employment aspects.

- Over 60% of surveyed users reported positive impacts in their communication with family & friends, education, time savings, financial savings and employment.
- 35% experienced positive impacts on their income.
- On the other hand, access to government information and services and health are the two areas of lowest impact.

However, in case of reducing disparities in access to information and in people's ability to derive benefits from it, the PAVs have shown a mixed performance. Along with literacy, access to these facilities requires, on an average, the users to pay approximately Taka 390 per month. With significant role of educational qualifications and financial strength in accessing the services and using them in their daily lives, PAVs have failed as a catalyst in reducing the ‘digital divide’, if not have widened it. On the other hand, from the nature of assistance sought by the users of telecentres, infomediaries can aid in this concern.

- While only about 15% of the cyber-café and home users seek assistance beyond hardware and software issues, in the telecentres about 30% of the assistance sought relates to information search in health matters, educational information, government services or news items.

- It appears that infomediaries are playing a role more than as a mere technical hand at the telecentres.

Telecentres, with their geographic bias towards the rural and remote areas and with the provision of infomediary-support to the users, can act as a minimizing factor towards the ‘digital divide’ concern.

### Present Challenges

While identifying top 3(three) challenges during the benchmark data collection (before the UISCs were established), 44% of the venue operators ranked electricity/load-shedding as the top problem. At the same time, between the benchmark and the update scenario, telecentres have become less equipped to deal with the electricity crisis.

Lack of computers/equipment and issues with net speed or connectivity are the other two top challenges of the PAVs. However, extent of these two issues varied significantly between the cyber-cafes and the telecentres and in some aspects significant progress was achieved by the UISCs since their establishment.

- Average number of computers per venue for a cyber café was 9.2. The average number of computers connected to the internet was 8.2, suggesting that most of the computers at cyber cafés have internet connection.
- In contrast, there were only 4.3 computers per telecentre on average in the benchmark period,

and only 1.8 computers on average were connected to the internet, suggesting that less than half of the small number of computers at telecentres were connected to the internet.

Updated data shows telecentres are even less equipped with computers now, with only 1.93 desktop computers and 1.4 laptops on average. However, almost all the computers of the telecentres (99%) are now connected to internet.

- In the benchmark data, 74% operators reported lack of enough net speed to meet user demands. After the establishment of the UISCs, internet speed remains to be a challenge. Around 59% of UISC entrepreneurs reported that their services are still hampered due to slow internet speed.

Average number of computers per venue is dismally low at the telecentres, with substandard connectivity. Improving national internet infrastructure is of utmost necessity.

It is undeniable that PAVs are significant in their contribution towards improving access to information of the people. Moreover, as evidences show, telecentres are proving to be an equalizing force in the ‘digital divide’ concern. This study highlighted a number of challenges faced by the telecentres and PAVs in general and identified a number of intervention priorities. With the proven positive impacts of the access venues and the nation’s strive to move towards digital competency, the identified priorities of the sector should be integrated effectively in the national policy priorities.

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