Effectiveness of Service Delivery of Union Digital Centers in Bangladesh:

Challenges and Way Forward

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Submitted by

The Research Team

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1. Mr. Md Rafiqul Islam, Deputy Secretary, Cabinet Division (Team leader)
2. Khandkar Estiaque Ahmed, Deputy Secretary, Cabinet Division (Member)
3. Mr. Muhammad Asadul Haq, Deputy Secretary, Cabinet Division (Member)

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Acronyms

DC -   Deputy Commissioner

FGD -   Focus Group Discussion

ICT -   Information Communication Technology

IT -   Information Technology

KII -   Key Informant Interview

UDC -   Union Digital Center

UNO -   Upazila Nirbahi Officer

UP -   Union Parishad

UNDP -   United Nations Development Program

Acknowledgement

Executive Summary

Union Digital Centers (UDCs), an internet based wireless service provider, were established with an aim to serve all types of governmental services to grassroot people across the country digitally. Over the time, UDCs have faced lots of challenges to serve the people from the Union Parishad (UP), service receivers and also monitoring/ supervising authority. The research has been undertaken to assess the current state of UDCs and challenges faced with identifying ways out to serve people well at grassroots level. Qualitative approach has been adopted for the study and data have been collected from primary sources. Collected data have been analyzed using thematic data analysis tool and descriptive statistics approach. The findings of this study reveal that unspecified supervising authority; lack of well-coordinated support from the UP; consciousness of local people about use of smart equipments; location of the Parishad; shortage of skilled entrepreneurs; scarcity of modern and advanced technology; lack of speedy internet & uninterrupted electricity; scarcity of equipments maintenance engineers at upazila level etc. are identified as weaknesses and challenges for smooth service to people digitally. The paper also exposes to establish trusted-coordination among UP Chairman, UP Secretary, Members, and entrepreneurs; determine a monitoring and supervising authority to look after the UDCs, appoint skilled entrepreneurs; organize meeting by the UNO at every two months in presence of entrepreneurs, UP Chairman, and UP Secretary and a yearly conference by the Deputy Commissioner; provide financial support for repairing and replacement of existing instruments; ensure speedy internet and uninterrupted electricity to UDCs at concessional rate; insert new services in the chart of activities of the UDCs and circulate it to mass people; organize training for capacity building of entrepreneurs etc. as ways out for assembling the UDCs effective.

Key words: Union Parishad, Union Digital Center, Entrepreneur, Chairman, Effectiveness.

1.1 Introduction

Union Digital Centers (UDCs) are the grass-root level digital service providers to citizens across the country located mostly at the Union Parishad. However, Union Parishad (UP) is the grass-root level local government tier in Bangladesh. Information technology, digital equipments, digital services to the grassroots people all became an important part of governmental and other institutional services from the 90s' decade of twentieth century. The advent of technology has leveraged the expansion of information flows from capital to the remotest part of the country. Bangladesh started to digitalize all the systems with an aim to make sure the services to the rural people of the country. To make the country more citizens focused and achieving the desired goals, it is required to provide services to the grass root people timely with minimum cost. And such types of services can be ensured only using information technology. It is fact that local government is a basic part of the overall governance process of any country that brings the government nearer to the people. Therefore, with the help of UNDP, Government of Bangladesh has established UDCs in 4,547 UPs in Bangladesh in order to serve the mass people. The Union Digital Center (UDC) is a one-stop service center in Bangladesh that aims to bring all types of government digital services and ICT facilities to the doorsteps of every citizen living in the country's rural areas. UDCs provide contemporary services to the rural communities and it has simplified the service delivery process. The UDCs have made it possible for local citizens to gain access to required information and services in a timely, cost-effective, and convenient manner. They ensure that marginalized people such as rural women, the elderly, and people with disabilities can get access to the government and commercial information and services. Although having fast and affordable access to services has great potential to improve citizens' lives, it is important to ensure that the effectiveness of UDCs is worth the investment. It is required to keep UDC in operation at the expected level of grassroots people despite few challenges that are needed to address.

1.2 Problem Statement

The grassroots people have access to the different type of online and off-line governmental and commercial services through UDCs. Despite this, ICT helps to smoothen and easy access of government services to the mass people with the minimum cost which will ensure the good governance (Hoque & Sorwar, 2014). It is worth mentionable that the fruitful deployment of UDC plays the crucial role in the establishment of e-government in Bangladesh. All the governmental services provided manually under the conventional system which is costly as well as time consuming. Therefore, most of the grassroot people have not received services timely and are unable to access governmental and other commercial services. UDCs are one-stop service outlets presently functioning at all 4,547 Union Parishad of the country. Through use of information and communication technologies, UDCs can bring various types of information related to government, livelihood, and private services to the doorsteps of citizens in rural areas. It ensures service providers and users to save time, cost and has made operations hassle free. The UDCs act as such the Public-Private-People's Partnership modality; these centers are run by local entrepreneurs, hosted by Union Parishad, and supported by Central Administration (Begum, 2017). It is mentionable that everyday new services and technologies are adopting in the governmental and commercial arena and grassroot people require having access to it. However, UDCs are operated with two local entrepreneurs with having scarcity of technical knowledge and skills. In addition, availability of technological and digital devices and equipment are important issues to serve the grassroots people timely with cost-effective manner. Moreover, urban-rural gaps are also prevailing among UDCs in terms of services and equipments. All these issues require to be addressed considering the benefit of the rural people and to ensure inclusive development across the country. Therefore, well-equipped, and technically sound entrepreneurs of UDC can ensure economical and time-bound services to the grassroots people.

1.3 Objectives of the Research

The goal of the study is to find out the current status of the UDC along with identifying challenges in serving the rural people smoothly. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To assess the existing services provided by the UDC;
2. To identify the challenges of the UDC in providing services to citizens;
3. To provide suggestions for strengthening the UDC as more effective service provider at grassroots level.

1.4 Rationale of the Study

People of rural areas have scarcity of opportunity for getting digital services due to their financial incapacity and technological ignorance. UDC encompasses all sorts of off-line, on-line government & commercial services available for the grassroots people based on ICT. Digital services are changing frequently due to technological advancement and as a grassroots service provider, UDC require coping up with the new services. Entrepreneurs and rural people need to be equipped with advance technologies and skills for services to the citizens at grassroots level. Near past no research/ study had been carried out to determine the strength and weaknesses and challenges of UDC. Considering the changing situation, the study focused on to assess the services currently provided by the UDC along with identifying strengths and weaknesses and putting forward recommendations for being more effectiveness of UDC as services provider at the grassroot level.

1.5 Limitations

The project started its work with apprehend that eight upazilas had been nominated in eight Divisions of the country, but the research team could able to visit seven upazilas and record opinion from 239 respondents. However, it could not be possible to conduct interview of desired number of respondents. Mentionable, that these respondents are UDCs entrepreneurs, UP Chairman, Secretary, Members and UNO of that Upazila. In addition, researchers could not enjoy dedicated time for research, as all the team members are government officials and had to conduct the research along with their official job disposition. Moreover, availability of the secondary resources and relevant literature are one of the concerns of the researchers as seemingly few study outcomes or academic research are available in this domain.

1.6 Dissemination of Findings

The findings of the study are expected to be disseminated through a seminar at the Cabinet Division in which all officials of this Division are expected to participate. The feedback obtained from the seminar had been incorporated in the paper. The team also contemplates to publish the report as an article in a reputed journal with taking consent from the Cabinet Division.

1.7 Structure of the Report

The report is organized in different segments. The first portion contains background of UDCs, problem statement, objectives, rationale, limitations, and structure of the report. The next section includes detailed review of literature, whereas the third portion describes methodology of the research adopted. The fourth part of the report explores sampling, techniques of data collection, source of data, ethical aspects of the study as well as research findings and discussion with presentation of gathered data in the subsequent segment. Finally, the report reveals summary of findings with recommendations and conclusion that manifests the ways to make UDCs as effective across the country.

2. Review of Literature

The study focuses the Union Digital Centre (UDC) and considers the literature that demonstrates the digital and electronic services toward reducing social inequality in urban-rural area. The viewpoint of information and communication technology for development considers ICT a powerful tool to bring socio-economic development with tremendous potential support for the world's poorest populations (Guterman et al. 2009). Mahmood (2005) mentioned that in order to supply information to the marginalized and rural disadvantaged and to decrease the digital divide between urban and rural areas, several information and knowledge centers popularly known as Tele-centers have already been established in the rural areas of many developing countries. ICT also has been improving dramatically from previous decades in the term of easy and enhanced access to services, reduced time, costs, harassment, and corruption in service deliveries (Bhatnagar 2009; Kumar & Best 2006). Besides, Li and Feeney (2014) stated that social inequalities would be significantly reduced when ensuring the e-services in the communities and people engage with them.

Ferdousi & Dehai (2014) conducted a study about general problems in the rural area of Bangladesh and mentioned that most of rural people face different problems such as corruption in land offices, irregularities in birth and date certificates, hassle for paying the electricity bill and other services' payments etc. due to lack of proper information, skills and lagging in terms of utilizing computer and internet. Besides, they are also confronted with bitter reality in public offices, such as the absence of service providers, unusual delay, and intimidation if bribes are not paid and sometimes forced to pay extra costs and visits (Bhatnagar 2004). Islam and Grönlund (2010) conducted a study on the Agriculture Market Information System (AMIS) in Bangladesh, and the result showed that it is possible to reduce social inequality through effective e-services based on people's information needs, incorporating easily accessible technologies and smart communication with the respective community. Sarker (2013) showed that UDCs' services minimize cost, distance, and time, eliminate intermediaries' problems, conflict, and improve accessibility, accountability, and transparency in the provision of information or services delivery. However, socio-economic development goals like reducing unemployment, poverty, and inequality, creating new jobs and market work for poor people, health, agricultural and educational facilities promotion, and rapid and easy access to public services can be achieved by properly utilizing and developing electronic services. Many researchers found a significant relationship between reducing social inequalities and digital service delivery. Although different literatures showed the importance, effectiveness, and acceptance of UDCs in Bangladesh, there exists scarce of literature on to examine the strength, weakness and challenges of UDCs in terms of skills, equipments that serve the grassroots people digitally. As the government is committed to serve the rural people through UDCs, it possesses huge potentiality to fulfill this commitment. This gap requires identifying the current state of UDCs as well as challenges to bring the UDCs as more effective service provider at the grassroot level in Bangladesh.

3. Research Questions

1. What are the services currently provided by the UDC?
2. What are the weaknesses/ challenges of the UDC in providing services to the citizen?
3. How can the UDC be more effective as service provider to grassroot people?

4. Methodology

Methodology is the way to investigate social phenomena for discovering new concepts and theories which inducts or deducts the existing theories. Methodology comprises the nature of study, criteria of subject selection, calculation of the sample size, and method of data collection, measurement, analysis, and presentation, with consideration of ethical issues and pre or pilot study, if required. However, Merton (1976) refers to methodology as logic of scientific procedure. A researcher needs to be aware of the design of investigation, the nature of influence and requirement of a theoretical system. In brief, methodology means techniques, procedure, or a method, associated with core questions of research process, techniques, and standard operating procedures.

4.1 Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research can be defined as a strategy that emphasizes qualification in the collection and analysis of data (Bryman: 2012:35). However, considering principal orientation to the role of theory in relation to research, qualitative research encompasses inductive; generation of theory, whereas quantitative takes deductive approach, testing of theory. Regarding epistemological orientation, qualitative corresponds to interpretivism and quantitative corresponds to positivism. In addition, based on ontological orientation, qualitative research refers to constructivism, whereas, quantitative research refers to objectivism. As the research is designed to gather details and in-depth information from the participants highlighting their working experiences at UDCs, it obviously encompasses qualitative research strategy.

From a philosophical point of view, qualitative research corresponds to the empiricism approach of philosophy which reveals that knowledge can only be acquired through sensory experiences. Regarding approach to inquiry, qualitative survey, unstructured, semi-structured and flexible methods are applied to express variation of situation, phenomena, and issues as

well. Fewer cases are considered as samples in qualitative inquiry which provide an emphasis on description of variables. It also covers multiple issues but arranges required information from fewer participants which contains meaning, experiences, feelings, perceptions and obviously subjective in nature.

4.2 Sample

This qualitative study has incorporated purposive sampling in which certain units have been selected purposively for judgment by the researcher. However, Nikolopoulou, K (2022) refers purposive sampling to a group of non-probability sampling techniques in which units are selected because they have characteristics that you need in your sample. In other words, units are selected "on purpose" in purposive sampling. It is a non-probability sampling, and here researcher determines the sample units who are obviously representative and possess information to provide to obtain the goals and objectives of the project. A total of 12 UDCs have been considered for sampling in which 239 respondents have been interviewed. However, these DUC are located at Tetulia of Panchagor, Chowgacha of Jashore, Fulchori of Gaibanda, Harirampur of Manikgonj, Daudkandi of Cumilla, Ripura of Narsingdi and Shibchar of Madaripur district. In addition, four focused group discussions (FGD) have been conducted in presence of stakeholders of the UDCs. Seven Upazila Nirbahi Officers (UNO) have been interviewed as Key Informant Interview (KII) as they are the prime authority of the UDC to look after on behalf of the government at local level. However, the seven UDC have been taken as sample from remote and rural, char areas of seven Districts of four Divisions in Bangladesh.

4.3 Data Collection Techniques

Primary data have been collected using a semi-structured questionnaire through in-depth interviews visiting the selected UDCs. In addition, FGD have been conducted with similar group of people comprising of UP Chairman, Members, and other beneficiaries during field visit. In addition, KII has been conducted with UNO of the sampled upazilas.

4.3.1 Questionnaire

A questionnaire is a research tool configuring a series of questions used to collect pertinent information form the respondents. However, McLeod (2023) mentioned as a questionnaire is a research instrument consisting of a series of questions for the purpose of gathering information from respondents. Questionnaires can be thought of as a kind of written interview. They can be carried out face to face, by telephone, computer or post. A semi-structured questionnaire has been utilized for the study which contains both structured and unstructured questions. Here the participants could answer the factual questions and opinion oriented (yes / no) which are structured in character. In addition, the questionnaire contains some unstructured questions requiring descriptive answers, and the respondents have enjoyed the liberty to express their opinion freely which is essential for qualitative research. The survey questionnaire has been arranged with a sequential order which contains some simple, unambiguous, and relevant questions. In addition, data also have been collected from the entrepreneurs of the UDCs taking opinion from them and it was recorded accordingly. Moreover, opinion have been recorded from the Union Parishad Chairman, Members, and the Union Parishad Secretary on different aspects of the UDC.

4.3.2 Focused Group Discussion (FGD)

A focus group discussion (FGD) is a good way to gather people from similar backgrounds or experiences to discuss a specific topic of interest (Krueger: 1988). Here participants are guided by a moderator or facilitator who introduces topics for discussion and helps the group to participate in a lively and natural discussion amongst themselves. The strength of FGD relies on allowing the participants to agree or disagree with each other so that it provides an insight into how a group thinks about an issue, about the range of opinion and ideas. In addition, it reveals the inconsistencies and variation that exists in a particular community in terms of beliefs and their experiences and practices. The paper prefers to conduct FGD with the monitoring and supervising authority of the UDC of the selected upazilas in which local UNO, union Parishad Chairman, Members participated and expressed their opinion about the current status, problems, and prospects of UDCs.

4.4 Sources of Data

The study prefers to collect data from primary sources. However, Solanki (2022) cited as the data is directly collected by the researcher and was not available before is called primary data. Data has been collected from the entrepreneurs working at the UDCs of different Union Parishad of sampled upazilas using semi-structured questionnaire through in-depth interviews. In addition, FGD have been conducted with the UNO, UP Chairman of the upazila for in-depth opinion about UDCs prospects and problems. However, field level primary data have been collected during March and April 2023.

4.5 Ethical Consideration

Bhandari (2022) mentioned that ethical considerations in research are a set of principles that guide research designs and practices that includes voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, potential for harm, and results communication. Ethical morals have been sustained in this study. However, ethics are the set of rules that govern our expectations of our own and others' behavior. Research ethics are the set of ethical guidelines that guides us on how scientific research should be conducted and disseminated. It also administers the standards of conduct for scientific researchers. This study considered ethical standards of social research and prior ethical approval was taken from the all concerned authority. It is mentionable that participation in this study was completely voluntary and participants had the choice to skip any question they felt uncomfortable with or terminate the interview at any time. The respondents enjoyed no risk by attending the interview and there were no questions that would endanger their security. In addition, participants of the study remain anonymous and ensured that collected data will only be utilizes for this research project.

4.6 Data Analysis

As the study considers mixed method approach, it prefers to adopt thematic analysis technique as well as descriptive statistics for analyzing the gathered data. Data collected through FGD were reviewed, examined, and analyzed manually using framework analysis technique. However, Clarke et.at (2015) mentioned that thematic analysis is an accessible, flexible, and increasingly popular method of qualitative data analysis that provides the qualitative researcher with a foundation in the basic skills needed to engage with other approaches to qualitative data analysis.

The overall objective of framework analysis is to identify, describe, and interpret key patterns within and across cases of and themes within the phenomenon of interest. Here analyzed data is presented in the research findings section following the chronology of the themes such as existing status of the UDC as well as to identify challenges and way forwards. Sequentially, the paper also explores for effective pathways for vibrant UDCs serving rural people digitally.

5. Research Findings and Discussion

Part A

(Responses from service providers/ entrepreneurs; total 93 respondents)

5.1.1 Whether require for modern technology for citizens service or not

The respondents reveal that they possess conception about requirement of modern technology for UDC and it represents 90% of the respondents. And 10% of them mentioned that they have enough technological support for serving the citizens of rural people.

However, during FGD participants also stressed for new technology for better service to the citizens. They also mentioned that UDCs entrepreneurs require to acquire capacity to serve people using new technology. The discussants also revealed that over the time, nature and volume of citizen's demand are changing frequently and entrepreneur should come up with technology for meeting the requirements for their own survival.
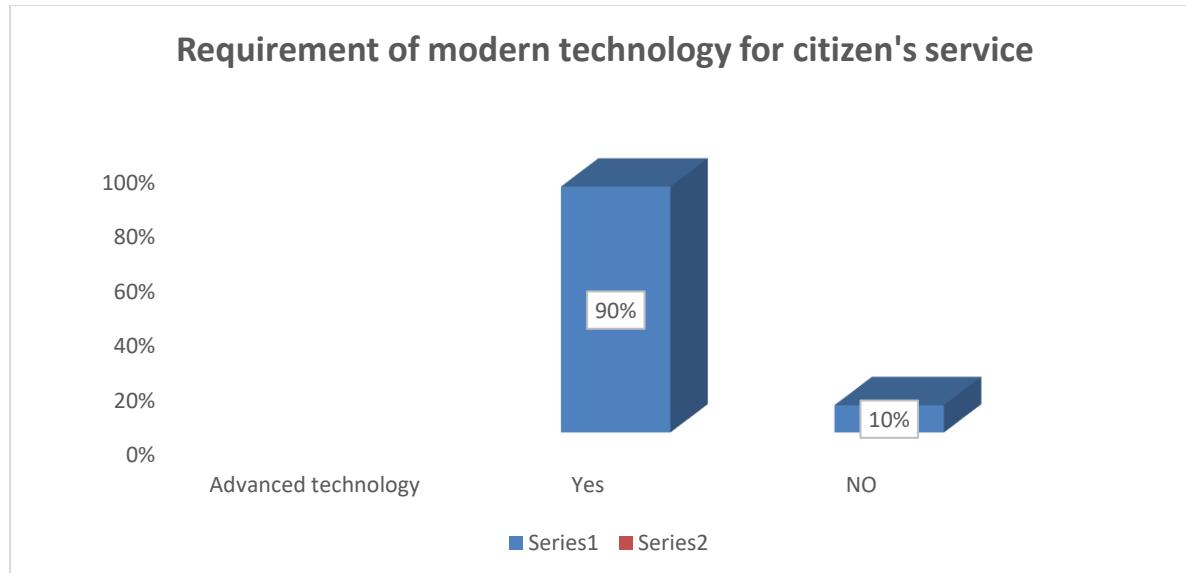
(Figure-1)

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5.1.2 Average monthly income of each entrepreneur

In this question the research team approached to 93 entrepreneurs and 56% of them mentioned that they have a monthly income between Tk 8,000 to 16,000 range. However, 19% revealed monthly income Tk16, 000 to 24,000. And the rest of the respondents have monthly income below Tk 8,000 and above Tk 24,000 respectively.
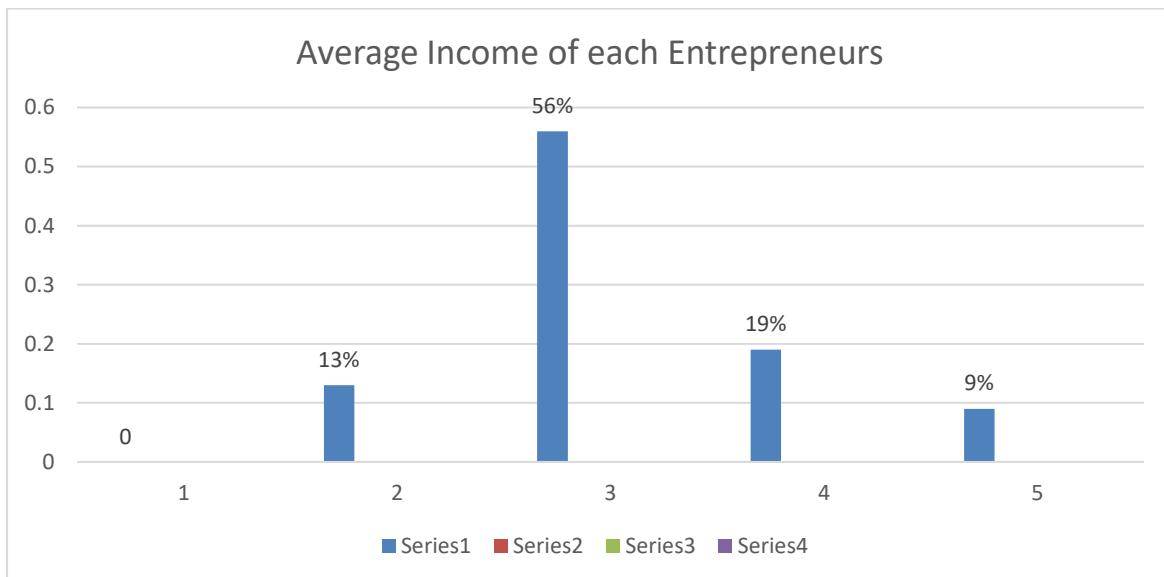
(Figure-2)

The FGD participants interestingly said that most of the activities of the UP associated with computer typing such as, different pay roll of labors, services, list of different assistance etc. are to be done by the entrepreneurs of that UDC. However, all these activities are done without any payments which obviously impact negatively on the income of the entrepreneurs. In addition, most of them mentioned that internet speed is slow at local level and they use *mobile data* and personal *Wi-Fi* connection most of the time to serve the people. However, the speed of the broadband connection provided to Union Parishad is too slow to do any work as well as to serve local people revealed most of the KII participants during the interview.

During discussion participants mentioned that UDCs have not more activities as public do their activities from other outlets adjacent to their livelihood rather coming to UDCs. UDCs were mainly engaged with doing birth-registration related activities and this was the main source of

income of UDC. But later ID and password for birth registration was given to the UP Chairman and Secretary. And they do it themself and not share with the UDC entrepreneurs. Moreover, entrepreneurs are yet too skilled enough to discharge various types of activities to meet public demand revealed by the most of the discussants. Therefore, income is decreasing day by day.

5.1.3 Whether entrepreneurs engaged with other profession or not
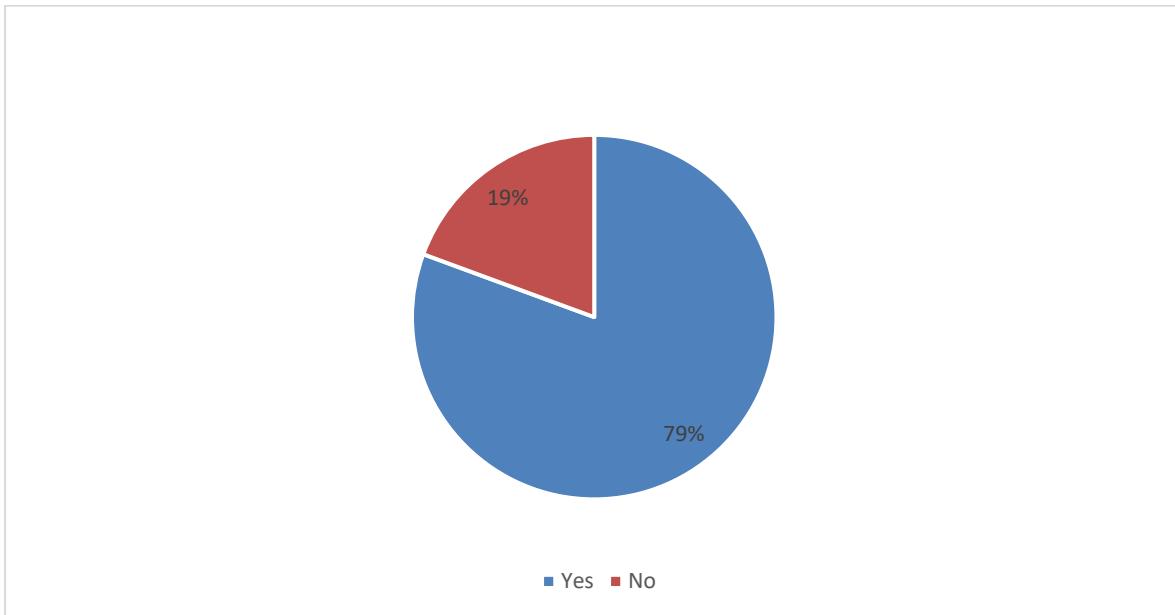
(Figure-3)

The pie chart represents 19% of the respondents are engaged with different profession other than UDC. However, 79 of the respondents are fully dependent on UDC income. During discussion, the FGD participants on this issue mentioned that few entrepreneurs become reluctant to do job at UP due to various reasons such as, noncooperation from UP Chairman & Secretary, remote location of UP etc.

5.1.4 Whether capable to all services digitally to citizens

Whether capable to all services digitally to citizens

- 36%
- 64%

■ Yes ■ No
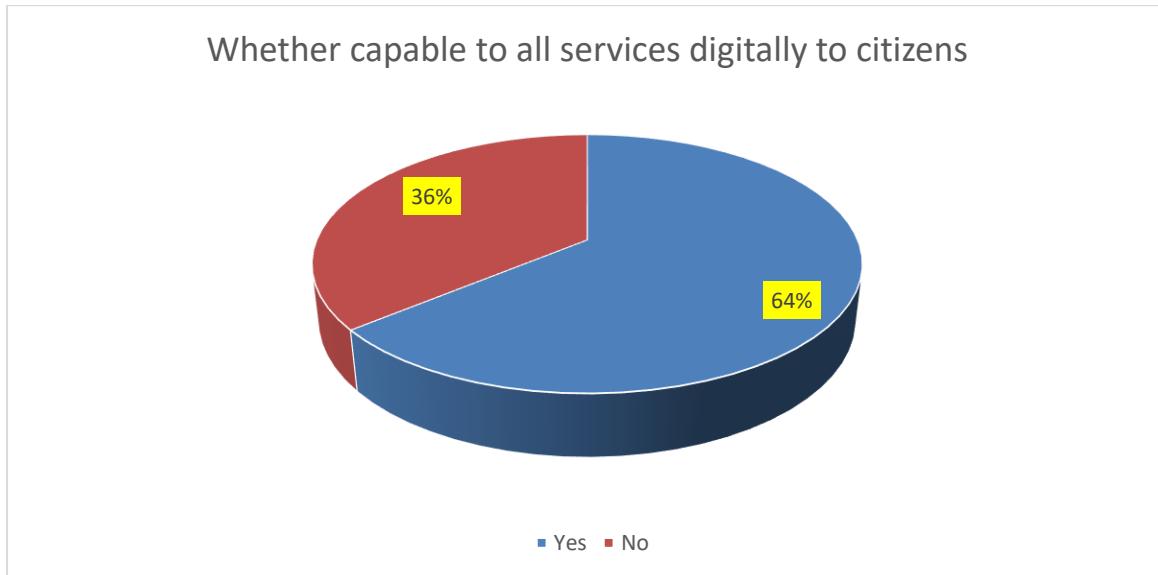
(Figure-4)

Respondents of UDC think, they possess enough capacity to serve the local people through UDC and 64% of them mentioned in this way. However, the rest of the 36% respondents reveal that they have not sufficient capacity to serve the people. But The FGD participants mentioned that entrepreneurs are yet too skilled enough to discharge various types of activities to meet public demand. Moreover, they stressed about appointment of entrepreneur as an important aspect for the UDC as sometimes entrepreneurs are appointed without considering sufficient efficiency and skills. Thus, such entrepreneurs cannot serve well to service receiver with their expected level. This ultimate pave a way to be a non-functional UDC of that Upazila.

5.1.5 Cooperation from UP Chairman, Members or not

The diagram represents that the entrepreneurs get cooperation from the Union Parishad and 53% of the respondents opined for getting sufficient cooperation. However, 28% of the respondents mentioned that they do not get cooperation from the Union Parishad. Mentionable that 19% of the respondents did not make any comments on this question.
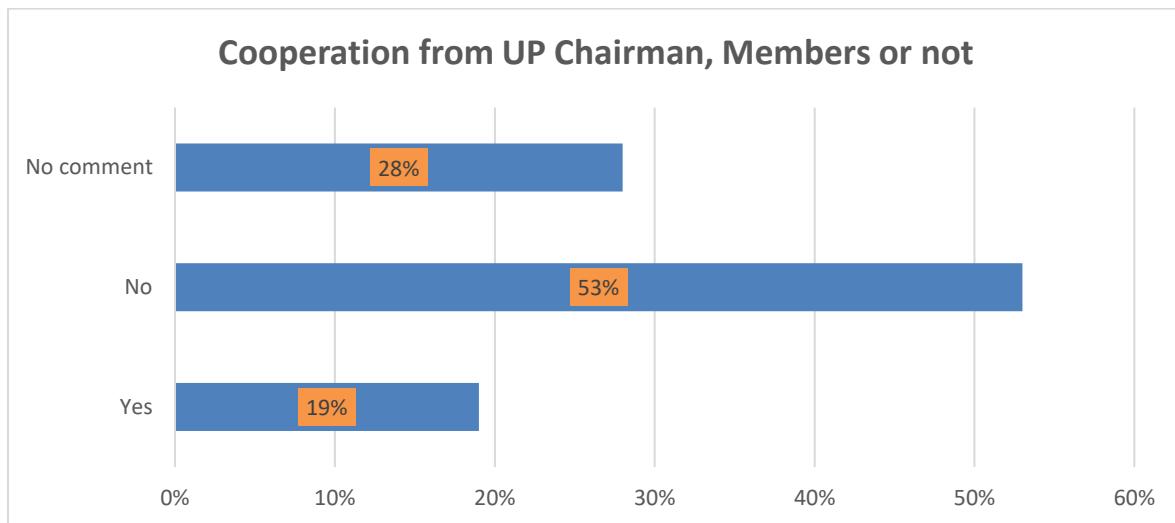
(Figure-5)

The FGD participants mentioned that most of the activities of the UP associated with computer typing such as, different pay roll of labors, list of different assistance etc. are to be done by the entrepreneurs of that UDC. However, all these activities are done without any payments. Entrepreneurs do not fell interest to discharge UP's activities always. On contrary, few KII cited that UDCs entrepreneurs sometimes misuse the ID & password of the UP given to him for discharging various governmental activities on trust. In addition, entrepreneurs do not cooperate UP Chairman and sometime they become engaged with local politics and create illegal pressure on Chairman to do something.

Moreover, the participants revealed that as after assuming power, the newly elected Chairman demands for appointing new entrepreneurs as his/her wish, and if s/he failed, try to non-cooperate the entrepreneurs with various aspects. The newly elected Chairman think the current/ existing entrepreneurs are appointed by the previous Chairman and consider him as

his opposite supporter. Sometimes UP Chairman appointed his acquainted persons/ nephews as entrepreneurs and they act at the UP parallel to the existing UDC. Therefore, survival of an UDC become more challenging there. And this a common scenario across the country, they stressed during FGD conversation.

Entrepreneurs are appointed with a contract between the newly elected Chairman and the entrepreneurs. But if any entrepreneur violates rules and contract, the Chairman cannot remove him from the UP and it hinders various public interest of that areas mentioned by the most of the UP Chairman.

5.1.6 Problems of UDCs

Problems of UDC

Scarcity of advanced equipments: 79%
Lack of trained entrepreneurs: 27%
Frequent change of entrepreneurs: 35%
Lack of skilled maintence manpower: 44%
Others: 20%

■ Series1 ■ Series2 ■ Series3 ■ Series4
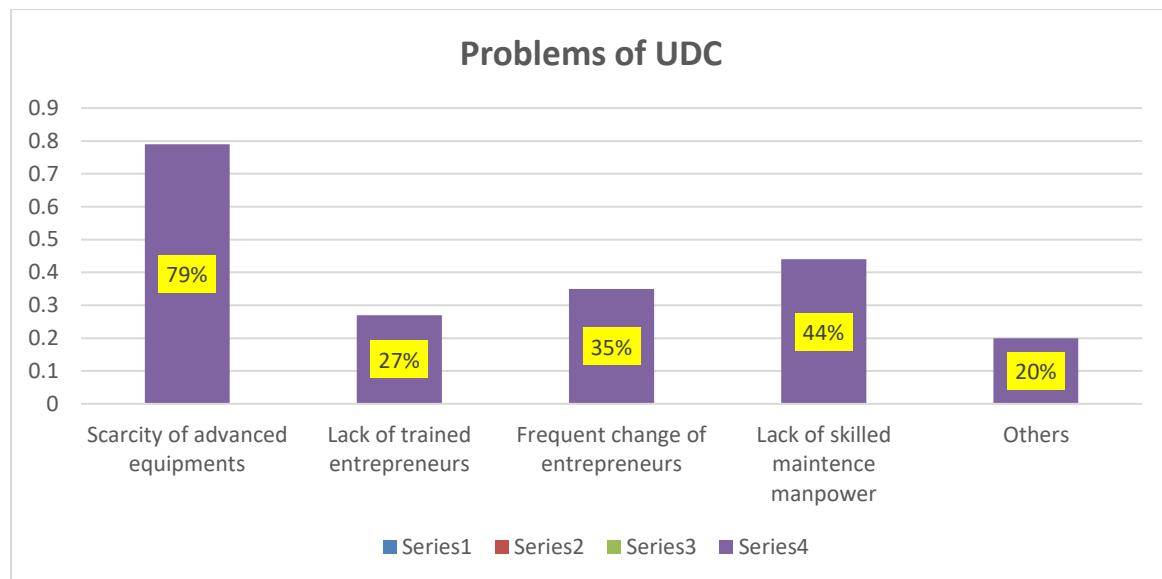
(Identified more than one answer by the entrepreneurs)

(Figure-6)

The respondents provided their opinion on this topic and reveals that 79% of them mentioned that scarcity of modern and advanced technology play vital role as weakness of the UDC. It also revealed that 44% of the respondents mentioned lack of skilled manpower at local level for maintenance of the equipments used at UDC. However, 35% entrepreneurs mentioned frequent change; 27% for lack of trained entrepreneurs and 20% mentioned other reasons as weakness that hinders smooth service to the people.

The FGD participants also echoed the similar voice that modern and advanced technology is a must for serving digitally to the remote people and most of the UDCs are now suffering from it. Availability of skilled and industrious entrepreneurs at local level is also a vital issue for well-functioning of UDC uttered by the discussants. The participants also mentioned that non-cooperation from UP Chairman, remote location, lack of continuous supply of electricity, low speed of internet, cope up with modern technology are also problems uttered by the participants.

5.1.7 Strength of UDC (identified more than one answer by the entrepreneurs)

Strength of UDC

- Sufficient equipments
- Skilled entrepreneurs
- Suficient cooperation from UP
- Satisfaction of Service receiver
- Others
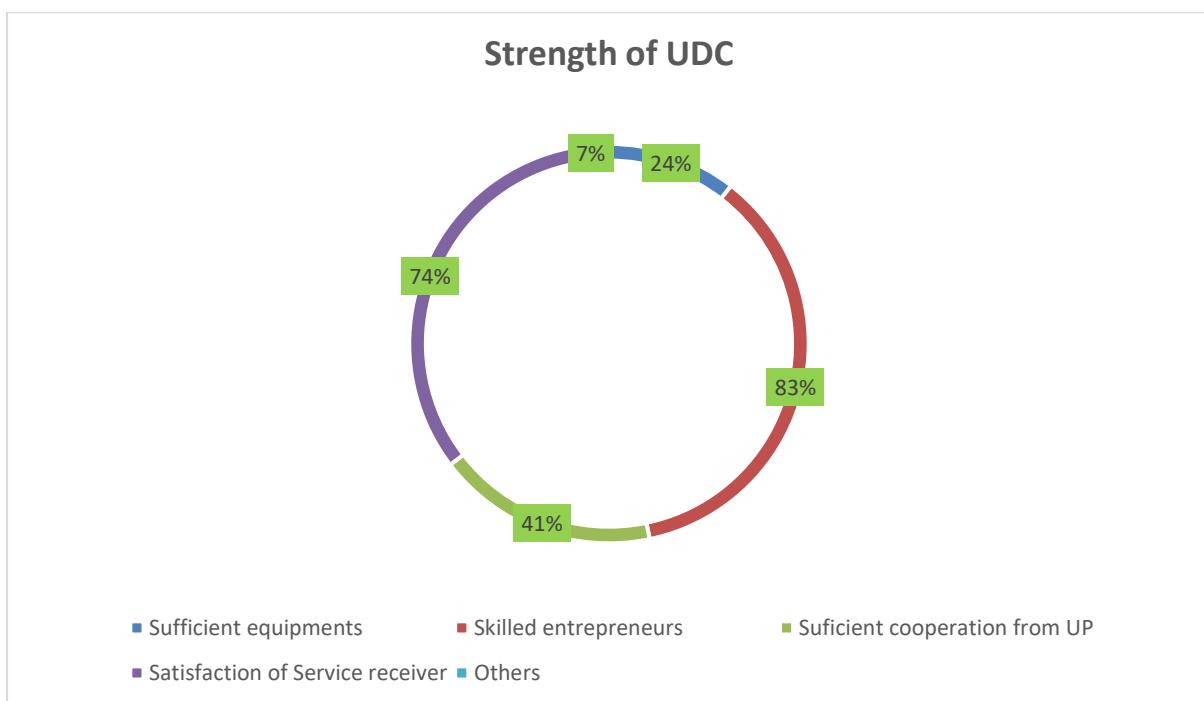
(Chart-7)

Strength of an organization is the key to achieve its goal and the UDC possess sufficient skills to serve the local people. However, 83% of the respondents mentioned, they have enough skills and efficiency to serve local people through UDC. In addition, 41% of the respondents mentioned sufficient equipments as the strength of the UDC. Moreover, 74% of the entrepreneurs opined for getting cooperation from the Union Parishad and it is a strength of the UDC. A figure of 7% of respondents mentioned satisfaction of service receiver as strength of UDC and 24% of respondents mentioned other reasons.

Part B

(Responses from UP Chairman/ UP Secretary/ UP Member; total 146 respondents)

5.2.1 Availability of two entrepreneurs at UDC

Availability of two entrepreneurs at UDC is the key issue for a well and service-oriented organization such as 72% of the respondents mentioned that they have two entrepreneurs working at the UDC. On the contrary, 28% of the respondents mentioned that they have only one entrepreneur working now at their UDC.
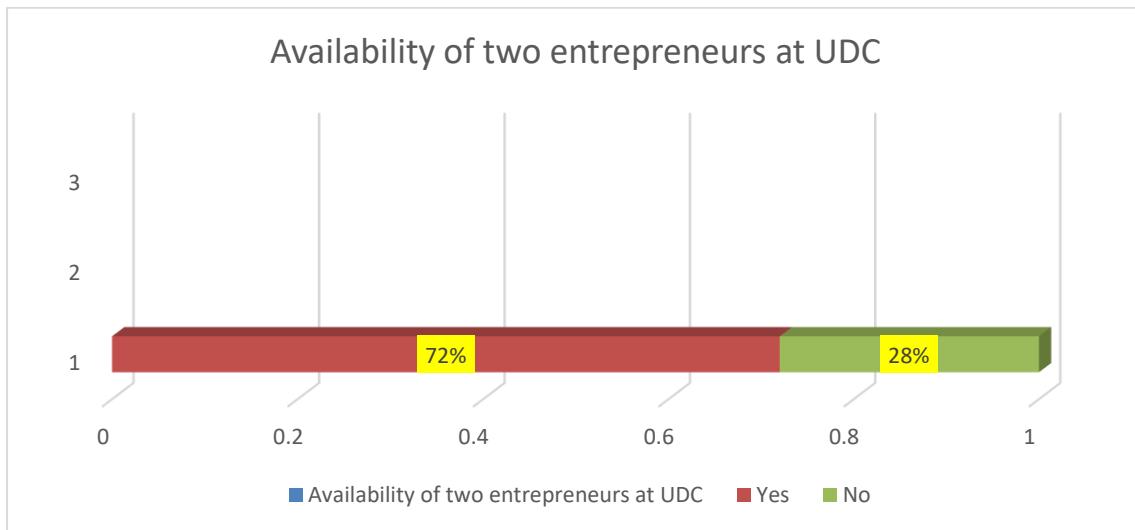
(Figure-8)

During discussion, the participants mentioned that availability of skilled and efficient female entrepreneurs are a challenge for the local areas. The female entrepreneurs join and work for few days with enthusiastic manner and after they lose interest and quit from the UDC.

5.2.2 Whether UDC is functioning well or not

The pie chart shows that 93% of the respondents mentioning their UDC are functioning well. However, 7% of them mentioned that their UDCs are not in operation at the expected level.

7%

93%

■ Yes ■ No
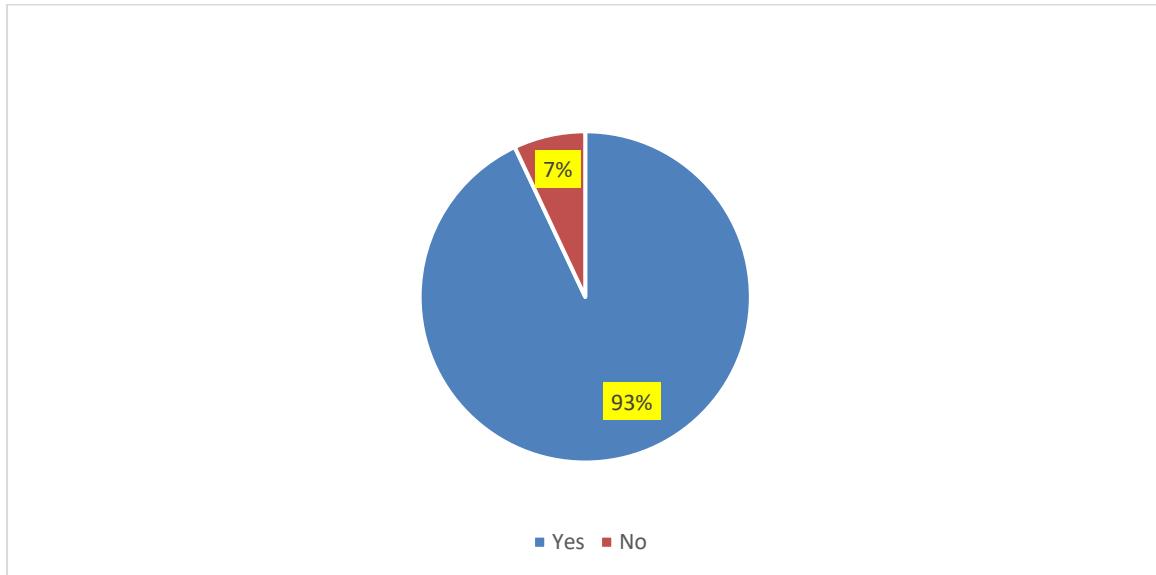
(Figure-9)

A well-functioning UDC require different types of issues to address and environment prevails there which are tantamount to the similar nature of problems identified by the FGD participants and respondents. If UP is located beside a growth center, its UDC could perform better. Publicity of UDC or types of activities and services disposed of by the UDCs require to spread among the locality, mentioned most of the FGD participants.

5.2.3 Weakness/ Problems of UDC

(Identified by the UP Chairmen, UP Secretary, Members and UNO)

In this query Union Parishad Chairman, Union Parishad Secretary, Members mentioned that scarcity of modern and advanced technology is the key weak point for a well-functioning UDC and 77% of them cited in this way. In addition, 64% of the respondents mentioned lack of equipments maintenance mechanics at upazila level; 64% of mentioned lack of skilled entrepreneurs; 10% mentioned frequent change of entrepreneurs as the key weak points for the UDC.
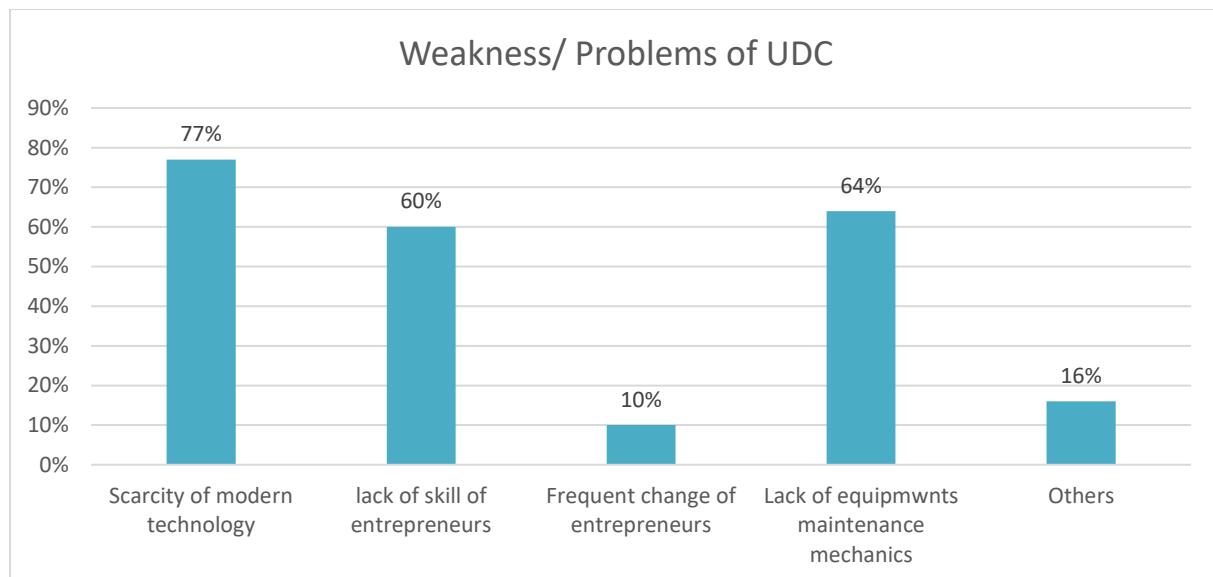
(Figure-10)

In addition, during FGD, participants mentioned that well and coordinated support from the UP, location of the Parishad are also important for UDC along with speedy internet & electricity connection. They also stressed that it is time to formulate a rule for the UDC's operation and appointment & removal of entrepreneurs. And it will pave a clear shape for the UDC to function smoothly. Currently, there is no direct authority to whom the entrepreneurs can share different public related issues. UNO of that upazila becomes engaged with his different activities and in most of the upazila, UNO cannot organize a meeting with the UDC entrepreneurs to hear and solve their problems. If any equipments of the UDC become dysfunctional and incur thousands of money to repair or replace, UDCs cannot afford financially to replace it. In addition, they cannot get financial assistance from the UP or from the UNO or Upazila Parishad to mend their equipments. Furthermore, if the entrepreneurs

could manage money, they have to travel to the town, a long way, to replace or repair it that incur another big amount of money.

6.2.4 Strength of UDC

(Identified by the UP Chairman, UP Secretary, Members and UNO)

Strength of an organization is the key to achieve its goal and the UDC possess sufficient skills to serve the local people. However, 67% of the respondents mentioned that satisfaction of the service receiver is the prime strength of the UDC. In addition, 71% of the entrepreneurs opined that they get cooperation from the Union Parishad and it is a strength of the UDC. 69 % of the respondents also mentioned skilled entrepreneurs as a strength and 38 % of them mentioned availability of sufficient equipments are also strength of the UDC.
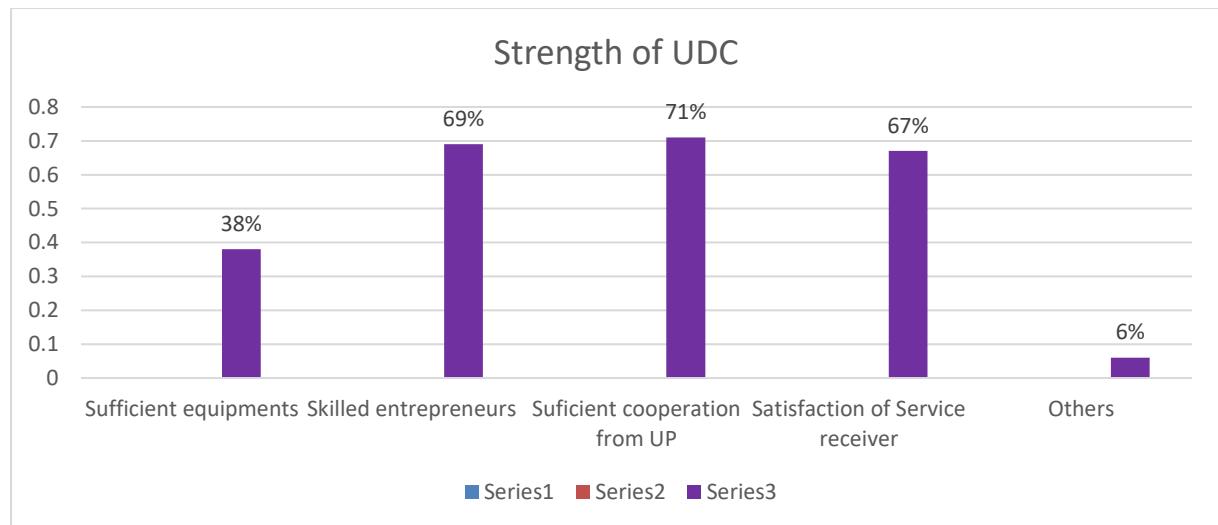
(Figure-10)

UDCs possess lots of positive signs to perform at the UP that are clearly mentioned by the participants.

5.3.1 Theme 1: Currently provided services by the UDCs (research question)

UDCs are engaged with disposing lots of activities determined by the government which are mentioned by the entrepreneurs. Despite the determined activities, entrepreneurs also do more that are demanded by the grassroot people. Currently Entrepreneurs are engaged with mostly birth and death registration related activities, different testimonial and certificates, succession certificate, NID application, passport application, visa application and status check, notice writing, agent banking, online application, online voter registration, email, online job application, electricity line connection application, NID amendment application, opening bank account, vaccine registration, online land porcha, bkash, police verification application, photocopy, scanning, utility bill payment, e-challan

, computer compose and training etc. However, all these functions are done on demand by the local people. In addition, computer and internet-based activities of the Union Parishad are also performed by the entrepreneurs. It could be rational here to mention respondent's statements as such:

> *'Entrepreneurs of the UDC are mainly discharging Porcha and birth-registration related activities at current moment and other activities are done less'*

Mentionable that most of the UDCs earn monthly around Tk 8,000 to16,000 that corresponds 56% of the UDCs across the country. However, 19% of the respondents revealed their monthly income Tk 16,000 to 24,000 range. Technological advancement and digital devices by the local peoples contribute to shrink the average monthly income of the UDC cited by the entrepreneurs.

5.3.2 Theme 2: Challenges of UDCs (research question)

The research project mainly focused with identifying the weakness and or challenges of the UDCs. Currently few UDCs are functioning well but most of the UDCs are facing different types of challenges which are mentioned by the respondents during interview and discussion. However, entrepreneurs cited scarcity of modern equipments as their prime challenge to serve the local people and it corresponds to 79% of entrepreneurs. Lack of skilled maintenance

engineers/ technicians at grassroot level also contribute to 44% of the respondents identifies as challenges for the UDCs. Interestingly, 60% of the respondents comprising with UP Chairman, Secretary, and members, mentioned that lack of skilled entrepreneurs contribute for not functioning the UDCs well and stressed for enhancing capacity of the entrepreneurs through training. In addition, few more challenges are also revealed as, frequent change of entrepreneurs, scarcity of trust and coordination among UP Chairman, UP Secretary, and entrepreneurs, lack of a solo supervising authority regularly, lack of speed of internet, uninterrupted electricity, scarcity of financial resources for maintenance of equipments, payment of entire electricity bill of the Union Parishad etc.

5.3.3 Theme 3: Ways out for more effective service provider

(Research question)

Respondents and FGD participants describe various steps required for the UDC to be effective. Most of them mentioned equipments require to be updated and modern. A well communicated location of the UDC at UP building where service recipients can come and seat for getting their services. The discussants mentioned as such:

'entrepreneurs require to be skilled and capable enough to serve the service recipients using updated technology and equipments.'

Ownership of UDCs, they consider an important issue for the UDC as the UP or Upazila Parishad or UNO or DC or any other government body require to look after and supervise the activities of the UDCs. However, respondents mentioned as:

'UNO and DC of the district sometimes visit it but not an organized way cited by the most of the entrepreneurs. So, it is an essential need to organize meeting every two months by the UNO and a yearly conference by the DC of that district in presence of the high officials of the government'.

However, this step will enhance the confidence and inspiration among the entrepreneurs to look forward for serving well. Additionally, entrepreneurs require to acquire capacity through training and seminars and UNO of the upazila can organize it. This will enhance their capacity to serve local people and ultimately show the effectiveness of the UDCs.

It is important to widely circulate the services provided by the UDCs for the local people to enhance the income of the entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs require to be neutral always and should not be engaged in any political issues. Entrepreneurs require to congratulate the newly elected Chairman at times which will pave a congenial working environment for UDCs. The discussants also unfold for providing equipments maintenance cost through UNO as sometimes entrepreneurs cannot afford to repair or replace. This step will connect UDC's entrepreneurs with the government positively and be recognized.

It is revealed here that the broad band internet connection incurs around two thousand and five hundred taka electricity bill monthly which is a burden on entrepreneurs to pay. However, the speed of broadband internet connection is not sufficient for faster work swiftly. Therefore, they uttered as:

'entrepreneurs depend on using Wi-Fi and mobile data for smooth running the UDCs. Providing internet with a concessional rate to the UDCs could be a positive way to strengthen the capacity and effectiveness of the UDCs.'

Inserting new services to UDCs along with widely circulation of UDC's activities to the local people and such activities will add positive image abut UDC to people. Ensue freedom to dispose of the entrepreneur's job with any interference from the UP Chairman and Secretary. This step will contribute to enhance income and inspiration of the entrepreneurs. Use of solar panel could be an option for uninterrupted electricity which incur unbearable money by the entrepreneurs. So Upazila Parishad could assist entrepreneurs financially to install solar panels for continuous electricity supply at the UDCs.

6.1 Key Findings

1. Entrepreneurs of the UDC are mainly discharging *Porcha and* birth-registration related activities at current moment. Most of the entrepreneurs mentioned that internet speed is very slow at local level and they are using *mobile data* and personal *Wi-Fi* connection at their most of the time to serve the people. However, the speed of the broadband connection provided by the government to the most of the Union Parishad is too slow to do any work as well as to serve local people swiftly revealed by the participants during the interview. Moreover, the birth-registration server becomes down frequently and UDCs are suffering for ensuring smooth service to the people.

2. It is worth mentionable that most of the activities of the UP associated with computer typing such as, different pay roll of labors, list of different assistance etc. are to be done by the entrepreneurs of that UDC. However, all these activities are done without any payments that obviously impact negatively on the income of the entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs do not fell interest to discharge UP's activities always. During FGD, most of the UP Chairman uttered that they cannot trust entrepreneurs as have instances to misuse the ID and password provided by the government to the UP for discharging various governmental services. They also mentioned as such,

'entrepreneurs do not cooperate UP Chairman and sometime they become engaged with local politics and create illegal pressure on Chairman to do something.'

3. Appointment of entrepreneur is an important issue for the UDC as sometimes entrepreneurs are appointed without considering the efficiency and skills to serve people digitally. And such entrepreneurs cannot serve people at their expected level. This ultimately pave a way to be a non-functional UDC of that Upazila. However, entrepreneurs are appointed with a contract between the newly elected Chairman and the entrepreneurs. But if any entrepreneur violates rules and contract, the Chairman cannot remove him from the UP and it hinders various public interest of that areas.

4. Entrepreneurs charge more money than expectation for a single activity from the local people. And it impacts negative perception about the UP to general people. Sometimes entrepreneurs misbehave with service recipients that create adverse impression about UP and as Chairman, he has to manage people mentioned by most of the UP Chairman during discussion.

5. There is no specific allotted room for the UDC at Union Parishad complex. Therefore, few UDCs are located at the ground floor and some are at the first floor of the Union Parishad. Service recipients of local areas are become very reluctant to step for first floor to get service from UDCs. In addition, it is not conducive to elderly and disable persons for getting services from upstairs.

6. Availability of uninterrupted electricity manifests a big issue for UDCs to perform as prompt service provider. However, load shedding creates disruption to serve smoothly and it is a common phenomenon at the remote and char areas of the country. It is revealed that managing battery-based solar panel for the UDC costs an unbearable amount to pay. It is worth

mentionable that speedy internet service and uninterrupted electricity are the main challenge for a well-functioning UDC identified by the respondents and FGD discussants during interview.

7. Some Union Parishad have not UP building and their daily activities are discharged at a rented building and such situation creates challenges to establish UDC there. In this Union Parishad, UDC is also functioning at a rented building just like a business outlet/ enterprise.

8. Activities of UDCs are shrinking as local people do their activities from other outlets adjacent to their livelihood. However, UDCs are mainly engaged with doing birth-registration related activities and this was the main source of income of UDC. But later ID and password of birth registration was given to the UP Chairman and UP Secretary. And they do it themself and not share with the UDC's entrepreneurs. Therefore, income is decreasing day by day.

9. Well and trusted cooperation from UP Chairman and UP Secretary are playing vital role for determining active and vibrant UDCs. It is time to formulate a rule for embodying a permanent shape of the UDCs, as after assuming power, the newly elected Chairman demands for appointing new entrepreneurs as his wish, and if he failed, try to non-cooperate entrepreneurs with various aspects. The newly elected Chairman think the existing entrepreneurs are appointed by the previous Chairman and consider him as opposite supporter. Sometimes UP Chairman appoint his acquainted person or nephew as entrepreneurs and they act at the UP parallel to the existing UDC. Therefore, survival of an UDC become more challenging there. And this is a common scenario across the country revealed by most of the entrepreneurs during interview.

10. Female entrepreneurs appointed at the UDCs become absent for most of the days. They attend regularly at their initial days but after months they lose their interest in this business and become reluctant and ultimately quit. In most of the cases, female entrepreneurs are the wife or nephew of existing entrepreneurs. Their name is shown officially in the paper, but they do not attend to serve people regularly.

11. Union Parishad works as per the office hours such as 9.00 am to 4.00pm. But local people engaged themselves this time for their agricultural or business-related activities. At afternoon and evening, people visit UDC for their desired services. Therefore, it requires to open the UDCs up to 9.00 pm every day to serve the people and obviously it will boost up the income and performance of the UDCs.

12. Income of entrepreneurs decrease due to technological advancement as local people now a days use smart phones, internet and do their own jobs himself using their devices. Moreover, they have obtained their literacy on information technology over the time. People visit merely UDCs for services except few governmental services. Therefore, income and activities of UDCs have been decreased and entrepreneurs become disheartened.

13. Entrepreneurs are yet too skilled more to discharge various types of activities to meet public demand. Therefore, it is time to take steps to enhance their capacity by the upazila administration so that UDCs can increase their income and could sustain.

14. Every two months UNO may organize a meeting with the entrepreneurs and address their issues raised and may instruct the UP Chairman, UP Secretary, and the entrepreneurs to work in a well-coordinated manner for the local people. Simultaneously, Deputy Commissioner of the District can organize a yearly conference with the entrepreneurs in presence with the higher authority to identify the challenges and way for UDCs as performing a service-oriented organization. These endeavors will enhance confidence among the entrepreneurs as mentioned by the respondents.

6.2 Recommendations

1. Establish well-trusted coordination among entrepreneurs, UP Chairman, UP Secretary and Members and determine an effective monitoring and supervising authority to look after UDCs.

2. Organize meeting by the UNO at every two months with entrepreneurs, UP Chairman, and UP Secretary and yearly conference by the Deputy Commissioner.

3. Appoint skilled and educated entrepreneurs to operate UDCs. Moreover, enhance IT capacity of the entrepreneurs through training.

4. Provide financial support for repairing the existing instruments and replacement of equipments by the advanced technology by phases.

5. Ensure speedy internet and uninterrupted electricity to UDCs at concessional rate.

6. Insert new services in the chart of activities of UDCs and circulate it to local people widely.

7. Extend the UDC hours from 9.00 am to 9.00 pm for better service delivery as well as increase its income.

6.3 Conclusion

Technological influx in the 21st century is a common scenario across the world. Government of Bangladesh declared earlier that Bangladesh will be transformed digitally by 2021. In this regard, in 2009, UDCs are established at every Union Parishad of the country to serve the local people with various governmental and commercial services digitally. Over the time, UDCs contributed significantly in transforming the rural traditional society into a digital one with serving different services through internet-based digital devices. The research finds that UDCs act excellently to enhance the rural community, focusing on information services with the help of technology and digital equipments. The paper also revealed that people in rural areas are receiving significant benefits from UDCs. It serves all kinds of people in the society as per their demand. Despite this, UDCs possess some challenges identified in this paper, require to address with due procedure so that these centers could perform well at the grass-root level. Mentionable, that government of Bangladesh declared in its second perspective plan that Bangladesh will be a smart country by 2041 and information technology sector could be the prime change maker to achieve its goal. Proper management and supervision of the UDCs could act as renaissance towards a smart rural society in the country.

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Effectiveness of Service Delivery of Union Digital Centers in Bangladesh: Challenges and Way Forward

গবেষণার প্রশ্নাবলী

(পার্ট-ক: উদ্যোক্তা/ সেবা প্রদানকারীর জন্য)

(বাংলাদেশের ইউনিয়ন ডিজিটাল সেন্টারসমূহের বর্তমান অবস্থা, চ্যালেঞ্জ নির্ধারণ ও উত্তরণের উপায় প্রণয়নের লক্ষ্যে মন্ত্রিপরিষদ বিভাগ কর্তৃক গবেষণা কার্যক্রমটি গ্রহণ করা হয়েছে। এই প্রশ্নমালার উত্তরসমূহ শুধুমাত্র গবেষণাকার্যে ব্যবহৃত হবে। গবেষণার মান উন্নয়ন ও সঠিক তথ্য প্রাপ্তির জন্য গবেষণায় অংশগ্রহণকারীগণের সকল তথ্য গোপন রাখা হবে। এছাড়া, তথ্য প্রদানকারীর পরিচয় প্রকাশ করা হবে না।)

(বি. দ্র. প্রত্যেক প্রশ্নের সম্ভাব্য একটি বা একাধিক উত্তর নির্বাচন করা যাবে এবং প্রয়োজনে মতামত সংযোজন করা যাবে।)

উদ্যোক্তার নাম			বয়স:
	সর্বোচ্চ ডিগ্রি:		জেণ্ডার:
UDC-এর ঠিকানা	ইউনিয়ন:	উপজেলা:	জেলা:

১।   UDC-তে বর্তমানে যে সকল সেবা প্রদান করা হয়, সেগুলির নাম লিখুন। জানুয়ারি থেকে সেপ্টেম্বর ২০২২ পর্যন্ত প্রদানকৃত সেবা) (প্রয়োজনে অতিরিক্ত কাগজ সংযোজন করা যাবে)

ক)	চ)

খ)	ছ)
গ)	জ)
ঘ)	ঝ)
ঙ)	ঞ)

২।   সবচেয়ে বেশি যে সেবাগুলি নাগরিকগণ নিতে আসেন, তার মধ্যে ৬টি সেবার নাম উল্লেখ করুন।

ক)	ঘ)
খ)	ঙ)
গ)	চ)

৩।   সেবা প্রদানের জন্য বর্তমানে UDC-তে যে সকল সরঞ্জামাদি/ যন্ত্রপাতি আছে তা উল্লেখ করুন।

ক)	ঘ)
খ)	ঙ)
গ)	চ)

৪।   (১) নাগরিকের চাহিত সকল সেবা প্রদানের লক্ষ্যে আর কোন উন্নত যন্ত্রপাতি/ সরঞ্জামাদির প্রয়োজন আছে কি না?

ক) হ্যাঁ   খ) না

(২) যদি হ্যাঁ হয়, তাহলে কি ধরণের যন্ত্রপাতি/সরঞ্জামাদি প্রয়োজন তার নাম উল্লেখ করুন।

ক)	ঘ)
খ)	ঙ)
গ)	চ)

৫।   UDC থেকে আপনার মাসিক গড় আয় উল্লেখ করুন। (প্রযোজ্য ক্ষেত্রে টিক চিহ্ন দিন)

ক) ৮,০০০ টাকা নিম্নে	গ) ১৬,০০০-২৪,০০০ টাকা
খ) ৮,০০০-১৬,০০০ টাকা	ঘ) ২৪,০০০ টাকার উর্ধ্বে

৬।   (১) UDC এর বাইরে আপনি অন্য কোন পেশা/ কর্মে নিযুক্ত আছেন কিনা?

ক) হ্যাঁ   খ) না

(২) যদি না হয়, তাহলে কি পেশা/ কর্মে নিযুক্ত আছেন, তা উল্লেখ করুন?

ক)   খ)

৭।   (১) আপনি কি নাগরিকের চাহিত সকল সেবা UDC-র মাধ্যমে দিতে পারছেন?

ক) হ্যাঁ   খ) না

(২) যদি না হয়, তাহলে কি কি নাগরিক সেবা প্রদান করতে পারছেন না তা উল্লেখ করুন?

ক)	গ)
খ)	ঘ)

৮।   (১) ইউ.পি চেয়ারম্যান/ মেম্বারদের কাছ থেকে কোন অসহযোগিতার সম্মুখিন হন কি না?

ক) হ্যাঁ   খ) না   গ) মন্তব্য নেই

(২) যদি হ্যাঁ হয়, তাহলে অসহযোগিতার ধরণ উল্লেখ করুন।

ক)	ঘ)
খ)	ঙ)
গ)	চ)

৯।   UDC-এর সমস্যা/ দুর্বল দিকসমূহ কি কি ? উল্লেখ করুন।

ক) প্রয়োজনীয় আধুনিক সরঞ্জামাদি/ যন্ত্রপাতির অভাব;	ঘ) সরঞ্জামাদি/ যন্ত্রপাতি মেরামতের মেকানিক/ কারিগরের অভাব;
খ) উদ্যোক্তাদের দক্ষতা/ প্রশিক্ষণের অভাব;	ঙ) অন্যান্য (উল্লেখ করুন)
গ) ঘন ঘন (frequently) উদ্যোক্তা পরিবর্তন;	

১০।   UDC-এর ভালো (strength) দিকসমূহ উল্লেখ করুন।?

ক) প্রয়োজনীয় সরঞ্জামাদি/ যন্ত্রপাতি আছে;	ঘ) নাগরিকদের UDC-এর সেবায় সন্তুষ্টি আছে;
খ) উদ্যোক্তাদের নাগরিক সেবা প্রদানের দক্ষতা আছে;	ঙ) অন্যান্য (উল্লেখ করুন)
গ) UP থেকে প্রয়োজনীয় সকল সহায়তা পাওয়া যায়;	

১১।   UDC-কে আরও কার্যকর প্রতিষ্ঠান হিসাবে গড়ে তোলার জন্য আর কি কি পদক্ষেপ নেওয়া প্রয়োজন?

ক)	ঘ)
খ)	ঙ)
গ)	চ)

ধন্যবাদ

Effectiveness of Service Delivery of Union Digital Centers in Bangladesh:

Challenges and Way Forward

গবেষণার প্রশ্নাবলী

পার্ট-খ:

(উপজেলা নির্বাহী অফিসার/ ইউনিয়ন পরিষদের চেয়ারম্যান/ সদস্য/ সচিবগণের জন্য)

(বাংলাদেশের ইউনিয়ন ডিজিটাল সেন্টারসমূহের বর্তমান অবস্থা, চ্যালেঞ্জ নির্ধারণ ও উত্তরণের উপায় প্রণয়নের লক্ষ্যে মন্ত্রিপরিষদ বিভাগ কর্তৃক গবেষণা কার্যক্রমটি গ্রহণ করা হয়েছে। এই প্রশ্নমালার উত্তরসমূহ শুধুমাত্র গবেষণাকার্যে ব্যবহৃত হবে। গবেষণার মান উন্নয়ন ও সঠিক তথ্য প্রাপ্তির জন্য গবেষণায় অংশগ্রহণকারীগণের সকল তথ্য গোপন রাখা হবে। এছাড়া, তথ্য প্রদানকারীর পরিচয় প্রকাশ করা হবে না।)

(বি. দ্র. প্রত্যেক প্রশ্নের সম্ভাব্য একটি বা একাধিক উত্তর নির্বাচন করা যাবে এবং প্রয়োজনে মতামত সংযোজন করা যাবে।)

নাম	
	পদবী:
কর্মস্থলের ঠিকানা	ইউনিয়ন: উপজেলা: জেলা:

১।   আপনার অধিক্ষেত্রের সকল/ আপনার UP-তে ২ জন করে উদ্যোক্তা (একজন নারী ও একজন পুরুষ) কর্মরত আছে কিনা?

        ক) হ্যাঁ   খ) না

২।   আপনার অধিক্ষেত্রের সকল/ আপনার পরিষদের UDC সচল আছে কিনা?

ক) হ্যাঁ   খ) না

৩।   UDC-এর সমস্যা/ দুর্বল দিকসমূহ কি কি? উল্লেখ করুন।

ক) প্রয়োজনীয় আধুনিক সরঞ্জামাদি/ যন্ত্রপাতির অভাব;	ঘ) সরঞ্জামাদি/ যন্ত্রপাতি মেরামতের মেকানিক/ কারিগরের অভাব;
খ) উদ্যোক্তাদের দক্ষতা/ প্রশিক্ষণের অভাব;	ঙ) অন্যান্য (উল্লেখ করুন)
গ) ঘন ঘন (frequently) উদ্যোক্তা পরিবর্তন;	

৪।   UDC-এর সবল (strength) দিকসমূহ উল্লেখ করুন।?

ক) প্রয়োজনীয় সরঞ্জামাদি/ যন্ত্রপাতি আছে;	ঘ) নাগরিকদের UDC-এর সেবায় সন্তুষ্টি আছে;
খ) উদ্যোক্তাদের নাগরিক সেবা প্রদানের দক্ষতা আছে;	ঙ) উদ্যোক্তাদের আচার-ব্যবহার ভালো;
গ) UP থেকে প্রয়োজনীয় সকল সহায়তা পাওয়া যায়;	চ) অন্যান্য (উল্লেখ করুন)

৫।   UDC-কে আরও কার্যকর প্রতিষ্ঠান হিসাবে গড়ে তোলার জন্য আর কি কি পদক্ষেপ নেওয়া প্রয়োজন?

ক)	ঘ)
খ)	ঙ)
গ)	চ)

ধন্যবাদ