

Union Digital Centers and the Future of Rural Governance

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Union Parishad, one of the oldest local government institutions in Bangladesh, plays a crucial role in governance at the grassroots level. It is the government body closest to the people, acting as their direct link to government services and administrative functions. This proximity allows Union Parishads to address the needs and concerns of local communities more effectively than higher levels of government.

The establishment of Union Digital Centers (UDCs) has revolutionized the capabilities of Union Parishads. These centers are designed to serve as conduits for both government and non-governmental information and services, effectively bridging the gap created by the digital divide. By integrating citizens into modern information flow systems, UDCs ensure that all members of society, particularly those in rural areas, have equal access to essential services and information. This not only enhances the efficiency and accessibility of local governance but also empowers citizens by equipping them with the tools and knowledge necessary to actively participate in the digital world.

To fulfill the vision of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina commenced building the Digital Bangladesh in 2008. On November 11, 2010, she officially opened 4,501 Union Digital Centers (UDCs) across the country, taking a big step towards digital inclusion. Bangladesh successfully achieved the Vision of Digital Bangladesh by 2021. Building on the success of Digital Bangladesh, Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has now heralded the vision of Smart Bangladesh by 2041, aiming to further advance the nation with technology and inclusive growth.

The growth of digital opportunities underscores the development of Union Digital Centers in Bangladesh. In November 2021, 8,280 Union Digital Centers (UDCs) across Bangladesh provided over 300 services. By 2024, an additional 1,000 services will be included, enhancing the existing 385 services to be available in the 9,397 digital centers. UDCs offer a range of services, from government-related tasks like obtaining trade licenses and land records to non-governmental services such as mobile banking, computer training, and visa applications. These centers also provide essential resources such as internet access, email services, and English education, catering to the diverse needs of the population.

The expansion of digital horizons through Union Digital Centers aligns with Smart Bangladesh's vision of a technologically advanced and inclusive society. With its focus on Smart Citizen, Smart Economy, Smart Government, and Smart Society, Smart Bangladesh aims to transform the nation into a more digitally empowered and equitable society. Union Digital Centers (UDCs) are ready to play a pivotal role in this transformation, particularly in rural areas. As vital hubs, UDCs are enhancing digital access, promote economic opportunities, improve government services, and facilitate societal integration. Consequently, they are making a significant impact on the socio-economic condition of rural communities.

At present, nearly 20,000 entrepreneurs are currently working in Union Digital Centers (UDCs), with each earning an average of 31,000 BDT. These centers significantly benefit migrant workers. Some centers have even introduced telemedicine services. UDC entrepreneurs play a crucial role in local economic development and job creation. However, to align with the Smart Bangladesh vision, entrepreneurs will undergo intensive training to enhance their skills and efficiency. The "Her Power" project by Department of ICT has been introduced in 44 districts with aims to increase the number of female entrepreneurs by training women and integrating them into digital centers. This initiative will also provide seed money of 20,000 BDT to support these women in starting and running their business. Besides, as a part of initiatives to ensure digital facilities, Specialized Digital Centers for special groups were introduced in 2018, followed by Expat Digital Centers for Saudi expatriates and Village Digital Centers in 2023. By 2024, within the framework of building Smart Bangladesh, an additional one thousand Village Digital Centers will be established at the grassroots level.

Union Digital Centers (UDCs) will become the cornerstone of providing rural populations with comprehensive digital access, crucial for realizing the vision of Smart Bangladesh. They can ensure that every rural citizen can utilize digital technologies and resources, effectively bridging the digital divide between urban and rural areas. Strengthening digital literacy programs is essential for UDCs. These programs will teach individuals how to use various devices and access online services efficiently. By

offering universal digital IDs, UDCs can help rural people easily and safely use many online services, like healthcare, education, and banking. This makes it easier for them to work with the government and private organizations, making society more inclusive and connected digitally.

Union Digital Centers (UDCs) have the potential to play a significant role in promoting economic inclusion and cultivating a thriving digital economy in rural areas. These centers provide platforms for mobile banking and digital transactions, facilitating the transition towards a cashless society. Moreover, UDCs offer training and resources for local entrepreneurship, thereby supporting the establishment and expansion of startups in rural regions. This organized method can help boost the economy and create many chances in the technology field. These actions are very important for people in rural areas because they allow them to take part in the digital economy, making life better and improving the community's overall progress.

For making a strong contribution in achieving the Smart Bangladesh vision, UDCs need to enhance the efficiency and responsiveness of government services for rural citizens. These centers act as one-stop shops for accessing a wide range of government services, such as land records, trade licenses, birth and death registrations, and more. It's crucial that UDCs ensure rural populations receive timely and effective governmental support. The integration of technology in administrative functions leads to more transparent and accessible governance. This aspect will be further strengthened in the future. Additionally, UDCs need to facilitate the transition to paperless operations, which simplifies processes and reduces the environmental impact, thereby making government services more sustainable and efficient.

Looking ahead, Union Digital Centers (UDCs) are positioned to assume an even more crucial role in advancing a technologically progressive and inclusive rural society, aligning seamlessly with Vision 2041. To effectively promote sustainable resource management, UDCs will need to embrace advanced technologies like solar energy and IoT-based services in the future. Additionally, expanding their capacity will enable UDCs to significantly contribute to the decentralization of technological infrastructure. This expansion entails establishing more IT training and innovation centers, and employment training centers along with expansion of digital service across rural districts. These proactive measures play a vital role in establishing digital villages and union digital centers, collectively forming the backbone of a nationwide smart supply chain. By integrating these efforts, rural communities are empowered to actively engage in the country's digital revolution, ensuring their inclusion and participation in the transformation journey of the nation.

Union Digital Centers (UDCs) are vital for realizing the aspirations of Smart Bangladesh, particularly in rural regions. They offer digital access, drive economic inclusion, enhance government services, and foster technological advancement in society. UDCs have significantly uplifted the socio-economic conditions of rural communities, ensuring that the benefits of Smart Bangladesh are accessible nationwide. With further opportunities to enhance the quality of life in rural areas, the expanding influence of UDCs empowers citizens with the tools and knowledge required to achieve the vision of Smart Bangladesh by 2041.

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