

Telecenters are bringing ICT to the reach of the marginalized population with the help of infomediaries. They are playing an important role in minimizing the information and ICT gap between the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural. Support from the infomediaries available at the telecentres as well as their low cost have contributed to better access for users compared to other types of public access venues such as the cybercafés. They have also managed to attract more female users. However, despite the demonstrated potentials, demand factor is yet to mature. Therefore, while the earlier challenge was to extend the access facilities to all segments of the society, the next challenge is to strengthen the backward compatibility by investing in last mile internet access, digitizing public records and intra-governmental communications.

# Development through Public Access to ICTs

## Challenges and Policy Priorities

### The Global Impact Study

The growing importance of access to information has led to a global movement in providing public access to the information hub – the internet. During the last few years governments of many developing countries including Bangladesh, often with the help of international development partners, have made significant investments towards this end. Significant efforts were made in providing mass access to information by expanding infrastructure for internet service delivery. After the initial years of such investments, it is now imperative to look at how the public access initiatives are functioning from a perspective of their sustainability.

University of Washington's Technology & Social Change Group (TASCHA) led a study with support from Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and a grant to IDRC from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to assess the functioning of the public access services in five countries. This brief report highlights the findings from Bangladesh.

In order to assess the public access services in Bangladesh through Public Access Venues (PAVs), this brief draws on data gathered in two phases. The first phase was conducted in 2010, providing a benchmark for the study, before the government of Bangladesh established Union Information and Service Centres (UISCs) in 4,501 Union Parishads. The second phase of the data collection was done in 2012, under the UNDP Bangladesh supported Access to Information (A2I) Program at the Prime Minister's Office, in order to facilitate an impact assessment of the (PAVs). The data gathered in the second phase were used to update the benchmark data and for impact evaluation of the PAVs .

The objective of this policy brief is to identify challenges faced by the PAVs and to suggest on the way forward to further strengthen the access to information initiative.

### What is a PAV?

Public Access Venues (PAVs) typically refer to centres or facilities where computer and internet services are available for the general people. In traditional sense, these are 'cybercafes' which are commercial establishments by the private sector. However, in Bangladesh telecentres or Union Information and Service Centres (UISCs) also act as PAVs which are established by the government (but not owned by the government) to spread the use of internet and extend public service delivery to the rural areas. This brief covers both types of PAVs - telecenters or UISCs and cybercafés.

### Significance of the PAVs

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

- ⑧ 60% of the respondents first used a computer at a PAV. For 75%, PAVs gave them their first internet experience.

# Global Impact Study

# GIS

## PAV



### Public Access Venue

is a non-profit or for-profit initiative offering communities public access to computer, internet and other ICT services. Examples-

**Telecenters, Cybercafés or Libraries**

## Bangladesh Country Report

is based on-

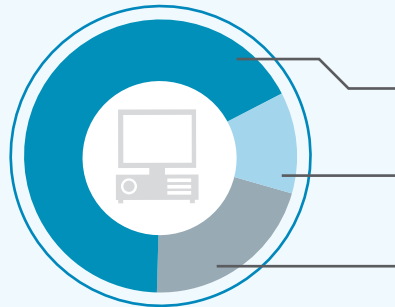
**30** ethnographic case studies  
**7** focus group discussions  
**10** in-depth interviews

**3** Surveys on-  
**25** districts  
**250** PAVs  
**250** PAV operators  
**1000** users

### WHY PAV MATTERS?

PAV provide access to computer, internet and ICT services.

Among the respondents, to use computer ...



**67%** usually visit a PAV  
**12%** go to other places  
**21%** use computer at home

Users come to PAV for a number of reasons. According to the respondents-



**32%**

users have no other option for computer use



**20%**

users have no other option for internet use



**12%**

users come to work with friends & others



**24%**

users come for help from venue staff

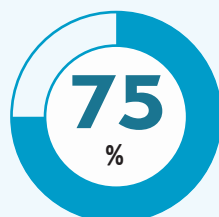
### WHY PAVs ARE IMPORTANT TO USERS?



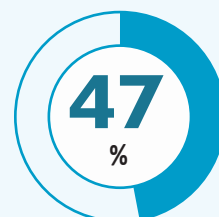
users first used computer at a PAV



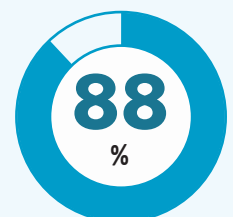
users found PAV as the most important place where they developed their computer skills



users first used internet at a PAV



users found PAV as the most important place where they developed their internet skills



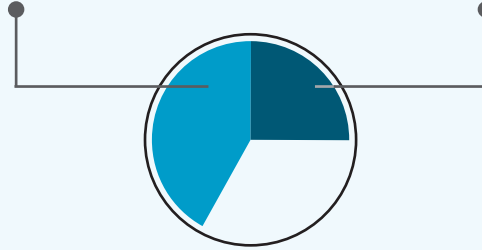
users' computer usage would decrease without PAV

# WHICH PAV: TELECENTER or CYBERCAFÉ?

**42%**  
visit **Telecenters**

... which are for-profit or non-profit,  
private or government PAVs  
usually located in rural areas  
with assistance for unskilled users

Among the PAV users ...



**25%**  
visit **Cybercafés**

... which are for-profit PAVs  
usually located in urban areas  
with no or limited assistance  
for users

Telecenters are more popular because they offer more ...



Access



About **72%** of  
the population live  
in rural areas ...

where telecenters are the only  
PAVs for access to ICT

Telecenters cater users from a  
more diverse age group ...

they attract more users from  
younger and older age group

Telecenters have more  
female operators



**16.7%**

in Telecenters



**3.3%**

in Cybercafés

... which may have drawn more  
female users



**32.2%**

users of  
Telecenters  
are female



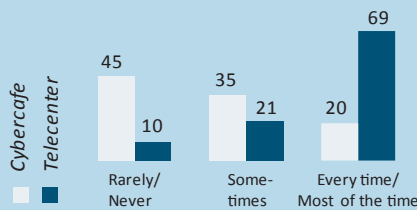
**7.5%**

users of  
Cybercafé  
are female

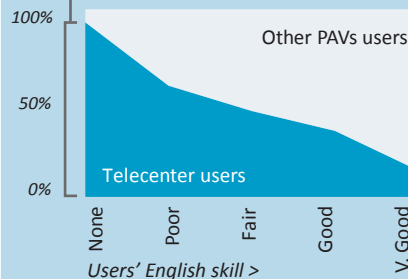


Support

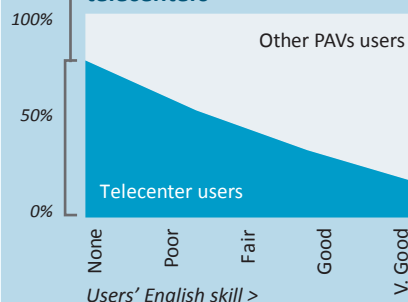
Telecenter users seek assistance  
more frequently



Due to the assistance provided,  
users with less English skills  
are more likely to visit  
telecenters

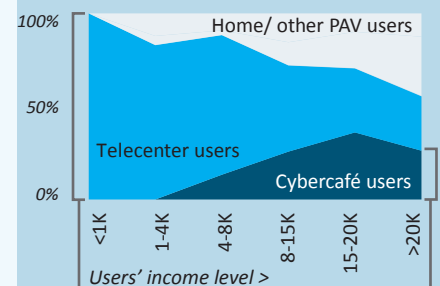


users with less computer skills  
are also frequent visitors of  
telecenters



Affordability

Users with lower income are more  
likely to be telecenter users



users from lower income  
groups usually go to  
telecenters

users from higher income  
group usually go to both  
cybercafés and telecenters

Infographics by



# WHAT ARE THE USES & IMPACTS OF PAV?

## Information & services sought by PAV users

PAVs provide gateway to information related to livelihood, and offer a range of ICT services. The real impact of PAVs, however, depends on whether the information/services are beneficial for the users or not!



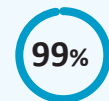
**68%** users seek info/services on  
**COMMUNICATION & LEISURE**  
... for personal and social networking, communication with friends & family, and pursuing interests & hobbies

Among the users pursuing communication and networking



89% formed a stronger social network

Among the users pursuing personal interest



99% overall computer skill improved



**41%** users seek info on  
**EDUCATION & LEARNING**  
... to complete assignments or info on admission and application processes

Among those looking for info to complete assignments



70% got valuable and useful info

Among those who seek information on admission



92% able to make better decisions about applying



**34%** users seek info on  
**INCOME & EMPLOYMENT**  
info on job opportunity, new products and services, and money transfer

Among those who sought and found job related info



92% used such information to apply for jobs

of those seeking info on products and services



84% earned more money

74% saved more money



**11%** users seek info on  
**HEALTH**  
info about illness or health care provider

Out of the users that sought information about an illness

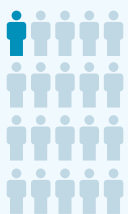


88% were better able to manage the illness

Those who sought info about health services



86% visited the health care provider

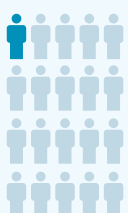


**7%** users seek info on  
**LOCAL LANGUAGE & CULTURE**  
how to organize cultural events; seek info in local language



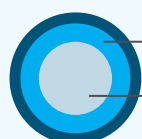
But only **12% telecenters & 4% cybercafés**

facilitate access to content in the local language



**7%** users seek info on  
**GOVERNMENT SERVICES**  
information on available government services, and avail those services

Among the users seeking info on various government services ...



93% got info

61% used that info to get the service

Among the users coming to avail any government services ...



88% actually availed those services

- ⊗ 60% indicated that PAVs were the “most important place” where they have developed their computer skills; 47.5% reported these venues to be the “most important place” where they have developed their internet skills.

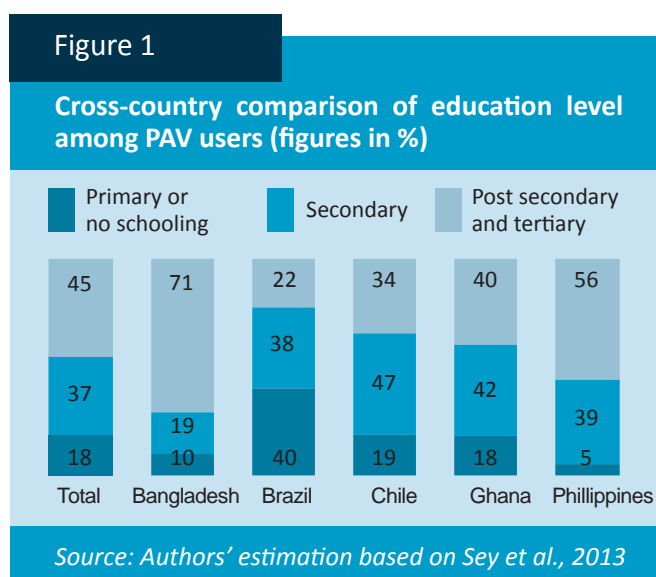
Even majority (over 54%) of the respondents who have computer access at home prioritized PAVs for reasons such as internet access, faster internet connections, ability to be with friends, or access to help from venue staff.

- ⊗ 30% of the users use PAVs as they have no other options for using internet.
- ⊗ 88% of all PAV users, including 93% of telecenter users, think their use of computers would decline if PAVs were unavailable.

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

The composition of users is different for different types of PAVs, particularly in relation to users’ income level, English skill, computer skill, gender, etc.

- ⊗ User groups of PAVs in Bangladesh mostly represent people with higher education. In fact,

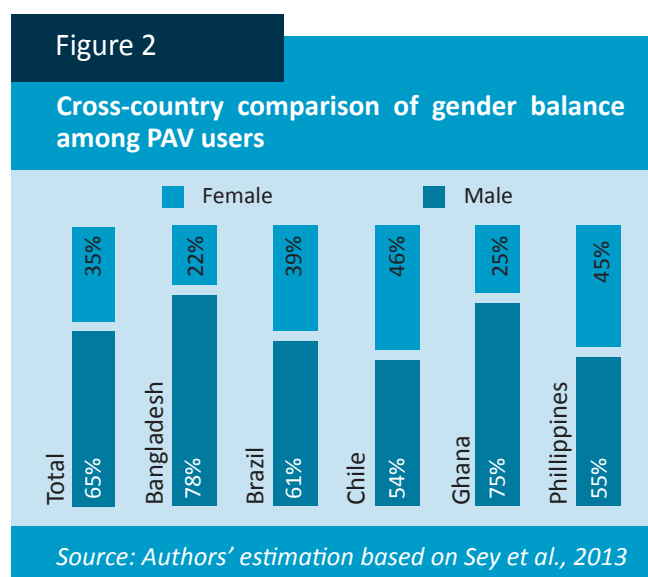


from the global project data, this concentration is highest for Bangladesh among the countries covered.

- ⊗ It is also important to note that people with low income are mostly telecenter users. Among the respondents who earn less than 8,000 BDT per month, 77.6% visit telecenters (the rest use cybercafé, home access or other forms of accesses).
- ⊗ Out of 29 respondents with no English skills, 27 were found to be telecenter users. Lack of local contents in the cybercafés and availability of support from the infomediaries at the telecenters

appear to have a significant role in the choice of the English-illiterate.

- ⊗ Users who lack computer skills are more likely to visit a telecenter. Among the telecenter visitors 77.4% have poor computer skills whereas only 20.1% of the cybercafé users and 2.5% of the home users have poor computer skills. In other words, lower the level of computer literacy, higher the likelihood of choosing telecenters 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. Among the countries covered under the global project, PAVs of Bangladesh demonstrated minimum female participation.
- ⊗ Telecenters, with higher ratio of female operators (16.7%), managed to attract more female users (32.2%) compared to the cybercafés (7.5% female users) with a lower ratio of female operators (3.3%). This situation at the telecenters is expected to have further improved after the establishment of UISCs where it was made mandatory to employ at least one female operator per unit.



## Impact of PAVs on Citizens

Perceived level of impact of the PAVs in the lives of the users appears to be highest in social communication, education and income and employment aspects.

- ⊗ Over 60% of users reported positive impacts in their communication with family & friends, education, time & financial savings and employment.
- ⊗ 35% reported 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 reducing disparities in terms of access to information and people's ability to derive benefits from it, the PAVs have shown a mixed performance. Along with literacy, access to these facilities requires the users to pay approximately Taka 390 per month. Thus, significant role of educational qualifications and financial strength in accessing the PAV services limit their scope as a catalyst in reducing the "digital divide". Nonetheless, they have widened geographic inclusion, particularly the UISCs. From the nature of assistance sought by the users of telecentres, infomediaries can aid in this concern:

- ⊗ While only about 15% of the cybercafé and home users seek assistance beyond hardware and software issues, in the telecenters 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 telecenters.

## Present Challenges

While identifying top 3 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 cybercafé's 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 cybercafé 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. However, updated data shows telecentres are even less equipped with computers now, with only 1.93 desktop computers and 1.4 laptops on average. But 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.

## Utilizing PAVs to Reach our Development Goals

Usage of the PAVs is dominated by social communication, education and employment. However, healthcare and other public services and governance related usage are very low. Therefore, apart from the infrastructure challenges at the PAV end, there is the other challenge of preparing the backstage. The original idea behind establishing the UISCs were to promote ICT in the day-to-day public life and make public services available to the citizens as e-services. While the PAVs appear to have contributed in the first objective, the latter is still evidently weak. Prime reason for the ineffectiveness of the PAVs in this regard relates to the fact that government's working, recordkeeping and procedural documents are yet to be digitized, which is essentially the backbone of any e-service delivery mechanism. Therefore, while the earlier challenge was to extend the access facilities to all segments of the society, the next challenge is to strengthen the backward compatibility by investing in last mile internet access, digitizing public records and intra-governmental communications.

**Reference:** Sey, A., Coward, C., Bar, F., Sciadas, G., Rothschild, C., & Koepke, L. (2013). *Connecting people for development: Why public access ICTs matter*. Seattle: Technology & Social Change Group, University of Washington Information School. Available at <http://tascha.uw.edu/publications/connecting-people-for-development>

## Agenda

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Analysis and policy brief: **Md. Ashiq Iqbal**, Research Fellow, & **Rezwana Abed**, Research Associate, IID.  
Infographics: **Ashiqun Nabi**, IID.

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