

## Prospects of One-Stop Service in Rural Bangladesh: The Experience of Union Digital Centers

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### Abstract

One-stop service obliterated digitized divide between urban and rural communities to speed up service delivery. The key objective of the study was to analyze the prospects of one-stop service with a focus on Union Digital Center in Bangladesh. The study followed a cross-sectional survey and data were collected through a survey questionnaire from 160 service recipients and semi-structured interviews with 16 UDC entrepreneurs & 8 UP Chairman. The overall results exposed that prospects of one-stop service from Union Digital Centers are very low in the future. Specifically, the socio-political influence over UDC's function is getting higher by local politicians and the UP Chairman. Due to the growing affinity between entrepreneurs and the ruling political party, UDC as a one-stop service center is losing its entity and objectivity. In some cases, political leaders got supremacy over community people while receiving services from digital centers. Entrepreneurs are always in a dilemma about their job security. The study also reveals that UDC is mostly accountable through the administrative mechanism. Due to the absence of a grievance system, entrepreneurs are not becoming publicly accountable for their service delivery. The findings of the study will be an important guideline for government policymakers, administration, local authorities, and UP Chairman to rethink how one-stop service will be continuing through Union Digital Centers in the long run.

**Keywords:** Prospects, One-Stop Service, Union Digital Center, Bangladesh

### Introduction

One-Stop Service centers offer a variety of services to empower people by giving access to information and a wide range of government and private

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services. This center brings multiple authorities into a uniform platform for beneficiaries (Ho, 2002). As bureaucratic complexity hinders frontline public service delivery, a one-stop shop was established by the government to resolve service-related complexities (World Bank, 2011; Pfeil et al., 2017). The Weberian bureaucracy propagates rules bound administration with maintaining formalism and red-tapism (Weber, 1978) which exaggerated public service delivery (Olsen, 2006). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, traditional bureaucracy experienced complexities in public service delivery which compelled it to accelerate interaction with multiple authorities (Kebicek & Hagen, 2000). New Public Management (NPM) intervened in the field of traditional bureaucracy and sought to determine service-related complexities (Hood, 1991). NPM reform initiatives have brought fragmentation of government service delivery. Now, it is required integration and coordination among public authorities to improve service delivery (Christensen et al. 2007). The Public-Private Partnership (PPP) as a paradigmatic shift established a new way of relationship by welcoming private organizations into various public service delivery (Hodge & Greve, 2007; Islam & Rahman, 2019). After that, the emergence of e-governance brought modernization in public administration to access one-stop e-service from a single window. The paradigmatic shift of service delivery implies that services are required to deliver from a one-stop portal based on customers' preferences (Wimmer, 2002; Rahman, 2016; Rahman, 2019).

The vision of 2021 of Bangladesh envisioned to ensure non-partisan-based professional public administration. Citizens must have access to minimum public services on daily basis. This vision triggered the installation of e-governance in all government agencies so that services can easily be offered to all through transparent means. E-governance will help to minimize time, cost, and the number of visits in public service delivery. Under the banner of e-governance, the government decided to establish IT Kiosks in every village by 2021 (CPD, 2007). To fulfill the dream of Vision 2021, the government needs to set up a one-stop service center in the rural corner of Bangladesh. Initially, Union Information and Service Center (UISC) was established in rural Bangladesh which was a successful outcome of the Access to Information (A2I) project (Palas et al., 2019). Later on, Union Digital Center (UDCs) was set up at the lowest tier of local government units as a one-stop service center to accelerate government, commercial, and information services at the doorstep of citizens (Rahman & Bhuiyan, 2016; Shahid Ullah, 2016; Shahid Ullah, 2017).

This one-stop service center is operated to serve electronic services to community people of all the union parishads of Bangladesh. So, it has been very easier to access electronic and government services, especially for the poor, marginalized section of society (Kumar & Kim, 2017). The government of Bangladesh has enabled to bridge the gap between rural citizens and the government by establishing one-stop digital centers at

Union Parishad. Digital centers are also working to promote the entrepreneurship development of rural youth. Thus, Union Digital Centers helped to uphold digital culture all over the rural areas in Bangladesh. Bangladesh's experience also allured neighboring countries like Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives to set up similar types of one-stop service centers (Zaman, 2015).

However, there is a research gap in studying the prospects of the one-stop service of Union Digital Centers in Bangladesh. So, the study argues that Union Digital Centers are facing a series of challenges in the areas of socio-political influence on UDC's functions, freedom of UDCs, institutional control, and institutional accountability as well. All these factors help to perceive how long UDCs will continue to offer one-stop services for the rural people of Bangladesh. So, the study aims to analyze the prospects of a one-stop service center in rural areas of Bangladesh with a special focus on experience from Union Digital Centers.

### **Literature Review**

Hoque and Sorwar (2015) studied on effects of the Union Information and Service Center (UISCs) for ensuring socio-economic development in the countryside in Bangladesh. UISCs helped to reduce time and distance for rural farmers and hereby they are getting services very easily. Besides, it facilitated access to information in education, agriculture, health, and law. Thus, rural citizens received expected ICT-based services which proves the potentiality of UISCs to promote rural development. Faroqi et al. (2019) examined the operational sustainability of the Union Digital Centers in Bangladesh. UDCs have created an opportunity to promote diversified ICT-based services and entrepreneurial skills. The PPP-based Digital Centre has to some extent confronted the operation of UDCs. Though UDCs are getting continuous support from the government, entrepreneurs' satisfaction rate is getting low which makes a question of sustainability.

Faroqi and Collings (2020) discussed the role of various stakeholders who were involved in Union Digital Centers (UDCs). The major stakeholders belong to officials of the central government, local government representatives, entrepreneurs, and mass people as customers. Entrepreneurs still now depend on external support from central and local governments. People are taking mostly certificates and commercial/private services and from which entrepreneurs are generating 50% of their total income. So, UDCs have not been established yet as a profitable institutions. It has not ensured the participation of women to promote entrepreneurship. The central government has not delegated adequate power to entrepreneurs. UP Chairman and Secretary treat entrepreneurs as part-time employees under their control.

Kumar and Kim (2017) studied various issues that are influencing the sustainability of Union Digital Centers (UDCs) in Bangladesh. Entrepreneurs are very much worried about their existence in the future. So,

they are not willing to invest more and more in UDCs. They lack skills, IT competency, and business knowledge. In some cases, UDCs have limitations in physical infrastructures which include a lack of internet, uninterrupted electricity supply, solar system, etc. Besides, women entrepreneurs' dropout has been large number due to the authoritative behavior of male entrepreneurs, social taboos, and marriage issues. Rahman and Khan (2012) analyzed electronic government progress and various e-governance initiatives in the context of Bangladesh. The study found Union Information and Service Centers (UISCs) as an important innovation to reach e-services at the doorstep of citizens. Citizens received various types of government, commercial, and information services on birth & death registration, certificates, agriculture, education, health, business, and disaster issues. UISCs aimed at reaching government vision 2021 to make a digital Bangladesh with the inclusion of rural community people.

Rahman and Bhuiyan (2016) examined multipurpose telecenters with a focus on the contribution of Union Information and Service Centers (UISCs) to socio-economic development in Bangladesh. Findings show that UISCs provided the necessary information for government agencies, social, health, and agricultural workers. There are some challenges affecting the performance of UISCs and socio-economic development as a whole. In some cases, the cost of services is too high which discourages women, students, and the unemployed to access services. Due to uninterrupted electricity and power supply, people cannot avail of electronic services. Again, the working schedule of UISCs (9 am-5 pm) does not allow access for women to receive services from information centers.

Sahid Ullah (2016) studied on role of Union Information and Service Centers (UISCs) to accelerate government services and community empowerment among rural populations. The findings suggest that UISCs have minimized time, costs, number of visits, and corruption in government services. People having education of 10-12 grade mostly (82.9%) availed services from UISCs. So, the inclusion of illiterate and poor people is still now out of UISC services in rural areas. But, in some cases, entrepreneurs helped poor people by taking minimal cost of services or no cost taken a few times. Though UISCs have succeeded in minimizing the digital divide between urban and rural communities, they could not bridge the gender gap in terms of service recipients. Vulnerable groups, women, and poor people have not been empowered by the ICT-based services of UISCs. Another study by Sahid Ullah (2017), shows that existing rural power structures do not give flexibility to entrepreneurs in the operation of UISCs. The power structure is highly influenced by land ownership. Due to the existence of asymmetrical power relations, marginalized, poor, and vulnerable people are deprived of ICT-based services. As only 1% of the total population is a user of UISCs, so it is struggling to survive in the long run. The domination of male entrepreneurs is still surviving which has seized women entrepreneurs' space in UISCs.

Hasan (2015) studied on role of Union Digital Centers (UDCs) as public information centers at the union level in Bangladesh. UDCs have reached unreached community people in the rural areas of Bangladesh. It has brought rural poor and marginalized sections of society under the umbrella of a single platform. People are getting services at affordable costs. Farmers received agricultural information from UDCs and entrepreneurs served as the bridge between poor farmers and government officials. UDCs also provide information on health, education, and disaster issues well.

However, existing literature focused on UDCs' sustainability, contribution to access to information, role in socio-economic development, e-service delivery, community empowerment through digital centers, and challenges to UDCs. Union Digital Centers have both political and administrative control which obstruct entrepreneurs to run UDCs independently. Sometimes, UDC entrepreneurs are getting mixed with political actors to exercise their local power. In this context, it is important to study on prospects of one-stop service in Bangladesh with a special focus on Union Digital Centers (UDCs).

### Methodology of the study

A cross-sectional survey was conducted to collect data from 160 service recipients, 8 UP Chairmen, and 16 UDC entrepreneurs. The study followed mixed methods that included qualitative and quantitative research design. The respondents willingly participated in a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interview.

**Table 1 Contextual Information of Union Parishads (UPs)**

Districts	Name of the Upazila	Name of the Union	Ares (in Acres)	Number of Households	Total Population	Literacy Rate (7 Years +)
Bogura	Bogura Sadar	Fapore Union Parishad	2422	2708	11,675	68.3%
		Lahiri Para Union Parishad	4535	6935	26,940	50.6%
	Sherpur Upazila	Garidaha Union Parishad	6148	12,035	48,511	46.4%
		Khamarkandi Union Parishad	5469	5681	21,574	36.2%
Sylhet	Sylhet Sadar	Kandigaon Union Parishad	8672	6607	40,988	45.6%
		Tuker Bazar Union Parishad	8342	9194	53,832	57.6%

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	Dakshin Surma	Baraikandi Union Parishad	1793	3955	22,339	61.9%
		Mollargaon Union Parishad	2636	5065	28,312	55.7%

*Source: BBS (2014)*

From the pilot study, it is found that people mostly visit Monday to Thursday to avail their services. In that time, on average 8-10 people visit for particular services from all the mentioned Union Digital Centers (UDCs). The study used the formula of Krejcie & Morgan (1970) and Yamane (1967) to count the sample size. So, it is required to take a minimum of 156 respondents to validate the data and the study selected 160 respondents.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N + (e)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{256}{1 + 256 * (0.05)^2}$$

So, n= 156.097561

(n= The sample size, N= the population size, E= the acceptable sampling error)

The study used multi-stage sampling, cluster sampling, and purposive sampling. Following cluster sampling, it selected 8 Union Digital Centers (UDCs) from 4 Upazilas of Bogura and Sylhet Districts. The study followed purposive sampling to select respondents who availed of any government, commercial, and information services from the Union Digital Centers (UDCs). It followed a survey method that includes a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews. 160 service recipients were selected from 8 Union Parishad for a questionnaire survey where 20 service recipients are taken from each Union. The study conducted a semi-structured interview with 16 entrepreneurs from 8 Union Digital Centers and 8 UP Chairmen from 8 Union Parishads. During the survey, it recorded information manually from the fieldwork. Survey questions were directly asked service recipients and a semi-structured interview was conducted in a formal setting in the office of Union Parishad. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data included information collected through questionnaires and interviews. The secondary data were collected from relevant books, journals, articles, and so on.

### Findings and Analysis

#### Demographic Profile

Table 2 presents the socio-economic profile of 160 respondents who participated in the questionnaire survey. Among the participants, 81.25%

belong to male and 18.75% are female. Most of the service recipients are involved in students (28.12%), housewives (15.62%), farmers (12.5%), businessmen (12.5%), and worker/day laborers (9.37%). 18.75% of participants have primary level education, 17.5% have Junior Secondary Level and 15.62% have Secondary Level education. People aged between 26-30 (18.75%) and 41-50 (16.87%) attended Union Digital Center to avail various services. It shows the diversified socio-economic profile of the participants in terms of gender, professional status, educational qualification, and age.

**Table 2: Socio-Economic Profile of the Service Recipients**

Category	Sub-category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	130	81.25
	Female	30	18.75
Professional Status	Student	45	28.125
	Farmer	20	12.5
	Housewife	25	15.62
	Businessman	20	12.5
	Rickshaw Puller	10	6.25
	Worker/Day laborer	15	9.375
	Service/Job Holders	10	6.25
	Shopkeepers	07	4.375
	Village Doctor	08	5.00
Educational Qualification	Illiterate	20	12.5
	Able to Sign	15	9.375
	Can read	14	8.75
	Primary Level	30	18.75
	Junior Secondary Level (JSC)	28	17.5
	Secondary Level (SSC)	25	15.62
	Higher Secondary Level (HSC)	18	11.25
	Bachelor's Degree and above	10	6.25
	15-20	15	9.375
	21-25	25	15.625
	26-30	30	18.75
	31-35	22	13.75

Age	35-40	32	20.00
	41-50	27	16.875
	51-60	05	3.125
	60 and Above	04	2.5

### Socio-political influence on UDC's functions

There are various types of socio-political influences that affect the performance of Union Digital Centers. There are several components to measure the degree of socio-political influence over UDCs.

**Table 3:** Service Recipients' response to socio-political influence over UDCs

	High (3)	Medium (2)	Low (1)
Political Affinity of UDC entrepreneur with UP Chairman	80 (50%)	48 (30%)	32 (20%)
Political Affinity of UDC entrepreneur with ruling party	96 (60%)	60 (37.5%)	4 (2.5%)
Influence of notable personalities of the village/community over UDC	40 (25%)	50 (31.25%)	70 (43.75%)
UDC entrepreneurs heavily rely on local power politics	80 (50%)	65 (40.63%)	15 (9.37%)

Table 3 shows that 60% of participants replied that UDC entrepreneurs had a high-level political affinity with the ruling party. 50% of participants said that entrepreneurs maintained a high political affinity with UP Chairman. In some cases, notable personalities of the village (25%) attempt to keep a high influence on UDC's functions. As a result, UDC entrepreneurs are getting heavily dependent on local power politics (50%).

One of the entrepreneurs shared his opinion

Entrepreneurs have to maintain good relations with the chairman of the Union Parishad. Sometimes, they need to accomplish data entry tasks of UP and go for field visits to various projects even though they do not get any money for it. They cannot claim money for carrying out the duties and responsibilities of UP. Entrepreneurs have to deal with local politics for a variety of reasons, because if they don't obey, the UP Chairman may fire them from jobs. Chairman supporters also exercise their power while dealing with services from UDCs. As a result, entrepreneurs cannot concentrate on their duties and responsibilities in the digital centers.

One of the UP Chairman replied during an interview

The recruitment and selection process of UDC entrepreneurs is not transparent so in many cases, it creates an opportunity to impose

socio-political influence over Union Digital Center. UP Chairman is elected for five years and UDC entrepreneurs have a contract for three years. In that case, entrepreneurs try to build nexus with the ruling Chairman. Due to the absence of written guidelines, local notable persons also exercise their power on UDC, and in some cases, they receive service free of cost.

Some of the participants acknowledged a low level of political affinity of entrepreneurs with the UP Chairman (20%), ruling party (2.5%), and dependency on local power politics (9.37%).

Another UP Chairman opined that

Political affinity is not always affecting the service delivery of Union Digital Centers. Rather, it depends on leadership quality and how UP Chairman is playing its role to deal with UDC's functions. My Entrepreneurs expect support, coordination, and feedback from Union Parishad so that it can sustain the business. I keep good relations with the digital center and take care of overall performance so that people are encouraged to avail of one-stop services from UDCS.

All the components of socio-political influence show that prospects of the digital center have been affected due to the high level of political influences, affinity, and dependency on local power politics. So, entrepreneurs are not willing to continue their entrepreneurship in Union Digital Center.

### Freedom of Union Digital Center

Figure 1 presents service recipients' opinions regarding the existence of freedom in Union Digital Center. Data shows that 45% of participants agreed with the existence of freedom in Union Digital Centers and 25% disagreed. The rest of 30% did not agree to give their opinion. It means people have not a good perception regarding the freedom of UDCs.

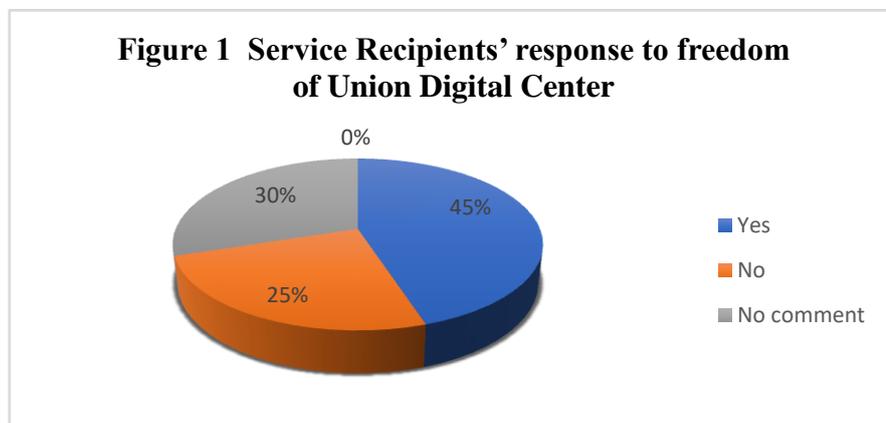


Table 4 presents a comparative view of UP Chairman and UDC entrepreneurs regarding the existence of freedom of UDCS. Data reveals that all the entrepreneurs and UP Chairman agreed on UDC's freedom in innovation for improving service. Similarly, UDC entrepreneurs have the

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freedom to open a new branch of digital centers. On the other hand, there is a contrast in results regarding investment decisions- and decision-making freedom of UDCs. 62.5% of entrepreneurs reported that they do not have freedom in decision making whereas UP Chairman recognize UDC's decision-making freedom (75%).

**Table 4:** UP Chairman and entrepreneurs' response to the freedom of UDCs

	UDCs Entrepreneur			UP Chairman		
	Yes	No	No comment	Yes	No	No comment
Does UDC have freedom in innovation?	Yes	16	100%	Yes	08	100%
	No	--	--	No	--	--
	No comment	--	--	No comment	--	--
Does UDC have freedom in decision-making?	Yes	04	25%	Yes	06	75%
	No	10	62.5%	No	02	25%
	No comment	02	12.5%	No comment	--	--
Does UDC have the freedom to take an investment decision in UDCs?	Yes	10	62.5%	Yes	08	100%
	No	04	25%	No	--	--
	No comment	02	12.5%	No comment	--	--
Does UDC has the freedom in opening a new branch of UDCs?	Yes	14	87.5%	Yes	08	100%
	No	--	--	No	--	--
	No comment	02	12.5%	No comment	--	--

One of the entrepreneurs shared his experience

I can exercise my freedom to bring innovation and change in the service delivery of Union Digital Center but most of the institutional decisions frequently come from UNO and UP Chairman. As a result, entrepreneurs feel excessive pressure to carry out their responsibilities. So, UDCs are running through the traditional fashion of service delivery. Despite having freedom in innovation, the uncertainty of profit obstructs entrepreneurs to widen and accelerate the service of the digital centers.

One UP Chairman argues that,

UDCs mostly receive administrative orders and directions from UNO and DC. We have the right to support, monitor, and play an advisory role in digital centers. So, it is all about administrative control which impedes decision-making freedom of union digital enters. Due to the growing number of private entrepreneurs, entrepreneurs cannot cope with the pace of the local market. So, the degree of freedom is more

administrative rather than political issues. Now, the government needs to think about how UDCs will survive by offering new services within affordable means.

### **Institutional Control of Union Digital Center**

Table 5 shows various components to measure institutional control of the union digital center on one-stop services. Most of the entrepreneurs (62.5%) have fear of losing jobs from UDCs whereas the Chairman (87.5%) does not agree about it. 87.5% of entrepreneurs acknowledged the priority of political leaders to get services from UDCs. But all the UP Chairmen have denied priority of political leaders to get one-stop services. In the case of priority of local/community leaders, both the UDC entrepreneur (75%) and UP Chairman (100%) agreed that they get priority as locally notable persons like mosque imam, religion leaders, school/college teachers, village doctors, etc. Entrepreneurs (62.5%) admitted that UP Chairmen sometimes forced to follow their directions directly or indirectly which contrasts with the opinion of UP Chairman/members. They (87.5%) also recognized that local political leaders attempt to give shelter to UDC entrepreneurs for remaining their existence.

**Table 5:** Institutional Control and its impact on the prospect of UDCs

(N= 16 & N=08 UDC Entrepreneur=16 &UP Chairman-08)		Yes		No		No Comment	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
UDC Entrepreneurs fear losing their job	UDC Entrepreneur	10	62.5	02	12.5	04	25
	UP Chairman	01	12.5	07	87.5	00	00
Political leaders get priority in receiving services from UDCs	UDC Entrepreneur	14	87.5	00	00	02	12.5
	UP Chairman	00	00	08	100.0 0	00	00
Community/local leaders get priority in receiving services from UDCs (mosque Imam, school teachers, village doctors, etc.)	UDC Entrepreneur	12	75.00	00	00	04	25.0 0
	UP Chairman	08	100.0 0	00	00	00	00
UP Chairman/Members	UDC Entrepreneur	10	62.5	06	37.5	00	00

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compel entrepreneurs to follow direction	UP Chairman	00	00	08	100.00	00	00
Local Politics gives shelter to UDC entrepreneurs to survive his/her existence	UDC Entrepreneur	14	87.5	00	00	02	12.5
	UP Chairman	02	25.00	06	75.00	00	00

The institutional control of Union Digital Center is getting lower gradually due to the existence of entrepreneurs' fear of losing their job, political leaders' priority over receiving services, compelling UP Chairman/ members for following directions, and access to political shelter of the entrepreneur. Thus, weak institutional control is questioning the prospects of the one-stop service of Union Digital Centers.

One of the entrepreneurs expressed his views,

UP Chairman, members, and local political leaders have a direct or indirect influence on Union Digital Center. If entrepreneurs disobey the direction of the UP Chairman, the Chairman can give a report to UNO which creates fear of losing jobs from UDCs. Without supporting the ruling party, it sometimes becomes very difficult to sustain entrepreneurship. In this regard, UDCs have to take shelter from the political umbrella for sustainability. On the other hand, we have a proposal to the government that entrepreneurs can be recruited for the post of computer operator of Union Parishad. But, no response was received from the government and administration which compelled us to rethink our continuity in Union Digital Centers.

On the other hand, UP Chairman argues that,

Entrepreneurs sometimes willingly get mixed with local politics for their interests. Yes, they cooperate with Union Parishad to assist in accomplishing various tasks. Due to the policy gap, UP members in some cases become entrepreneurs and engage their wives as female entrepreneurs. Due to the dual role of a single person, the performance of UDCs gets seriously affected resulting in questioning prospects of one-stop service from UDCs.

### **Institutional Accountability of Union Digital Centre**

Table 6 describes the nature of accountability of Union Digital Centers to service recipients. 37.5% strongly agreed that they can give an opinion to the UP Chairman regarding the services of UDCs whereas only 6.25% strongly disagreed. Even, 50% strongly agreed that they get services from Union Digital Centers on regular basis, 3.12% disagreed, and 3.12% strongly disagreed. On the other hand, 50% of recipients disagreed and

31.25% strongly disagreed about sharing service-related grievances with UP Chairman. So, people are getting services from UDCs and giving a few opinions to UP Chairman. Due to the absence of a grievance mechanism, people are getting deprived to present their opinions resulting in questioning the prospects of Union Digital Centers.

**Table 6:** Nature Union Digital Center's accountability to service recipients

<i>(Service Recipients N=160)</i>	Strongly Agree (5)		Agree (4)		Moderately Agree (3)		Disagree (2)		Strongly Disagree (1)	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
People can give an opinion to the UP Chairman regarding the services of UDCs	60	37.5	40	25.0	30	18.75	20	12.5	10	6.25
People can share their grievances with UP Chairman regarding services	10	6.25	05	3.125	15	9.375	80	50.0	50	31.25
People get services from UDCs regularly	80	50.0	40	25.0	30	18.75	05	3.125	05	3.125

Table 7 presents the institutional accountability of UDC entrepreneurs to the UP Chairman. 62.5% of entrepreneurs responded that UP Chairman did not monitor the performance of Union Digital Center whereas only 37.5% agreed to monitor UDC's performance by UP Chairman. In most cases, entrepreneurs (75%) acknowledged coordination meetings with UNO. Entrepreneurs also have expectations to get financial and logistical support from Union Parishad but only 18.75% of entrepreneurs received it. Entrepreneurs have the responsibility to submit a report to the UP Chairman which is carried by only 50% of entrepreneurs. 75% of entrepreneurs opined that the UDC management committee does not organize a monthly meeting.

**Table 7:** Institutional Accountability of Union Digital Center to UP Chairman

<i>(UDC Entrepreneur N= 16)</i>		UDC Entrepreneur	
		Number	Percentage
Does the UP Chairman monitor	Yes	06	37.5

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the performance of UDCs?	No	10	62.5
	No comment	00	00
Does UNO organize coordination meetings with entrepreneurs?	Yes	12	75.0
	No	04	25.0
	No comment	00	00
Does Union Parishad give financial and logistics support to UDC if required?	Yes	03	18.75
	No	08	50.0
	No comment	05	31.25
Does the entrepreneur submit the report to UP Chairman?	Yes	04	25.0
	No	08	50.0
	No comment	04	25.0
Does the UDC management committee organize monthly meetings?	Yes	04	25.0
	No	12	75.0
	No comment	00	00

One of the UP Chairmen shared his opinion,

Institutional accountability of Union Digital Center is consistent with local administration, especially to UNO. UP Chairman has the power to monitor and supervise overall functions. Generally, entrepreneurs maintain an excel sheet to make an entry of all the business information daily and forward it to access to information (A2I). There is not any obligatory legal provision to give financial support to UDCs, rather they sometimes get money from the LGSP fund of Union Parishad.

In contrast, one of the entrepreneurs explains,

UP Chairman hardly monitor the performance of UDCs and organize coordination meeting. In most cases, entrepreneurs do not know how they will be accountable to UP Chairman. Even, there is not any framework on how UDCs will submit reports of all the one-stop services to the UP Chairman. On the other hand, entrepreneurs do not know that they are responsible to submit reports to UP Chairman.

Due to the existence of accountability complexity, it has been a matter of question how long digital center will survive as a one-stop service center to ensure quality service delivery.

## Discussion

The study aims to evaluate the prospects of One-Stop Service of Union Digital Center focusing on existing socio-political influence on UDC's functions, freedom of digital centers, institutional control, and accountability of UDCs. The study found high socio-political influence on UDC's functions. 60% of participants agreed with entrepreneurs' affinity to the ruling political party. 50% of entrepreneurs acknowledged political connectivity with UP Chairman. As a result, Union Digital Center is becoming an institution of political patronage which makes question on prospects of one-stop service and institutional existence. Faroqi & Collings (2020) shows a similar kind of result that entrepreneurs are getting selected through political consideration by the UP Chairman. Due to political mixture, UDCs cannot provide a one-stop service for people properly. Sahid Ullah (2016) also presents a parallel result that Union Digital Centers promote existing political power structure and both the entrepreneurs and political actors are getting equally benefitted. Entrepreneurs in some cases behave like party activists.

Community people do not have a good perception regarding the one-stop service of Union Digital Center. 45% of participants agreed that Union Digital Centers enjoy freedom. It is a good thing that both the UP Chairmen and entrepreneurs agreed that UDCs have the freedom to make any innovation. But, 62.5% of entrepreneurs have no freedom in decision making which affects service delivery. Due to excessive administrative control, entrepreneurs cannot discharge their duties and responsibilities. Nowadays, the market has been a prime competitor of UDC entrepreneurs. In this context, the prospect of Union Digital Center along with its services gets questioned again. BBS (2014) depicted a similar kind of prediction that 20% of union digital centers can be stopped by 2014.

The degree of institutional control of the digital center is very low which is enquiring about prospects of services and UDC as an institution. 87.5% of entrepreneurs opined that they had given priority to the local political leader while delivering services. Even, 62.5% of entrepreneurs agreed that UP Chairmen were forced to follow orders. 62.5% of entrepreneurs have expressed concerns that they fear losing jobs from digital centers whilst most of the chairman (87.5%) have disagreed with the opinion of entrepreneurs. There is not any legal protection for them rather there is only a renewal opportunity of the previous contractual agreement. Shahnewaj et al. (2015) describe that UP Chairman is one of the key players to determine the continuation of UDC entrepreneurs. In this regard, entrepreneurs are worried if they do not support the UP Chairman and the chairman loses his/her position, they won't be reappointed.

Institutional accountability of Union Digital Center is mostly administration centered which is affecting one-stop service. 50% of participants opined that they got one-stop service from UDCs on regular basis. Only 37.5% strongly

agreed that they could give an opinion to UP Chairman regarding services. Only 6.25% of participants strongly agreed that they could give service-related grievances to UP Chairman. 62.5% of entrepreneurs did not experience monitoring activities by UP Chairman. But, 75% of entrepreneurs agreed that they had a coordination meeting with UNO. They also opined that the UDC management committee did not hold a monthly meeting with UDC entrepreneurs. It means that service recipients are unable to make UDCs publicly accountable. In that case, there has been created a gap between UDC entrepreneurs and service recipients. So, the study recommends ensuring proper monitoring by central authorities, local authorities, and Union Parishad as well. Kumar & Kim (2017) recommended a similar suggestion that all the concerned agencies need to monitor every single activity of Union Digital Center. It will ensure more accountability, transparency, efficiency, and effectiveness in the service delivery of Union Digital Centers.

### **Conclusion and Policy Implications**

The study has concerned about the prospects of one-stop service in rural Bangladesh specifically Union Digital Centers. The overall findings show that UDCs have very low prospects to sustain one-stop service. There exists a high socio-political influence on UDC's function, less decision-making freedom, limited institutional control, and limited public accountability of UDCs. UDC entrepreneurs have merged with political identity and in some cases UP chairman and entrepreneurs are supporting and protecting each other's back. So, entrepreneurship development has been a utopian matter in the rural level of Bangladesh. In some cases, the UP chairman facilitated the operation and management of Union Digital Centers to accelerate one-stop service for community people. Due to the existence of political influence and administrative pressure, it is not always possible to promote one-stop services. UDC entrepreneurs are not taking the risk to expedite their entrepreneurship. The local market of rural areas in Bangladesh is becoming a major competitor of digital centers. The findings of the study confirmed that without strengthening institutional control of UDCs, one-stop service will be severely affected in rural areas of Bangladesh. So, public accountability of the digital centers needs to be ensured by establishing a legal framework. The study has acclaimed the following suggestions for better prospects for Union Digital Centers.

- The government needs to take an initiative to formulate policy guidelines with a decision on whether this PPP model will be accepted in the future by the entrepreneurs. After mutual discussion of both government and entrepreneurs, it will be decided how it will be continuing.
- The findings have direct implications on one aspect of SDG target 16.10 which describes to 'Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation

and international agreement' (United Nations, 2020). Without ensuring the sustainability of digital centers, the government will not be able to spread all the information to rural people. As there has been an established relationship between UDC entrepreneurs with community people, entrepreneurs must have to be engaged with the government to contribute to society.

- The findings have also policy implications for the Right to Information Act 2009 of the Bangladesh government. Section 4 of RTI 2009 describes that 'every citizen will have the right to get citizenship from the authorities and subject to the request of any citizen the concerned authority shall be obliged to provide information (Bangladesh Gazette, 2009). So, UDCs should be publicly accountable for delivering their one-stop services to community people. Thus, access to information will ensure accountability and transparency. Entrepreneurs should restore all the information and if any grievance arises they will be bound to resolve it.
- A2I, DC office, and Local Government Division need to sit together to engage in brainstorming incorporating academic experts and think tanks. They should be forward-looking on how government and community people can be benefitted simultaneously as the government has a significant amount of investment to institutionalize Union Digital Centers. They can be outward-looking to collect experiences of other developing countries and how they are running their one-stop centers at rural levels. They can also think to design a regulatory and legal framework to ascertain the operational guidelines of UDCs.

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