Service Innovation Fund: Incentivising Innovation, Changing Lives

Md. Shakhawatul Islam

Access to Information Programme

Service Innovation Fund Award Ceremony. *Credit: a2i.*

What is the general context in which the story takes place?

In Bangladesh, especially in the government machine, policymaking and planning have been taking place in a traditional and centralized manner for a number of decades. As a result, the products introduced for public use have generally lacked user-centric design. This happened primarily because of the dearth of opportunities to experiment due to the unavailability of risk fund and a risk-aversive behavior prevalent among civil servants.

The Access to Information (a2i) Programme at the Prime Minister's Office, with support from USAID and the UN Development Programme, was started in 2007 with the objectives of increasing transparency, improving governance and public services, and reducing inefficiencies in their delivery in terms of time, cost, and number of visits associated with obtaining government services for underserved communities. As a facilitator of Digital Bangladesh, the government's innovation agenda, the a2i Programme works as an innovation intermediary through a whole-of-government approach. It has been bringing together all relevant stakeholders, including ministries and government organizations, and supporting, suggesting, and curating their work to catalyze truly unprecedented transformations in service delivery.

Thus, the Service Innovation Fund (SIF) was conceptualized to create an enabling ecosystem to foster and incubate innovation within civil service, youth, and general citizenry. The fund is designed to

USAID FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

LEARN

conceive and incentivize home-grown innovations. Though it initially was more inclined toward innovative civil servants, private sector organizations, NGOs, academics, researchers were soon caught up in the wave of innovation.

What was the main challenge or opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

Since the SIF was launched in March 2013, it has been managed by an innovation secretariat composed of a2i professionals. Even before the innovative proposals are received online (at www.ideabank.eservice.gov.bd), they organize awareness workshops and help agencies and individuals to develop proposals. Each and every proposal goes through multiple screening and evaluation stages designed to test important features, including the necessity, rigor, applicability, practicality, feasibility, and sustainability of the proposed solution, as well as the capacity and integrity of the innovator or agency. As of June 2016, 3,000 proposals had been received online; of those, 103 innovators and agencies have successfully come out as awardees, receiving total funding worth more than 20 million Bangladeshi taka (more than $250,000) to pilot their ideas in different sectors and geographical locations.

After funding the first 20 projects, a2i actively started asking civil servants, private sector professionals, innovators, and others how they felt about the SIF and what changes could be made to prompt more submissions of better innovative projects and better project performance. A range of problems came up, from fundamentals (e.g., the difficulty level of the application form) to more complex issues (e.g., the need for project management support). These findings made a2i question its strategy of "doing it on its own" and not engaging the relevant ministries and government organizations from the point when the innovator starts receiving the fund.

The most urgent symptom was the somewhat reluctant attitude of the ministries and directorates to absorb, improve, adopt, and replicate/scale up the complete innovation pilots that are relevant to the work they do. The question that needed to be answered was how to bring them on board from the onset of the innovation life cycle for every innovation pilot under SIF. The need was more acute for private sector organizations and individual innovators, who were quite lost when it came to drawing up a sustainability and replication/scale up plan for the output of their innovation pilot. Again, the civil servants, especially those who were far down the bureaucracy, faced immense difficulties trying to convince superiors who had not been involved during the piloting phase.

Another problem is that not all innovators have the marketing, management, and entrepreneurial skills required for successful project implementation. As a result, not only is the project time period often exceeded, but, more important, the project might fail to deliver the output that it set out to achieve in the first place.

Apparently, these two problems might seem mutually exclusive. But deeper analysis reveals that they are two sides of the same challenge—how to transform conventional innovation management process to a more collaborative and result-oriented innovation management process.

Describe the CLA approach or activity, explaining how the activity integrated collaborating, learning, adapting culture, processes, and/or resources as applicable.

To bring about the necessary transformation, a2i made intensive use of its many networks of partners and development collaborators to rethink its innovation management process. Alvin Tofler's concept of "Learn, Unlearn, and Relearn" were put into practice as a2i's innovation secretariat went to the roots of the SIF and started asking the basic questions that meant the success or failure of an innovation pilot.

There was a radical shift from being a team that facilitated the screening, evaluation, and awarding of pilots to a team that engaged itself throughout the innovation life cycle, starting from idea collection to the ultimate scaling up of completed innovation pilots. In addition to intensifying its incubation and intermediation activities (e.g., building linkages between the innovators and the relevant government offices and public sector organizations), a2i has catalyzed the formation of nearly 1,000 "Innovation Teams" comprising more than 5,000 officers from all units and tiers of the government, from the ministry level all the way down to the sub-district level. Led by chief innovation officers who are senior policymakers, the Innovation Teams represent an effort to build champions who will foster a peer support network and collaborative behavior within and across government offices. The SIF reinforces these teams by functioning as an intrinsic capacity building tool for them.

Meanwhile, a2i's Project Steering Committee approved a number of changes to the SIF, including:
- The Technical Experts Panel, to which the innovators have to present before receiving SIF approval, was further enriched to include the top government bureaucrats who would eventually have to be involved during the piloting phase.
- Innovators from approved projects would need to be presented to the relevant government offices to be vetted and to finalize the scope of their projects.
- The contract, which used to be signed only by a2i and the innovators, would now need to be signed by the chief innovation officers from the relevant ministries and the innovation officers from the relevant directorates.
- The relevant government organizations would need to engage their officers to regularly monitor the innovation pilots and evaluate their progress.
- To ensure value for money for the government, civil servants and/or agencies that have applied for the SIF would need to ensure matching funds from their own offices.

The innovation secretariat has also adopted the strategy of continuous learning and adaptation, which is necessary to ensure the efficacy of the innovation pilots and the effectiveness and acceptance of the resulting output. There is also a renewed vigor of promoting the SIF and the funded innovation pilots (both completed and ongoing projects).

Through these efforts, it was believed the innovation pilots would attain a greater level of maturity and acceptance through the combined efforts of a2i and the government, and that the existing innovators would feel more at ease when it came to receiving support necessary to successfully implement their projects.

Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources, implementation challenges or obstacles, and enabling factors)?

Though the changes raised some eyebrows in the bureaucracy, the importance of facilitating co-created innovation was soon realized. a2i was quick to drive home the message to important, influential government offices, including the Cabinet Division and the Ministry of Public Administration, which is the leading institution overseeing field administration. In this case, a2i leveraged its special position within the government.

But the challenge was far too great when it came to innovators outside the civil service. Therefore, a2i took a more direct approach by helping them showcase their innovations to government policymakers and decision-makers. For instance, a2i has been organizing showcasing events headed by ministers and attended by the heads of all organizations within the ministry.

With your initial challenge/opportunity in mind, what have been the most significant outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

Through deeper involvement of the government and project management support from a2i, the innovation pilots are now more organized and result-oriented than ever. There has been radical improvement in terms of project quality—done with the smallest possible budget. In every high-level meeting, including the secretaries of the government, the SIF-funded projects are discussed in detail, and their performance has become part of the performance parameter for the civil servants.

What were the most important lessons learned?

a2i would like to capitalize on this experience by advocating it to the government and using it as an example of how to ensure sustainability and scalability of government-funded projects.