NEW DIGITAL PLATFORMS EXPAND FINANCIAL OPTIONS FOR RURAL DWELLERS IN BANGLADESH

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When the UNSGSA last visited Bangladesh in 2015, she met rural residents who had just started to access financial services for the first time—along with vital government services and basic internet—due to an ambitious government program called Access to Information (a2i). Since, a2i has built on this success with three new solutions aimed to make it easier for Bangladeshis to receive benefits, pay their bills, and buy and sell goods online—while saving 14% of the costs normally associated with performing these activities.

On her return visit to Bangladesh in July 2019, Her Majesty Queen Máxima of the Netherlands, the UN Secretary-General’s Special Advocate for Inclusive Finance for Development (UNSGSA), eagerly listened to more beneficiaries of a2i’s innovative programming.

In the small town of Jinardi in the rural Narsingdi district, Queen Máxima spoke with Abdul Majid, a 65-year-old seasonal farmer who collects supplemental benefits through the Social Safety Net Program (SSNP) in Bangladesh. Mr. Majid explained that it used to take him an entire day to travel to a bank to receive his payment in cash—a trip that required him to spend money on transportation and food, and often stand in line for hours. At his age, he could hardly take it.

Now, he can easily walk to his local Union Digital Center (UDC)—part of a2i’s successful effort to decentralize banking, government, and commercial services—where his payment is delivered digitally to a bank account and he can cash out within 10 minutes. This is possible as a result of a2i’s new digital architecture for government payments, which allows beneficiaries to receive payments at the financial provider of their choice and withdraw it at their convenience.

a2i has also made it easier for people to make payments through a new integrated digital platform known as ekPay. This has enabled customers to pay utility, treasury, and other bills with a single digital interface.

Meanwhile, with a product called ekShop, a2i facilitates entrepreneurship online. It uses UDCs as access points for rural citizens who want to order goods and have them shipped there. ekShop also connects rural entrepreneurs with urban purchasers through its partnerships with major ecommerce platforms, where products from ekShop are cross-posted.

During the UNSGSA's visit, she met with Mizanur Rahman, one of ekShop's most successful sellers. A 27-year-old man from Khajuripara, a region that is famed for its dates and molasses, Mr. Rahman learned about ekShop when he visited a UDC to apply for a passport. He now sells molasses and other food products from his home region on the platform, and told the UNSGSA that his sales had increased by 40% in six months. He uses the extra income to support several younger family members.

The UNSGSA also spoke with Nasrin Oishi, a 24-year-old ekShop agent who earns $500 a month selling products previously not available to rural residents. Ms. Oishi, who worked for several years at her local UDC—providing government and private services—was able to launch her business with support from the center. She told the UNSGSA that she recently started to sell clothing made by local women to help them experience the same economic empowerment she has achieved.