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Working Paper

ICTs and Access to Information: How to Make it Work for Promoting Human Rights

Ananya Raihan

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About D.Net

D.Net – Development Research Network is a not-for-profit research institution in Bangladesh, established in 2001. D.Net's vision is a society where information and knowledge facilitates all stakeholders' participation in generation of wealth and its equitable distribution for poverty alleviation. Its mission is to become a premier organisation in Bangladesh and beyond by undertaking research and various action programmes in the areas, where information and knowledge can contribute to poverty alleviation, economic growth and peace.

During initial years of activities, D.Net's main focus was research on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for Development. D.Net's in-depth research in the area of ICTs for poverty alleviation has drawn attention of stakeholders not only in Bangladesh, but also across the globe.

Under its Mission 2010, D.Net's five year strategic plan, D.Net conducts research and implements important action programmes primarily in six thematic areas:

- Access to Information and Knowledge
- Enhancing Business Competitiveness for Economic Growth
- Governance and Human Rights
- Human Resource Development
- Institutional Capacity Development
- Eonomic and Development Policy Research

D.Net also undertakes policy influencing activities, for bringing burning issues before the policy makers and stakeholders to create awareness and to take proper actions.

D.Net has started to play a visible role in the research arena within the national boundary and in South Asia through involvement with BRAC, SAPANA, CENTAD, Sarvodoya and ICRIER. It has also gone beyond South Asia through telecentre.org, Canada; ICTSD, Switzerland; IKED, Sweden; ADB Institute, Japan; and ELDIS, UK. D.Net is a member of Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP), One World South Asia, and PAN Asia Network of IDRC.

D.Net received the Global Gender and ICT Award 2005 at the World Summit on the Information Society for its innovation – linking new ICT mobile telecommunication for improving access to livelihood information by the poor people, particularly women and the handicapped, through the introduction of the “mobile lady”.

About the Series

The objective of the working paper series is to bring important issues to the readers on various topics of public domain, based on the findings, observations and insights revealed from D.Net's in house research activities and action programmes.

This working paper on ICTs and Access to Information: How to Make it Work for Promoting Human Rights is an analysis prepared under Theme 1: Access to Information and Knowledge. This paper has been published under the research project named 'Abolombon' funded by 'Manusher Jonno Foundation'.

The working paper on ICTs and Access to Information: How to Make it Work for Promoting Human Rights identifies ICTs as a driving force in building an Information Society and creating the values of human rights for the protection of the vulnerable, alleviation of poverty, and empowerment of people through exchange of information between developing countries where there is a problem with governance. It is found that ICTs have great potential to make a profound impact and offer a wide range of possibilities in exercising human rights and to become an integral part of a democratic society.

D.Net believes that this publication will meet the demand of policy makers, researchers, academics and activists for analysis on the mentioned topic. Readers are most welcome to send their queries, comments, criticism and suggestions for further improvement of D.Net's publications.

Background

D.Net has been implementing a project titled "Abolombon"-"Empowering People through Improved Access to Information on Governance and Human Rights" since March, 2005 with the support of Manusher Jonno Foundation. At the end of the project, the results of the interventions proved that information is an important element for poverty alleviation and empowerment of the people. As the project was designed, with the intervention of ICTs, the role of ICTs was properly understood in terms of making livelihood information available to the people. The project played a very important role in the movement of establishing right to information, which has a unique dimension to the right to livelihood information for the poor people. Right to livelihood information has three perspectives: governance perspective, development perspective and rights perspective. The implemented project could touch all the three aspects of rights to livelihood information.

Importance of Information from Rights Perspective: From the rights perspective, citizens must know about the government, their responsibilities; their rights as citizens, availability of services and facilities provided by the government and other institutions. Strengthening the voices of the people at all levels, fostering their participation in the development process and ensuring gender equality can significantly improve the poverty situation.

Citizens' access to information related to functions of governments both at national and local levels, related to resource allocation for their constituencies and public reporting can significantly improve the situation in regard to exercising rights by them. However, much depend on prevalence of the rule of law which is an equation of prevalence of aware citizens in a country. The knowledge of citizens about laws which are designed to protect citizens can significantly reduce abuse of power by many actors including government officials and law enforcing agencies. Common citizens do not have easy access to the voter list, which is important to ensure the fundamental rights in deciding their own government. Even receiving information about import duties without extra payment is not possible by a business entity. In addition, lack of easily understandable information related to tax payment is used for extortion of the common tax payers. In this context, Bangladesh government introduced fund for getting legal redress for the poor citizens. The fund remained unutilised as majority of citizens do not know about the existence of such a provision. Painfully, due to lack of information about the procedure of birth registration and its fee in a transparent fashion, citizens often have to pay even for being mere "citizens" of the country.

In Bangladesh, in the name of official secrecy, majority of information about operations and activities of the government are not disclosed and such asymmetry in information availability creates fertile ground for corruption. A *Rights to Information Act* can remove the grey areas as regards which is a secret and which is not, and can ensure more predictable access to required information by the citizens.

Governance Perspective: Importantly, an overwhelming part of information and knowledge, required by the marginalised citizens is not a secret. They are open, but are not easily accessible to the people in the time of need. This dimension does not imply that a rights to information act is not necessary for the poor and vulnerable people. Rather, such an act can empower them in true sense by increasing their reach to the information related to governance.

Lack of transparency and accountability is a leading cause for non-cooperation by the government departments and deprivation of people from getting services from the state agencies. Actual allocation of allowances and benefits like VGF, VGD[1] cards per village in the period of distress, eligibility criteria for VGD, VGF cards, responsibilities of union parishad[2] to the people in a constituency, services availability and their eligibility provided by local government institutions, allocation of resources for local government institutions are extremely crucial for the marginalised citizens. Such information can help them to be organised and demand the necessary services from the institutions. There are examples, when availability of such information prevented corruption in allocation of feeding and fund for the destitute.[3]

Development Perspective: It is well known that obstacles to access resources in a sustainable way play a crucial role in drawing the line between have and have-nots. From pure economic perspective, in a market economy framework, access to information is crucial in terms of having access and getting price advantage in the market.

1. VGD– Vulnerable Group Development, VGF – Vulnerable Group Feeding
2. The primary unit of local government in Bangladesh
3. See URL: http://www.pallitathya.org/en/palli_centres/index.html

Unfortunately, there is no separate market for the poor producers of goods and services. Accordingly, access to information may drastically change the situation in favour of the poor producers within and for a country in the global context. On the other hand, while access to information related to market access is significant, it is also important to ensure access to information related to better production of goods and services, appropriate technology, information about self-employment related facilities, and wage employment for ensuring alleviation of income poverty. For addressing the non-income issues, the access to information related to education, technological know-how, affordable health care, legal and human rights are very crucial. In short, one can coin the gamut of information needs as "livelihood information needs".

Lack of access to information is a critical source of disempowerment for the rural poor. This makes them vulnerable to exploitation by the middlemen, leaves them exposed to preventable diseases and accidents, deprives them of justice due to lack of availability of legal aid services, and necessitates significant costs for finding simple information, among many other consequences.

It is important to understand that all information services may not necessarily be disseminated by the government. NGOs, Media and Mobile operators may start providing some of the information. For example, D.Net experiments to provide livelihood information through common access point.[4] Furthermore, less fashionable and more spread ICT like mobile phones is being used for operating *Help Line,* which is used for providing a variety of livelihood information to the village people through the concept of *mobile lady*, who moves from door to door. As a result, people with disability, women with less mobility and such disadvantaged people can access to modern ICT to resolve their livelihood problems through consultation with the experts. As the generated income for such model is not adequate for financial viability, NGO-government, NGO-donor model can be useful for making such service spread across the country.[5] Following the success of D.Net's model Grameen Phone, the largest telecom operator announced that it will provide help line services on health issues to the village community.

Designing of the Intervention

In designing the ICT-based intervention a set of factors has been considered:

a. Computers, mobile phones, Internet and other ICTs are just a tool. They can be meaningful when they are used for dissemination of relevant livelihood information in local language.
b. The poor cannot have the luxury to buy computers, mobile phones or other ICTs.
c. Majority of the community people are illiterate, and are even unable to read and write their own mother tongue.
d. It is not feasible "to implant" an "urban person" in every village on a regular basis to serve the "required information" to the poor.
e. Ownership of information resources by the rich cannot benefit the poor.

To address these factors, a five-pronged approach was applied:

a. Creating local content;
b. Establishing a common access point;
c. Using multiple information exchange channels;
d. Introducing "infomediary"; and
e. Ensure ownership of the poor on the information dissemination system.

Content: A comprehensive volume of Bangla language content was developed under the project in several areas: Women Rights, Land Rights, Local Governance, Marriage & Divorce, Law of Inheritance (partially), Family Law and Labour Law. Other areas have also been identified for developing more content: fundamental rights, legal references, harassment by civil servants, ethnic minority, government gazette, notifications, investigative reports etc. The contents are now accessible in the mega portal in Bangla language through www.abolombon.org and available in CD-ROM form with same web interface titled as "Jeeon-law". The CD-ROM version is available in the project areas for off-line browsing.

Common Access Point: People come to Pallitathya Kendra [rural information centre], guided by D.Net to understand provisions of law to get protection from certain types of violation or abuse. For example, in case of dowry, women can come to the centre and get assistance of the

4. Common access point is essentially Rural Information Centre (Pallitathya Kendra), one of which is established in the building of the local government institution (*union parishad*). See URL: http://www.pallitathya.org
5. See URL: http://www.dnet-bangladesh.org/Pallitathya_pcc.pdf

infomediary at the centre to know about existing laws prohibiting dowry, process of filing a case in situations related to dowry, laws against violence against women, existing institutions which can provide them legal support and such. An infomediary, from the knowledge base can search a particular law and explanation and can assist a victim with information about legal aid organisations, which can provide legal support.

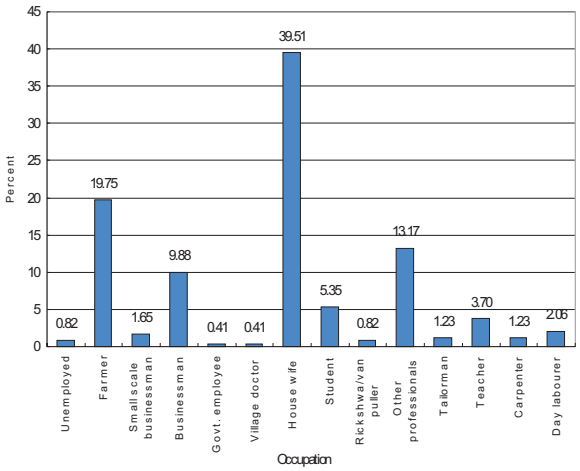
Help Line: From the very beginning, D.Net did not focus only on computers or Internet. D.Net operates a *Help Line* with lawyers at the *Help Desk* end for providing advice to the victims at the village level through mobile phones. A directory database "Jeeon-Thikana" is also useful to help the legal advisors in case the victim needs support from a legal aid institution. At the village end, there is a mobile lady who goes from door to door for assisting information seekers, particularly women and the disabled, who seldom get a chance to go out of the home, to call the Help Desk. The Help Line is very popular and getting more ground for expansion across the country. When answer to a particular question is available in the content, one can use the help line to get response. This combination of centre-based content and help line was the biggest innovation in the ICT4D (Information and Communication Technology for Development) arena and allowed to implement the "no refusal policy".

Infomediary: As regards delivery of the contents, it is not possible, neither feasible nor effective to make the content available to a large number of users through "telecentres" in the traditional meaning. It is a safe assumption that most target end users of information services through centres are non-users of most of the equipment in the information centre. For instance, a farmer or an old man with asthma or a divorced housewife will hardly have the training to sit with a keyboard and mouse and search for the information they are seeking. A farmer can describe his crops and ask for the going rates at different accessible markets; the old man with asthma can describe the symptoms of his ailment and ask for locations, fees and schedules of relevant doctors; the divorced housewife can explain her situation and ask for a possible recourse. In each of these situations, lies the need for a physical person, who knows how to understand the end user's specific situation and find a solution or a contact from the information knowledge base. This is precisely the role of the information operator, a kind of information intermediary or *infomediary*. The need for human interface between the contents and the ultimate users is also dictated by the problem of illiteracy, lack of affordability, cognitive aspects etc. While a human interface is thought of, it is not always possible to hire that interface from the urban area for feasibility reason. Thus, this interface should be identified within villages. The skill mix of the "infomediary", the human interface for content dissemination to the rural people, is in strong correlation with style of presentation and readability of the content, without losing their usability. The nature of content development is also dependent on "cognition" of the ultimate users and the infomediary – how a villager asks a livelihood question or how she/he describes a livelihood problem. Then, how can an infomediary search for suitable answers to the queries or problems? It is also very important for content development. In this regard, D.Net successfully identified infomediaries within the villages and was able to implement the "no exclusion policy".

The Statistics

All four centres run by D.Net received a total of 6870 users, out of which 37.03% were female and 62.97% male. Information on local governance and human rights was received by a total of 305 users, of which 38.69% were female and 61.31% were male. It is remarkable that majority (39.51%) of the users of legal and human rights information services were housewives, and this was possible due to the availability of help line, as the mobile lady went to them for providing information services [see Figure 1].

Figure 1. Occupation of Recipients of Legal and Human Rights Information Services

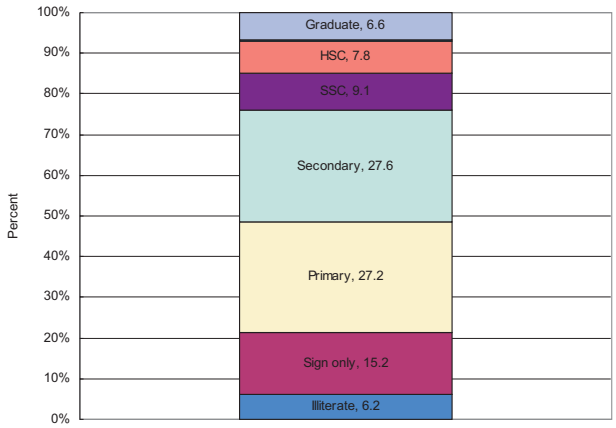


It is also very indicative that majority of the information service users are less educated. Figure 2 shows that 76.13% of the users are with education of secondary level or below. This implies that information centres meet the information need of this group of population. Furthermore, it was found that 21.40% of users could receive the service, due to the presence of an infomediary, as they did not have any education.

More than half (51%) of the users received services on land law related issues. Service recipients on women rights issues stand second (26%). Total 3% cases were referred to the lawyers of partner organisations.

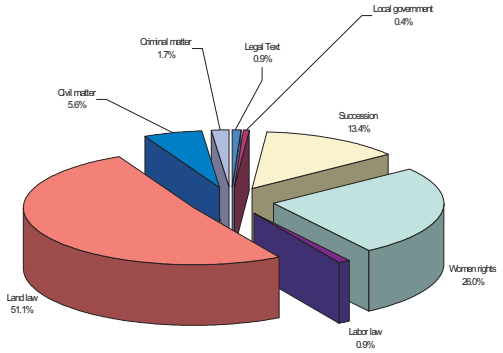
It is important that behavioural changes take place slowly in any society. Use of technology in general and particularly new technology for seeking information is a matter of behavioural change. It was found that 18.8% of users think that mobile phone is the most preferable channel for receiving legal advice. About 22% users prefer letter-based response. The convenience of content based information search was preferred by 12.5% of the users. Importantly, 46.9% of users still think that face-to-face interaction is the best way of receiving legal advice.

Figure 2. Education Level of Legal and Human Rights Service Users



The linkage with expert for content and help line was of particular value for making the help line useful. The user tracking analysis shows that 29.5% of times help desk expert used CD content for answering the queries of the users. They applied their own expertise 31.3% of times. The help desk experts used books and articles 17.4% of times. About 22% of times the help desk experts sought advice of the expert panel formed under the project. This vindicates the presence of an expert pool for making the no refusal policy successful.

Figure 3. Types of Information Services



The outcome

The statistics confirms that targeted beneficiaries started to receive benefit of ICTs in improving access to information on legal and human rights issues, though the number of villagers was below expectation. The grassroot level human rights activists became more benefited from the content [the local branches of NGOs can have one computer for repository of legal information].

The major outcome of the project is that the organisations, both national and local, working on human rights issues have become aware of the issues of access to information and are eager to play a role in mainstreaming ICTs in human rights movement. This is the most significant outcome of the project. As the project was designed as a research project, the underlying objective was to find out the most effective method and mode of delivery of livelihood information. At the end of the project, it was clearly understood that only income oriented business

model ignores that there is a problem of willingness to pay by the poor. Rather, the grassroot level organisations, which are thriving to uphold human rights and provide support to the victims of human rights violation can enhance their current efforts through the use of ICTs, in terms of reaching the target beneficiaries, training the grassroot level human rights activists, and above all, sustaining the efforts through income generation.

Lessons Learnt

A number of important lessons were learnt from the process of project implementation, which can be considered by the initiators of ICT-based access to information drives.

"Infomediary" [a human interface between digital livelihood content and poor information seekers] is a vital component of the whole concept of livelihood information dissemination using ICTs. The "quality" of "infomediary" matters. The standard of information dissemination was improved, where appropriate "infomediary" was found. It was found that in the selection of an "infomediary"; general IQ, comfort level in using ICTs and social commitment should be emphasised.

One of the major lessons is that local language content can create impact on the livelihood of the community. The idea of "critical mass" for livelihood content worked very well and Pallitathya Kendra became a "one stop information centre" for the villagers. The content on all areas of livelihood have been developed and disseminated. As a result, demand for content in one area was created through demand in content for other areas. This integrated approach should be continued in future.

Following the critical mass approach, the current project was complemented and supplemented by other two projects supported by Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB) and International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. Under Abolombon, the livelihood content in the areas of local governance and human rights were developed and content dissemination was supported in two areas. Under the project of RIB, livelihood content in the areas of agriculture and health were developed and another centre in Nilphamari was established. Under the IDRC support, content in rest of the areas have been developed and two centres in Netrokona and Noakhali have been established. The centre in Bagerhat was established with D.Net's own resources. Such combination of resources, allowed D.Net to research the concept of access to information in its full form. This combination of resources proves that own design of project with flexible donor support are critical elements of success.

An expert team was formed to provide critical advice and support to the core team for project implementation. The support helped a lot in preparation of quality legal content. However, the expert time was inadequate due to busy schedule of the experts and faulty design of compensation.

Access to information on demand is an issue of "behavioural change" of the villagers. The behavioural change takes place slowly, which was a factor for relatively low turn over of users. A consistent and prolonged intervention is required for a behavioural change. A time span of one year is not adequate to make people think about the Pallitathya Kendra as a "resort for all livelihood problems". The existing centres thus need continuation and new common access point should be designed for a long time, at least for five years.

Promotion of access to livelihood information is a new issue. The research experience shows that a visual demonstration is more effective than a lecture based mobilisation camp, like meetings, FGD (Focus Group Discussion) etc. When the question of "behavioural change" comes up as a major factor, design of promotion can be made with a residual approach.

It was found that legal camp is a very effective way to promote on-line activities. The legal information with the use of digital content and help line will be a very effective tool for "changing the behaviour" of the victims and other users.

The research outcome confirms that mainstream development organisations will be the main host of ICT-based livelihood information dissemination activities. Already a number of organisations are willing to start ICT-based livelihood information dissemination. "Diganter Dak", an NGO in Noakhali, started the process to set up three "information centres" in the Union Parishad and Upazilla Complex. Hunger Free World and Sabolombi are going to establish two centres in September this year. Pallibandhu of Gaibandha, an NGO working with the disabled, also showed interest to initiate income generating activities for the disabled through information centres. Grameen Phone, the largest *telephone company* in Bangladesh launched "Community Information Centres" by being influenced with the concept of Pallitathya of D.Net.

The focus of D.Net on "Livelihood Content" was vindicated by the response of the organisations that are eager to use it for the promotion of livelihood, at the grassroot level.The assumption that "livelihood content" is a key element of success for ICT-based information services was proved to be correct. There is a severe dearth of Bangla language searchable content on livelihood issues. D.Net was able to address that critical need and became the pioneer in Bangladesh, for developing livelihood digital content. The demand for the content is on the rise. This demand now has shown a way for sustainable content development efforts through the adoption of pricing mechanism for the content. "Shushilon", an NGO based in Satkhira, has already started ICT-based livelihood information services buying content developed at D.Net. More than ten institutions confirmed that they will use content prepared by D.Net, and are willing to pay for them. Grameen Phone is in the process of signing MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) with D.Net for using the content developed by D.Net.

Help line has emerged as a new resort, which is ICT-based, but has a vast coverage across the country due to high penetration of mobile phones. It has been decided to continue the Help Line with a more professional structure and keep it well equipped and an attempt should also be made to make it a countrywide service. D.Net is negotiating with telephone companies for putting it on a professional ground using a cross- subsidisation model.

The "no exclusion policy" proved to be effective in creating confidence among the villagers. This policy implies that all citizens can receive services irrespective of illiteracy, physical disability as well as socially less mobile males and females. It was possible due to the three pronged approach:

i. Deployment of infomediary [a human interface between users and content base].
ii. Mobile service through mobilisation work.
iii. Through the mobile lady, who visits rural household for those people who are unable to visit the centres for various reasons.

Similarly, no refusal policy is also important for winning hearts and making the services effective. This policy implies that if a question of livelihood problem comes to the information workers of the centres, it would certainly be answered. It was possible for an "innovation": combination of centre-based information services and help line services. If content base is not adequate, a user can call the help desk, and get response from experts on livelihood subject matters.

In a few cases, it was found that information receivers did not receive proper services from the institutions they have been referred to. It implies that information service alone may not be adequate without further improvement of the quality of services delivered by service providing institutions and availability of services.

What Next

It is a matter of great pleasure that although D.Net started the movement on access to information research alone in 2003, today there are many champions with different models in the field. It is now time to think about coordination of efforts, so that we can avoid duplication and spread more on the ground. If we join our hands together, we can start a Mission by 2011: to establish an information centre at least in every union. In that endeavour, based on the gathered knowledge and expertise, D.Net wants to start a new phase for providing support to the organisations planning to start ICT-based information dissemination for the grassroots.

D.Net is now planning to continue the content development where specific focus will be given on visual content, which will be based on animation, audio-visual and combination of both. As the penetration of Internet connection has enhanced, D.Net started it on a test basis on-line (Internet based) help-line for human rights activists. Due to the huge response, we have been forced to close it as the current human resource does not allow processing such large number of queries.

As the demand for directory information is high, D.Net is planning to develop more interactive and country-wide database of livelihood support institutions. Partner institutions have plans to be involved on a term of exchange of whole database with data for a particular area. Development of audio-visual promotional materials for various human rights organisations and grassroot level promotions has also been planned. On-line legal reference for the human rights activists has started during the project. However, it started to generate momentum only at the end. By this time a core group has been formed with ASK, BLD, DLR and BLAST. The area of content for legal reference has also been identified.

One of the weak points of the current effort is that the web site with huge information was not promoted with a comprehensive plan. D.Net started promotional activities so that users can take benefit of Bangla on-line legal repository.

As was mentioned earlier, the major future plan is to build up a support facility for the organisations planning to initiate livelihood information dissemination services along with their core activities. D.Net is planning to provide support to the selected organisations in the following areas:

1. Set up of computers
2. Selection and training of infomediary
3. Support at the field level
4. Supplying content and database
5. Support in promotion of access to information issues

The level of interest and enthusiasm encourage us to continue the efforts of making ICTs effective for promoting human rights in Bangladesh through improved access to livelihood information.

Ananya Raihan

Ananya Raihan is the Executive Director of D.Net, a premier development research institution in Bangladesh. Mr. Raihan completed his MS in Economics (specialisation: Economic Cybernetics) in 1990 and was awarded Ph.D. in Economics in 1994 from V.M. Glushkov Institute of Cybernetics, National Academy of Science, Ukraine.

Mr. Raihan started his professional career at Kharkov State University, Ukraine as an Assistant Professor in 1993. He also served as a Research Fellow, at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), a civil society think tank in Bangladesh, and immensely contributed at Bangladesh Institute of Bank Management (BIBM) as an Associate Professor and Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) as a consultant. Mr. Raihan performed professional work for a number of international and regional organisations including UNCTAD, WTO-ITC, SAARCFINANCE, OXFAM and ICTSD.

Mr. Raihan has a diversified research interest which includes access to information, international trade, financial sector reform, corporate social responsibility and SME development.

Mr. Raihan has also been awarded the Ashoka Fellowship in 2004 in recognition of his contribution as a social innovator in the area of ICT for the rural community.

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