



Case Study Series 3:

Addressing Citizen's Concerns: Inspiration from Proactive Civil Servants

Case Title:

**Addressing Fishermen's Misery:
Digitalization of Bangladesh's Closed Water Body Leasing**

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The case studies for this series are collected from real-life cases of civil servants working in different South Asian countries. This collection initiative is an attempt to document different proactive approaches taken by civil servants and, in the process, encourage other civil servants to become more proactive in their own workplaces. If you know of other such instances of proactive acts, please email us (hossainsaadia@gmail.com), and we will get back to you to collect more information.

Addressing Fishermen's Misery: Digitalization of Bangladesh's Closed Water Body Leasing

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An Outdated System for Leasing Out

Every year in Bangladesh, among a total of 26,275 *Jalmahals* (Ministry of Land, 2016), around 700 government-owned *Jalmahals* (Closed Water Bodies) under development projects are leased out across the country. Bangladesh government's Ministry of Land, with the help of the District Administration, processes applications from Fishermen's Co-operative Societies (Ministry of Land, 2009). For that, the Ministry would publish a countywide notice inviting tenders for leasing out a certain *Jalmahal*. The representatives from the fisherman's co-operatives residing in remote locations would travel from far and wide to Dhaka, the capital city, to submit their applications to express their interest in leasing a certain water body as they earn their living through this (Rahman et al., 2015).

This process was difficult due to the cost, hassle, and time constraints. There was not enough time between the publication of the notice and the application submission deadline, even though the co-operatives had to gather more than 30 different documents and certificates to meet the requirements. Sometimes, there were allegation against some Ministry Officials that they showed bias towards certain applicants and deliberately removed important documents from others' applications. Due to this, the common fishermen were afraid of being disqualified and found no reliable alternatives to travelling to the Secretariat in the capital for applying in person, despite the high cost. Many complaints and lawsuits are filed every year, with concerns about corruption and malpractice, but this system continued until last year.

Problem

For submitting *Jalmahal* leasing applications, co-operative societies need to send their people from different remote locations in Bangladesh all the way to the capital and often the supporting documents for the applications have been lost due to mishandling in the office.

Solution

An innovative civil servant took a proactive approach and advocated for the digitization of the process by implementing online leasing application submission.

Outcome

Fishermen no longer need to travel long distances to apply for leases or repeatedly submit the same documents, which also eliminates the risk of documents getting lost due to mishandling.

Overthrowing Bureaucratic Rigidity

While Mr. X was examining the leasing applications submitted in 2020 with 4 other officers of the Ministry of Land, his team identified that the applications from Fishermen Co-operative Societies could be submitted at the local district office, rather than requiring travel to the capital city, Dhaka. Moreover, a significant amount of time could be saved by cutting down some of the redundant steps.

They realized that the Ministry's application examination is unnecessary as the Deputy Commissioner's (DC) office scrutinizes them again. To simplify the process and reduce the risk of documents getting misplaced, all the documents, such as audit reports, registration, and constitution of the fishermen's co-operatives, could be uploaded online for instant verification. In the online application form, there can be mandatory fields for pre-requisite documents, which will ensure submission of necessary papers and the number of complaints and allegations of missing files will be reduced. Some redundant documents can also be removed, like photos and National Identity Cards (NID) by accepting applications through verified user accounts.

The proposal to simplify the process for Fishermen Co-operative Societies was rejected by Mr. X's superior officer, who demonstrated bureaucratic rigidity and claimed that the old method was satisfactory. Mr. X was diligent, and during the departmental meeting, he decided to approach the Secretary of the Ministry of Land about reforming the leasing system. The Secretary, who is in charge of the Ministry, took an innovative step and approved the proposal to simplify the process and initiated the development of an online facility for leasing out closed water bodies, marking a paradigm shift in the history of leasing out processes (Bangladesh Post Desk, 2022).

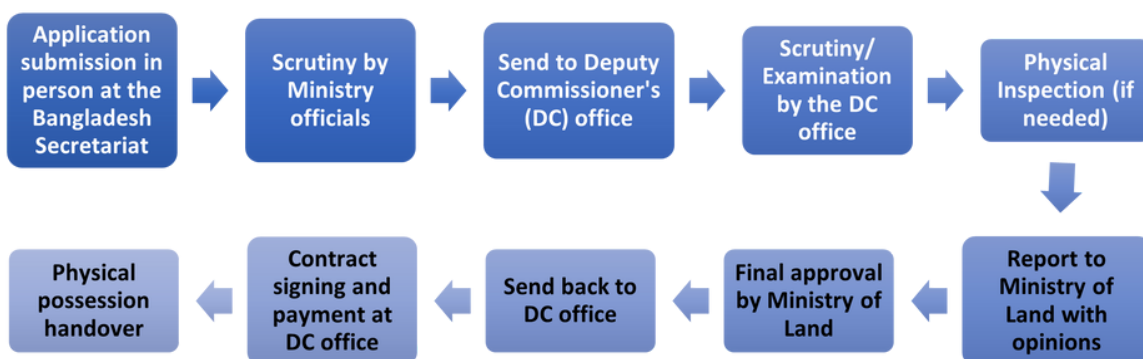


Fig 1: Previous Manual Process

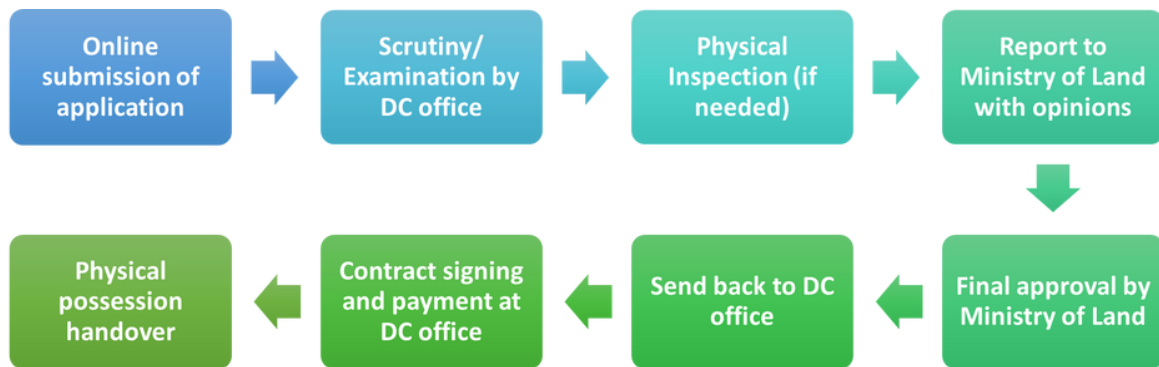


Fig 2: Current Digital Process

Transparency and Efficiency Ensured

Fishermen Co-operative Societies can now easily apply online to lease closed water bodies, eliminating the need for time-consuming travel and reducing government man-hour costs. The new system minimizes the number of required documents and prevents the loss of important paperwork by requiring mandatory fields. Permanent documents do not need to be resubmitted every year. Co-operative Societies can receive notifications and upload necessary documents through their online accounts. Archiving records promotes transparency and reduces corruption by making the monitoring of leasing activities much easier. Mr. X's attempt to simplify the process has led to the inception of a system which is now used for leasing out all closed water bodies by the *Upazila* and District administrations throughout the whole country.

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