

The Daily Star

Most rural households lack digital access

Reducing the digital divide crucial
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Despite the government's enthusiastic approach towards a digital Bangladesh, it appears we still have a long way to go. It is concerning that nearly three-quarters of rural households in the country have low level digital access and skills, according to a recent study by the Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) titled, "Digital Literacy in Rural Bangladesh", which surveyed 6,500 households. The study is the first of its kind to develop a Digital Literacy Index (DLI), illustrating the current state of digital literacy in rural Bangladesh. In recent years, Bangladesh has achieved commendable progress in digitising many of its public services to make them more accessible and cost-effective, but it appears that this continuing "digital divide" among the rural and urban households threatens to deter the successful expansion of our e-governance. The study reveals that rural households are still lagging behind in adoption and use of e-services due to lack of proper access to information and communication technology (ICT) and the skills required to operate digital devices.

It further shows that about 49 percent of the households have no access to a computer and 54 percent do not have access to the internet. Although 96 percent of rural households own a mobile phone, a majority (59 percent) do not have access to a smartphone. Only three percent pay bills via mobile, six percent use computers for productive activity, 20 percent use the internet for functional activities like reading news, online training, etc., three percent have online shopping experience, and less than one percent earn through online activities. The study categorised rural households into four different classes, according to digital access—none, low, basic, and above basic. 72 percent of households were found to have low access and only four percent had above basic access. Digital access is one of two aspects of digital literacy, the other being the skills that enable people to use these tools to effectively communicate, seek information, and solve problems. When it comes to problem-solving and actual efficacy, the percentage of households who possess the requisite skills is staggeringly low.

Although the issue of the digital divide created during this pandemic has been discussed in the media, we are yet to see any comprehensive plan

from the government to tackle the problem. Not to mention, online education remains completely inaccessible to many students because of poverty, poor internet connectivity, high internet charges and a lack of necessary equipment.

The authorities and the policymakers must sensibly design innovative interventions which will be favourable in making information technology and connectivity available across every rural community to bridge the existing inequalities.