

## BUILDING FROM THE BOTTOM UP

Developing and sustaining the Bangladesh INASP-PERii Consortium (BIPC)

*Abdullah Shams Bin Tariq, 2010*

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*Developing a library consortium requires a great deal of planning, steady funding from its member institutions and a firm agreement regarding what resources will be included. However, even the greatest plans and a sizeable budget mean very little if there are no individuals with the time and desire to maintain it. As found in the development of BIPC, enthusiasm and individual dedication can be just as important as planning and funding.*

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The Bangladesh INASP-PERii Consortium (BIPC) has experienced rapid growth since its beginnings in 2006. Although the challenge of sustainability remains, the successes and obstacles so far have taught important lessons and continue to be met with enthusiasm.

Before BIPC, there were a number of unsuccessful initiatives to obtain and provide access to electronic resources through the development of a local consortium. However, these never took-off and eventually the institutions and organisations involved had to go their own way, obtaining subscriptions via direct negotiations with publishers or joining foreign consortia.

Alternative, sometimes largely funded, projects to develop national links also failed to achieve their goal. A possible reason for this is that many projects are driven top-down and start with a few highly-paid consultants who depart after a certain period, often failing to really connect to the grassroots. In developing countries like Bangladesh, there are often additional issues such as corruption, deep-rooted and widespread mistrust and inefficient manpower for implementation.

It is, perhaps, because of its bottom-up development that BIPC has been more successful. In 2005, Rajshahi University (RU) began talks with INASP to be part of the first phase of the Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERI - now in its second phase, PERii) and allocated funds for subscriptions to e-resources. The following year, Bangladesh joined PERI as one of INASP's partner countries. The Bangladesh Academy of Sciences (BAS) arranged a meeting between the Bangladesh Universities and INASP in May, 2006 to start off the BIPC initiative.

It was decided in the beginning that BAS should act as the main point of coordination for the consortium. With

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BAS as the coordination lead, BIPC is governed by two committees:

- the Coordination Committee (formed of institutional contacts and headed by the Director of BAS)
- the Advisory Committee (formed of heads of institutions with the President and Secretary of BAS as Convenor and Member-Secretary respectively)

Additionally, the member institutions make payments for resources through BAS in local currency. The payments are then transferred to the publishers via INASP.

The initial stage of BIPC's development, however, was not easy. By the end of 2006, the consortium was struggling with only two institutions - Jahangirnagar and Rajshahi Universities - confirming their contributions for 2007. To address this, Mosharraf Hossain, then Deputy Librarian of Jahangirnagar University, took personal leave and arranged a series of privately-funded visits to many institutions. While the visits met with mixed success, it was still enough to ensure the survival of the initiative.

Only a few months later, in May, 2007, when the issue of forming a consortium came up in a Coordination Committee meeting some members simply said, "We don't *need* a consortium – this *is* the consortium!"

Thus BIPC was born.

## Teething problems

Much like the voluntary visits to various institutions, the early challenges of forming a consortium required a great deal of enthusiasm and dedication to overcome. Some of these issues, such as the low level of e-literacy amongst library staff and policy makers, were fundamental issues that needed to be addressed. We found most libraries did not have an official email account and some did not use email at all. While most institutions struggled to complete the initial access setup and support had to be provided on a voluntary and individual basis, there has been significant improvement over the last few years.

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Another issue that proved to be a struggle was convincing the institutional policy makers of BIPC's merit. Gradually, through persistence and enthusiasm, trust and appreciation began to grow and, by 2008, institutions were contacting us to join BIPC and not the other way around.

To operate a consortium, it is also essential to cater for the demands of everyone. Even within institutions it is difficult to justify an initiative if it does not cover most of the disciplines. Therefore, a key factor to growth was the aggressive inclusion of resources in subject areas that were not satisfactorily covered before.

Finally, the lack of a clear, objective, cost-sharing formula has proven to be problematic. Our approach has based institutional contributions on size and library budgets for periodicals. However, if an institution has reported exceptional difficulty, it has been allowed to join for less than initially stipulated, while a more able institution may pay more considering this is a national cause. For this reason, we use the term *contribution*, rather than *subscription*. Long-term, a variable payment structure can be difficult to maintain.

## Successes

The enthusiasm and commitment of the library contacts has been the determining factor in the success of the consortium. In fact, one of the greatest successes of this initiative is that such a group of enthusiastic and committed librarians have been brought together.

The establishment of a reliable and transparent financial structure by BAS has also greatly contributed to maintaining momentum. In Bangladesh, where apprehension of financial mismanagement is widespread,

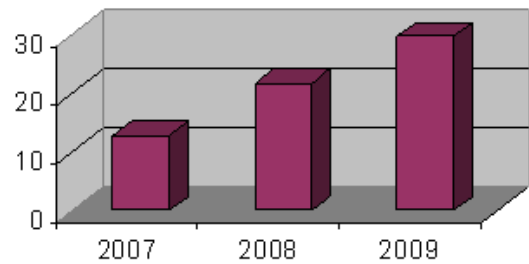


Fig. 1 - Paying institutions. This shows the growth of BIPC through member organisations from 2007-2009

this is always going to be crucial. BAS still has to struggle through a significant amount of red-tape just to make the foreign currency transfer to INASP. The fact that the payments have even managed to get through is a significant achievement.

A low-profile, yet highly productive mode of administration has kept the managerial structure and costs low. The charts (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) show an encouraging level of growth in the number of member institutions a steady rise in resources. Additionally, usage and coverage has been excellent (see Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). It is indeed heartening to note that we have reached over 80% of our target audience (staff and research students at public universities in this case)! This is a significant achievement over such a short space of time.

There are a great many donor-funded projects in Bangladesh, but BIPC's achievements are difficult to match - providing access to e-resources at a level comparable to developed countries, with widespread coverage in only three years. In fact, one colleague even reported feeling inconvenienced by the lack of access to necessary resources while visiting abroad.

BIPC operates with a 'bottom up' approach. It is managed in-country, driven by institutional demands and has no central funding, relying instead on member institutions for support. Because the librarians have to work very hard to pay these fees from their institutional budgets, there is usually plenty of motivation to make BIPC a success.

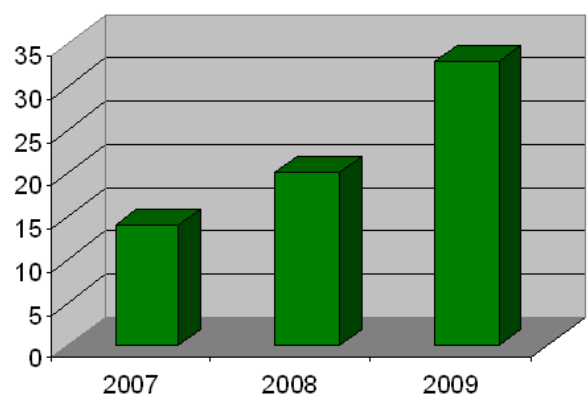


Fig. 2 - Subscribed resources. All electronic resources including journal collections, databases, etc.

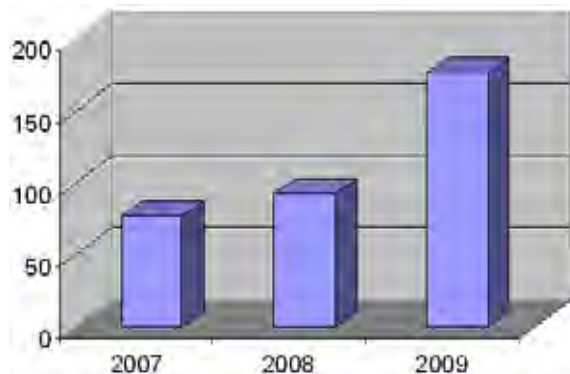


Fig. 3 - Total full-text downloads (in thousands). This shows a massive increase in full-text downloads since 2007.

This has led to several institutions organising their own events to popularise e-resources amongst users.

In 2008, BIPC decided to set aside 3% of the annual institutional contributions as management fees for admin, support and training. This led to the first independently funded and facilitated workshop, held in January 2009. The event had 50 participants from 30 institutions and cost just over USD 1000 with no need for outside expertise.

The desire for a strong, sustainable consortium is evident as BIPC works to fund e-resource access as well as facilitate, organise and support their own training events whenever possible. Only in the latter part of 2006 were subscriptions paid for by INASP. Since 2007, BIPC's e-resource subscriptions have been fully funded through institutional contributions.

In a parallel development, the strength of BIPC and the drive to build upon what already exists made Bangladesh a perfect candidate for the Journals Online project. Together, BAS, the Editing and Publication Association of Bangladesh (EPAB) and INASP, set-up the Bangladesh Journals Online (BanglaJOL) – a service to provide access to Bangladesh published research, and increase worldwide knowledge of Bangladeshi scholarship.

Through PERii, the consortium benefits from the advice and experience of an international network. For example, in 2009, PERii Bangladesh hosted the annual PERii Steering Committee meeting, bringing together representatives from 21 partner countries. This gave both the country partners and consortium members an opportunity to share experiences and learning with people working on similar initiatives in other developing countries.

### Looking ahead

Currently the majority of subscriptions handled via BIPC are negotiated by INASP, however, as the consortium grows, so does its ambition. BIPC has discussed how to

build upon the activities in which they already engage. These discussions have included direct negotiations for non-included resources, a union catalogue of journal holdings, inter-library loans, and a common library software platform to facilitate future sharing of resources.

Due to the informal manner in which the consortium was formed, much required documentation and organisational structure is still missing, although member institutions do sign a Deed of Agreement with BAS. At the moment, a constitution is being drafted and a formal structure for cost-sharing is being set-up. This also needs to include some succession planning, which is something that needs careful attention.

Of the remaining obstacles for effective growth and impact, one of the most significant is the lack of human resources for technical support. Many of the public universities in particular seem to be unprepared for e-librarianship. To address this, the technical support base is being widened nationally to ensure continuity and sustainability.

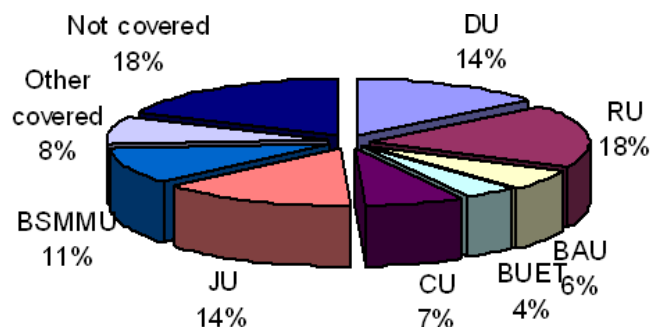


Fig. 4 - Coverage. BIPC has managed to reach over 80% of its target audience within 3 years.

One recurring issue is that the value of the accessible resources is not always appreciated by institutional policy-makers. One reason for this is that the quiet researcher - the user of the resources - is often not involved in policy-making. Sadly, it seems, continued effort is required to convince policy leaders across our institutions.

Institutional awareness is only one problem; user awareness is another big issue. Often, the resources available are not well-used for the simple reason that potential users are unaware of them or lack essential searching skills.

Though researchers are extremely appreciative, the effective use and provision of resources requires the involvement of librarians, ICT professionals and institutional administration, among others. When institutional administrators are not familiar with the



*Participants of the first independently funded and facilitated BIPC workshop in January, 2009*

issues, there are often significant delays and difficulties in institutional policy decisions. As BIPC grows, ensuring participation and understanding at all levels becomes increasingly important.

There are also outside factors that impact on BIPC's growth and sustainability such as the emergence of local stakeholders representing publishers or independent e-resource providers who are not involved in PERii. There is also the possibility that Bangladesh will transition to a middle-income status in the future. This would change the current scenario with a possible steep rise in subscription costs. Finally, there is also the question in general of the sustainability of the current mode of institutional contributions for the subscription. Within a few years BIPC may reach a stage where it is nearly saturated in terms of the member institutions' abilities to contribute.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident that significant challenges remain ahead. Nevertheless, it is heartening indeed to see a vibrant consortium in place with members working together to get more out of it. Dedication and enthusiasm for the project have been as important as funding and planning. As long as this spirit is alive, it should be possible to overcome the difficulties lying ahead.

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#### **Bangladesh Academy of Sciences (BAS)**

<http://www.bas.org.bd/>

#### **Bangladesh INASP-PERii Consortium (BIPC) Temporary Librarian Support Page**

<http://www.ru.ac.bd/rulib/bipc/lib.htm>

#### **Bangladesh Journals Online**

[www.banglajol.info](http://www.banglajol.info)

For more information on INASP and PERii, visit the website:

[www.inasp.info](http://www.inasp.info) or [www.inasp.info/perii](http://www.inasp.info/perii)

For information on other consortia, see our case study - The Winning Formula. This examines the development of the Kenya Library and Information Services Consortium (KLISC):

[www.inasp.info/the-winning-formula](http://www.inasp.info/the-winning-formula)