

# EMPOWERING RURAL COMMUNITIES:

## The Impact of High-Speed Internet in Bangladesh

As the global digital revolution gathered pace with the dawning of a new millennium, Bangladesh could only look at its neighbors with envy.

In the race for faster and more secure internet connections, the South-East Asian country had been left behind – held back by outdated satellite connections as other nations in the region embraced high-speed fiber-optic cables.

This digital divide propelled economic growth and limited access to vital information, but a significant sea change was on the horizon – and the answer lay beneath the waves.

The Bangladeshi government partnered with the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) to embark on a visionary project - the installation of a submarine fiber-optic cable.

Up to this point, Bangladesh's desire to thrive in the digital age had been hampered by its slow and inadequate internet infrastructure. It limited access to online resources and hindered communication - restricting the potential of businesses and individuals alike. But this underwater solution would alleviate the digital bottleneck and propel the nation into the 21st century.





This vital artery landed at Cox's Bazar in the southeast of the country.

The government envisioned a “digital Bangladesh” and recognized the importance of access for everyone. It actively engaged with communities, ensuring geographical boundaries and socioeconomic divides did not hinder the cable's future use.

Its impact was nothing short of transformative.

In 2004, Bangladesh had just 23,000 internet users, but by the end of 2015 that number skyrocketed to a staggering 54 million.

Mobile phone users, embracing better connectivity for more services, also increased during the same period from 3 million to 133 million.

The benefits permeated every facet of Bangladeshi life.

From improved overseas communication to seamless online transactions, businesses witnessed a surge in efficiency and opportunity.

People embraced the power of the internet for entertainment, knowledge sharing and keeping in touch with loved ones overseas.

The impact on education was profound. Students gained access to a wealth of online resources, including video lectures, teaching notes, and interactive platforms. A newfound ability to connect with experts and peers across the globe also enriched their learning experience.

Committed to empowering developing nations, the IsDB also understood the transformative potential of high-speed internet access - so backed the plan with a substantial US\$60 million investment.

The 1,065km submarine cable was installed by the SEA-ME-WE Consortium, a global leader in undersea connectivity. Technical partners like Alcatel-Lucent from France and Fujitsu from Japan provided their expertise, ensuring the cable's seamless integration with existing infrastructure.

The tourism industry was also boosted. With reliable internet access, hotels like the Pan Pacific Sonargaon in Dhaka could cater to the needs of globetrotting business travelers. By 2011, cricket fans staying at the hotel for the World Cup could use the hotel's wi-fi system for an enhanced visitor experience.



Rural communities were not forgotten and although initial access in these areas remained limited to 2G and 3G technology, the groundwork for comprehensive connectivity was laid with plans for "data centers" in villages.

One rural innovation was "telemedicine," where doctors in remote communities could connect to their counterparts in Dhaka via online conferences. This helped deliver more accurate diagnoses and improved access to healthcare services.

The submarine fiber-optic cable has laid the foundation for Bangladesh's digital future. However, with a lifespan of 25 years, the government has already secured a contract for a second cable, future-proofing the nation's digital ambitions.

This collaborative and pioneering project demonstrates how strategic infrastructure investments can unlock a nation's potential and empower its people. As digital advances continue apace, Bangladesh has bridged the digital divide and charted its course towards a brighter, more connected future.