

Using IT to promote right to information

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'The great democratising power of information has given us all the chance to effect change and alleviate poverty in ways we cannot even imagine today. Our task... is to make that change real for those in need, wherever they may be. With information on our side, with knowledge a potential for all, the path to poverty can be reversed.'

Kofi Annan, Secretary-General, United Nations

Governments all over the world are embracing democratic norms and adopting principles that facilitate more open and responsive governance. There has also been a marked increase in the enactment of domestic legislation to entrench the public's right to access information from their governments, and even private bodies in some instances.

In the Commonwealth, to date 10 countries (Australia, Belize, India, Jamaica, New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United Kingdom) have enacted right to information laws. India, which passed the Right to Information Act in May 2005, is the most recent Commonwealth country to establish this right legally.

With a mandate to promote the practical realisation of human rights in the Commonwealth countries, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) believes that the right to information is fundamental for the realisation of economic and social rights as well as civil and political rights.

Power of the right to information

The right to information is premised on the right of all the citizens to access government held information. It entails a corresponding duty on the government to provide information, which are of general interest or value to the public, both proactively and on request. Without information, the public will struggle to fully exercise their rights, and even be unaware of their rights to information.

Furthermore, information is vital for the protection and enforcement of rights. More broadly, the right to information is a powerful tool which can be used to break down the walls of secrecy which too often exist between the citizen and the State.

Promoting good governance and inclusive democracy

With access to information on their side, people can function better as an informed and responsible citizenry - investigating and scrutinising government actions and reviewing the performance of their elected representatives with a view to seriously holding them accountable. The world over, access laws have been used to monitor and oversee the functioning of the Member of Parliaments and Governments officials. People can access information on how officials are delivering on their commitments, how the bureaucracy is spending public money and how representatives are interacting with special interest groups.

Facilitating participatory development

The right to information empowers groups from all sectors of our society to scrutinise and engage with the developmental activities being undertaken around them - by governments, donors and private bodies. People can access information about their development rights, as well as can find out more about the development projects and programmes from which they are supposed to be benefiting. At the more personal level, people can use the law to ensure that they



Source: <http://peacecorpsonline.org/messages/jpeg/cosguinebissau.jpg>

receive the entitlements and benefits that are due to them and other sections of society.

Exposing corruption

The right to information is the key to combat corruption and foster an environment which is pro-transparency, pro-democracy and ultimately pro-people. Experience has shown that civil society groups, anti-corruption agencies, media persons and activists can use right to information laws to expose high-level corruption. Access laws can also be used very effectively at the community level to expose cases where implementing agencies fail to properly discharge their duties, both to the government and the public.

Supporting equitable economic growth

The right to information is an important tool that can be used to ensure that markets work for the people rather than corporations. At the high policy end, parliamentarians and the public can exercise their right to access information to obtain documents on trade and economic policy, and also to scrutinise the activities of international financial and trade institutions, such as the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation. At the other end of the spectrum, people can use their right to obtain information and make rational informed decisions on tax, wage and occupation, health and safety entitlements and compliance.

Bolstering media capacity

In many jurisdictions across the world, the media have been active users of the right to information, using access laws to unearth cases of corruption, mismanagement of public funds, highlighting the government's misuse of public resources, etc. The right to information is a powerful tool in the hands of the media who, in taking this legislation to heart, have in many countries put pressure on governments to amend their policies. The right to information makes real a new era of investigative journalism premised not on hearsay, but verified government information.

Using IT to network for change

The right to information is a core aspect of CHRI's work in the Commonwealth. Specifically, CHRI's Right to Information (RTI) Programme works towards the adoption and implementation of right to information regimes in all the Commonwealth's member states. To this end, CHRI partners with governments and civil

society organisations in member states to catalyse action towards the enactment of access legislation. CHRI also works to support implementation of access regimes, through the exchange of best practice and lessons learnt.

CHRI recently organised a National Conference in India on 'Effective Implementation: Preparing to Operationalise the Right to Information Act 2005' which was designed to bring together government officials and civil society with key Indian and international experts on the right to information to discuss best practice, challenges and key implementation strategies.

CHRI's RTI Programme covers the entire Commonwealth. It has been of key importance that the programme utilises its resources – human, financial and technological, strategically to maximise its reach. As a policy-advocacy organisation, CHRI's approach has been to channelise the needs, ideas and lessons learnt by local partners towards governments in the form of practical policy suggestions for change.

In this context, CHRI recognises that the Internet can be a powerful media, enabling better coordination between governments, civil society organisations and individuals working on the right to information across the Commonwealth and its sub-regions.

Making best use of the organisation's website

CHRI's Right to Information website (<http://www.humanrightsinitiative.org/programs/ai/rti/rti.htm>) has been a key element of CHRI's international engagement strategy. It has been developed to provide legislators, advocates and the public with resources on international and Commonwealth principles and standards on the right to information. The site also functions as an important RTI archive, providing links to all Commonwealth RTI legislation, as well as a comprehensive collection of right to information resources of all the 53 Commonwealth countries.

Establishing and strengthening partnerships

CHRI has extensive contacts with NGOs, civil society groups and right to information activists across the Commonwealth. Promoting awareness on the right to information through information sharing between and across these networks has been one of the key strategies for CHRI. CHRI has relied on the Internet and e-mail to establish and consolidate its partnerships with stakeholders throughout the Commonwealth. ICT tools also help CHRI to consolidate the local partnerships and also for making timely interventions.

Publishing and circulating useful information

The RTI programme is also keenly aware of the opportunity ICT provides for disseminating useful information and raising public awareness. The RTI team writes extensively for newspapers, journals, articles and newsletters and tries in this manner to spread greater awareness about the right to information and its key relevance in the access of other basic rights. CHRI also publishes original papers and reports in its websites.

The successful implementation of the law is directly related to the level of commitment within the government and the level of knowledge of the people. CHRI's RTI programme is committed to disseminate the knowledge to all the concerned stakeholders and ICT has proved to be a useful tool for it. ■