

# OPENING THE EYES...

*The government is going to relax public procurement rules that will eventually allow inexperienced contractors to participate in bidding for development work. The move aims to award a bulk of the contracts to the novice ruling party men. The government has taken the move despite the development partners' concern that it would encourage corruption and lead to substandard development work. Around 70-80 percent of the budget for annual development programme, involving around Tk 25,000 crore, is spent on procurement.*

"From the training we found CPTU as a good source of information on corruption in procurement, and we built good relations with them."

*Shawkat Hossain*  
Joint News and Business Editor  
Prothom Alo

▶ This is the excerpt of a report published in the leading Bangla Daily Prothom Alo in May, 2009, which focused on how public procurement is infested by corruption by a clique of vested interest groups and how the government deliberately makes policies that encourage corruption. This was a very interesting investigating report on corruption by Shawkat Hossain of the Prothom Alo, who was present in all the training sessions.

The Prothom Alo ran the report soon after an in-house training of journalists on "Investigative reporting on corruption and the use of RTI Act" organised by Management and Resources Development Initiative (MRDI) under a USAID-PROGATI funded project. The training helped the reporters build rapport with the Central Procurement Technical Unit (CPTU) of the Planning Ministry and dig out investigative stories on corruption using the sources.



# The Initiative

MRDI has long been advocating for the people's right to know. It wants implementation of the Right to Information Act in a pro-poor approach. With support from USAID PROGATI, MRDI is working for using the law as a tool of curbing corruption in the development works.

## Capacity Building

### In-house Training for Journalists

MRDI took the initiative to improve journalists' skills in investigative reporting on corruption in the public procurement and budget implementation process, and the use of RTI Act for accessing information. It organised in-house trainings for 12 national and 7 district level media houses.

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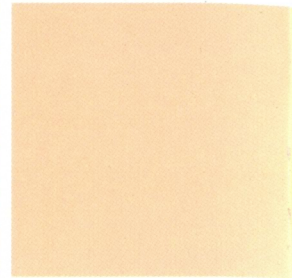
The coverage of investigative reports on corruption and irregularities increased remarkably after the training that focused on the use of RTI Act in gathering information from government offices and dealing with corruption issues.

A report ran by the New Age highlighted that the Information Commission was facing difficulty in getting information from the Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha for handling a complaint against the city development authority under the RTI Act.

"I believe this training has taught reporters/gatekeepers a new approach to investigative reporting where use of the RTI can generate in-depth reports that can stand out from generic investigative reports. We have also realised that the present RTI Act has limitations in accessing information quickly; but at the same time, it is a new tool of journalism that can help us produce different kinds of reports."

*Sharier Khan*

Deputy Editor, The Daily Star



The Barisal correspondent of the Kaler Kantha who took part in the training wrote a story on corruption in city corporation's tender for development work.

The local level journalists never knew the Public Procurement Act (PPA), Public Procurement Rules (PPR) and Right to Information Act. After the training, they started using these laws and rules while reporting corruption issues. Gramer Kagoj, a daily published from Jessore, conducted an investigation on RTI Act in one upazila of the district. The reporter asked people from various occupations and government officials, but none of them had ever heard of the law. So there was no question of seeking or providing information.

As the high officials of CPTU were involved in the training, the reporters were able to build up sources in the unit that oversees public procurement. Most importantly, the CPTU encouraged the MRDI initiative and its officials were very communicative with the journalists. Their tips helped the reporters investigate corruption and irregularities in public procurement.

"Reporters now make phone calls or e-mail us to know the details of the procurement rules and seek our help in handling complex issues."

Director General, CPTU

## Training for Civil Society Organisations on RTI



Apart from the in-house training of journalists, MRDI organised training for the representatives from civil society organisations (CSOs) on the use of RTI Act to monitor government services. The civil society organisations/NGOs are also subject to public request for their financial and programme information as they are handling public funds for development work. MRDI believes that it is the responsibility of the civil society to involve mass people so that the law is enforced and utilised properly by all citizens.



## Training for ACC officials on RTI



"We need a policy on disclosure of public information that will fulfill people's right to information and at the same time protect the rights of the accused."

*Ghulam Rahman*

Chairman, Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC)

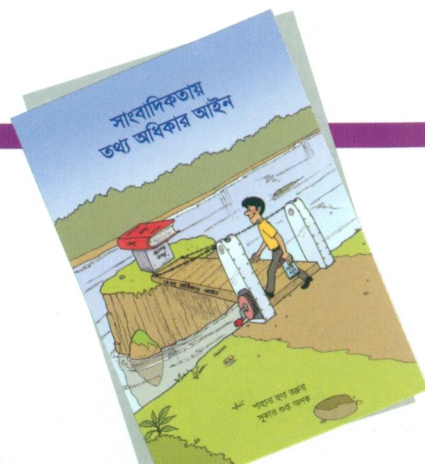
Another component of the initiative was training for government officials. MRDI believes it is very important to train the government officers since traditionally they have a bureaucratic mindset and they practice a culture of secrecy. They do not want to provide any information to the public. This has been one of the challenges in implementation of the RTI Act. So it is important to train all the officials concerned of a government institution to ensure free flow of information.

MRDI so far trained 100 Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) officers in five batches all over the country. It helped the ACC officers in playing their due role in the implementation of the RTI Act and serving the people with required information. The ACC officials during the training sessions said there should be a clear disclosure policy for them so that they can decide on which information should be disclosed to the public.

A policy on disclosure of public information regarding corruption charges and investigation is vital for the ACC. As requested by the ACC Chairman, MRDI during the training collected the 100 ACC officials' views on which points should be disclosed and which points should not be. Thus MRDI is assisting the ACC to prepare a policy on disclosure through this training.

## Handbook for Journalists on RTI

Under the same programme, MRDI published a handbook for journalists on the RTI Act that presents the basics of the law, techniques of using it in investigative reporting, and the process of requesting or accessing public information. The book written by Shahana Huda Ranjana, Coordinator, Media and Communication, MJF and Sukanta Gupta Alak, Joint Editor, Desh TV.







## Advocacy for RTI

Advocacy for RTI Act is very crucial for Bangladesh to popularise it among various sections of the citizens who are potential users of the law. MRDI believes RTI Act will remain unused or ignored without an effective campaign for it. That is why MRDI organised a series of consultations at Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi and Barisal divisional headquarters. MRDI conducted a questionnaire survey among the stakeholders of Sylhet division too.

The stakeholders of the law including government officials and professionals attended the meetings and discussed what to do for effective implementation of the law. They highlighted the strengths and weaknesses, challenges and opportunities in their respective division in the implementation of the RTI Act.

Findings of the consultation meetings and the National Seminar will help the policymakers and others concerned to set strategies for implementation of the law properly.

"Government officials can provide better public services through proper use of RTI Act... It also makes the officials more accountable to the public."

*SM Arif-ur-Rahman*

Deputy  
Commissioner,  
Barisal, in the  
consultation meeting

"We need to change ourselves...People have the right to access information from the government officers and we have to serve them."

*ABM Azad*

Additional District Magistrate, Chittagong,  
in the consultation meeting



"Culture of secrecy is the biggest challenge to implementation of RTI Act. Voluntary disclosure of information is essential."

*Md. Jamsher*

*Ahmed Khandker*  
Deputy Commissioner,  
Khulna, in the  
consultation meeting

"Enactment of RTI Act is a pragmatic step taken by the government to ensure free flow of information. Still there are many misunderstandings about the Official Secrets Act among the government officers."

*Muhammad  
Delwar Bakht*

Deputy Commissioner,  
Rajshahi, in the  
consultation meeting

## Who says what

"The training is appropriate for the ACC officials and will help them play their role properly in implementation of the RTI Act and serve the people with required information."

*Muhammad Zamir*

Chief Information Commissioner

"This training opened my eyes in digging out corruption. We are now able to find the inconsistencies in the actions of the administration officials. The officials cannot now keep information secret as they did in the past."

*Mohon Akhand*

Bureau Chief, Daily Samakal, Bogra

"Everyone is now aware of the public procurement rules. The training reduced the scope of corruption by giving advertisements of tender for development work in unknown newspapers."

*Mobinul Islam Mobin*

Editor, Gramer Kagoj, Jessore

"I got the handbook on Right to Information. It's easy to read and very helpful for us to build our journalistic career."

*Md. Wali Newaz*

District Correspondent, New Age, Faridpur

"Civil society organisations must act as a bridge to elicit information, using the new law, that will serve the interests of the poor and marginalised as inequality of access to information reflects disproportion."

*Hasibur Rahman*

Executive Director, MRDI



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