

RTI E-Newsletter V1 Issue 4

T o o l s

Editorial

This is the 4th Issue of the RTI e-newsletter. We hope readers are finding it useful. We will appreciate your comments and feedback.

Like many other countries, in Bangladesh we celebrate Right to Know Day on September 28. It will be observed this year as well with the participation of members of Right to Information Forum and their networks. This celebration is of huge significance specially in drawing attention of different groups ranging from government authorities, intellectuals, media, NGOs and the general population on the spirit of Right to Information.

Since the enactment of the Act, we have been observing that gradually people, especially at grassroots level

are receiving their due services and benefits by using this Act. One reason is that organizations working for the empowerment of people are playing a significant role through their awareness and campaign initiatives on RTI issues. However, it is time to go beyond benefits and services of disadvantaged groups to address issues of national significance and those which have policy implications. The RTI Forum should take initiative and motivate their members and others to seek information that has an impact for example on the revenue budget, infrastructure projects, environment degradation etc. The use of RTI Act



and the intention of Authorities to give information on sensitive matters need to be tested. It is only then we will be able to say that the RTI Act is working in Bangladesh.

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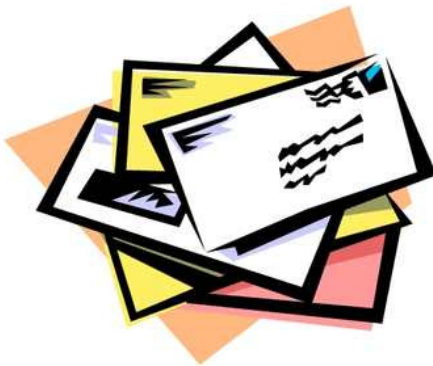
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Right to Information Forum

Right to Information Forum is a network which acts as a watchdog on implementation of RTI Act and to popularize the RTI Act among citizen of the country. It was formed prior to the enactment of the Act with demand for a most useful Act having strong and independent oversight body and later to monitor its implementation. Its membership is open for individuals and organizations having interest to promote RTI. Till date the number of forum members is 56 which include civil society organizations as well as individual person. Detail of forum and its activities will be reached through its own website which is www.rtiforum.org.bd.

Manusher Jonno Foundation is acting as the secretariat of RTI Forum. This forum is acting as a platform so that organizations and individuals can work collectively not only to



observe the implementation status of the RTI Act, also to make the Act more useful and meaningful to people and thus make changes in their everyday life. Forum's role in popularizing RTI is of huge importance in this regard.

Forum has been observing Right to Know Day since 2008. An International Conference on RTI was arranged in May 2009. An independent report on RTI will be published by the forum within shortly.

Authorities under RTI Act

- Any organization/institution constituted in accordance with the Constitution of People's Republic of Bangladesh; (Public Service Commission, Election Commission,)
- Any ministry, division or office constituted under the Rules of Business as given in Article 55(6) of the Constitution; (Ministries of the Government)
- Any statutory body or institution established by or under any Act; (Grameen Bank)
- Any private organization or institution runs on government funding or with help from the government exchequer; (Bangladesh Protibondhi Foundation)
- Any private organization or institution runs on foreign funding; (BRAC, Manusher Jonno Foundation)
- Any organization or institution that undertakes public functions in accordance with any contract made on behalf of the Government or made with any public organization or institution; (Organizations involved in toll collection from different bridges, Construction Farms which Implements Govt. Projects)
- Any other organization or institution as may be notified by the Government in the official gazette from time to time;
- Union Parishad is also an Authority and Information Providing Unit.

(Source: RTI Handbook, Published by Manusher Jonno Foundation)



‘When seeking information becomes a matter of pain....

We had arranged a dialogue with the landless people in Union Council Office for which I needed the list of *khas* land beneficiaries. I decided to make an application under the RTI Act to receive this information. I went to Kanaipur Union Land Office, Faridpur Sadar with the information request on 16.07.2012 but was told that it is not possible for them to provide this information without the permission of A C Land Office.

The next day I communicated with the Designated Officer of AC Land Office the Designated Officer which did not receive it and wanted to know why I needed this information. When I told him the reason he again refused and asked me to talk to the Assistant Commissioner of Land. We entered his (Assistant Commissioner of Land) room and submitted the application to him. He said, ‘Who are you? You cannot ask this information from me. You go and ask this information from the



District Commissioner’.

I went to District Commissioner Office on 22.07.2012. I submitted the information request to the reception of DC Office. They returned the information request and told me to contact the e-department. I went to e-department

accordingly. E-department refused to receive the application. Following their advice I went to Vested Property Department. They didn't receive as well. I was advised to contact with State Acquisition Department. By this time I didn't have any application form left. In fact I was no longer interested to try to get this information.

The same situation exists in most parts of the country. The concerned authorities are yet to know their role under this Act and thus the requesters are not getting the information which is now their right.

(Story collected from

Mr. Shahidur Rahman
Village: Basunarosinhadia
UP: Kanaipur; Upazila Faridpur Sadar)

Peer's View : Taboo issues of right to information

Legal obligation is not sufficient for ensuring people's right to information, although RTI Act 2009 was one essential step forward.. While rigorous campaigns and programmes by the government and non-government entities have paved the way for establishing an informed society, a number of issues are undermining the potential of such campaigns in achieving this goal.

A post-RTIA survey of citizens by the RTI Forum revealed that only 4 percent applicants used RTIA prescribed form for obtaining information, while 29 percent used conventional letter of application. When a normal application gets denied, many applicants – including some well-known research Institutions, tend to avoid using the RTIA prescribed form for the fear of retaliation. Individuals and institutions prefer not to harm 'good relation' with the government offices

by forcing them to provide information under RTIA, which the government offices would deny otherwise. To address this issue, RTI Commission or independent bodies can be enabled and encouraged to lodge RTIA prescribed application on behalf of third party (anonymous) applicants.

Every now and then we receive a SMS on our mobile that encourages us to use RTIA2009 to get information from government and non-government entities. However, people who are busy struggling for their everyday needs fail to understand the necessity of applying for such information. There seems to have a lack of genuine demand for information, and legal process alone cannot change that. To create demand for information, we need to focus on correlating information to people's everyday life.

Non-government institutions can play a key role in demonstrating how specific piece of information can be used for the betterment of someone's everyday life. Dissemination of information in an absorbable way through data visualisation can be one effective tool in this regard.

Also, the provision of proactive disclosure should be given more emphasis. At this point, institutions take credit for receiving and responding to more RTIA prescribed application. However, we want to get to a point where institutions will be credited not for receiving hundreds of applications, but for their efforts in proactive disclosure.

Syed Ahmed
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