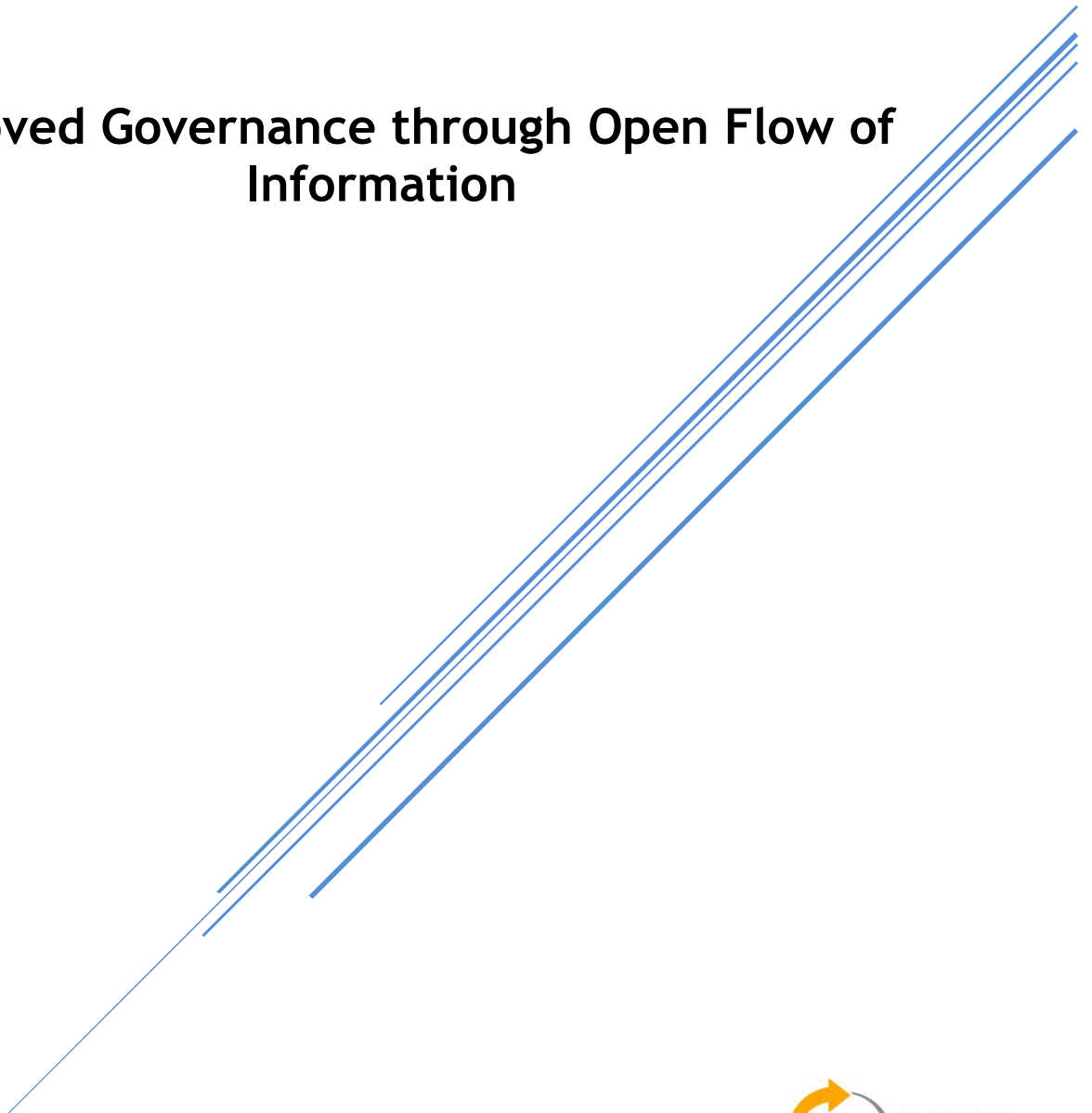


Project Annual Report

Year-1

(January 2020- December 2020)

**Improved Governance through Open Flow of
Information**



Context

The project “Improved Governance Through Open Flow of Information” began with the aim of enhancing the capacity of media and skills of journalists on producing objective and authentic in-depth stories on issues of public interest using RTI as a tool. It also aimed at developing a group of young women as RTI advocates who will promote and support women’s right of access to information and aware their peers, family members and others.

The rationale behind the initiative was, the media, as part of the civil society and as an independent entity has an important stake in the right of access to information in order to produce in-depth objective stories that will bring the necessary information into the light and unveil corruption and irregularities. Media can use the opportunity of the present government's commitment to facilitate citizens and journalists make best use of the RTI Act in promoting transparency and accountability at all levels. It will help raise the level of public demand for information and services which will ultimately contribute to attainment of SDG 16.10.2.

But, right after the Covid-19 Pandemic hit, MRDI was concerned about the huge challenges for the local journalists working all over the country. As an organization which works to develop capacity of the media and journalist, MRDI with the support of The Asia Foundation revised the ongoing project according to demand of the crisis. The project supported the district level journalists who were working as front-liners, risking their lives to gather information during the pandemics. To engage newsroom managers and reporters in keeping safe while gathering news is another objective of this project. The project also tried to enhance capacity of youth on fact checking to fight disinformation during Covid-19 and how they would make authorities accountable using RTI during and post Corona situation.

Online sessions have been also organized on Covid-19 safety and RTI for youth groups of seven districts. Seven distance learning session through webinar were organized for them on authentic and specific message on Covid-19 and how to access information using Right to Information (RTI) Act. Experts on Covid-19 conducted the safety sessions. The RTI sessions facilitated the youth on how they can access information related to their life and livelihood during and after the pandemic. Side by side, an online fact checking course has been being developed targeting the youth.

To aware the local journalists on how to keep safe while gathering news during the pandemic and to provide them with a platform where they can share their experience and voice their concern about the pandemic, MRDI organized seven online training and participatory workshop for the journalists from eight divisions. To assess the impact of this pandemic on the journalists, MRDI also conducted a brief survey among the participants from 20 media houses in eight divisions.

Findings from these events revealed that the need for building the capacity of the media and journalists is even greater, as limited media capacity due to media experts’ shortage and media dependence on corporate funding and advertisement has become a driving media capture in Bangladesh. Whereas people need trusted news and information to keep safe from harmful

practices particularly at the time of global outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic, trust in the media institutions in Bangladesh has fallen to troubling lows amid a rapidly changing information ecosystem, state-controlled ownership, and a journalist community divided on political lines.

Therefore, MRDI consulting with The Asia Foundation once again revised the project to accommodate the needs of changing media scenario. The objectives and activities are also revised accordingly.

Objectives

1. Enhance capacity of youth on fact checking to fight disinformation during Covid 19 and how they can keep safe and get authentic information during and post Corona situation.
2. Engage newsroom managers and reporters in keeping safe while gathering news.
3. Enhance the level of people's trust in media and assess level of external stakeholders' engagement to strengthen democracy and political participation with an additional focus on the pandemic period through conducting a survey.
4. Facilitate media houses develop their audience engagement plan.
5. Enhance capacity of media and skills of journalists on producing objective and authentic in-depth stories on issues of public interest.

Reporting period

January 2020- December 2020

Activity Update

1. **Approval from NGOAB:** As per government rule, the project was submitted to NGO Affairs Bureau based on their prescribed format and got approval of implementation. The first revised budget was submitted to NGO Affairs Bureau based on their prescribed format and got approval on 31st May 2020, the second one was approved on 6 October 2020.
2. **Project Informed Information Commission & Cabinet Division:** MRDI shared objectives and activities of the project with Information Commission and The Cabinet Division. Information Commission has given a consent letter to extend their cooperation in project implementation. The Coordination & Reform Unit of the Cabinet Division has also been informed about the project.
3. **Base set-up and Inception Meeting:** At the very beginning, MRDI deputed its officials to the project. Then the project team sat with the officials of The Asia Foundation to discuss the project implementation strategy and plan. After every revisions of the project, MRDI conducted these inception meeting to review the new activities and plan for implementation.

4. **Content Development meeting:** A meeting on developing the content for the Journalists Training has been organized. 5 Media experts along with the lead expert assigned to develop the training content took part in the meeting. As per the recommendation and discussion of that meeting, a training content was finalized. However, because of the Covid-19 Pandemic, the planned journalist training was never organized. But the training content will be used in the two-day journalist training, as a part of the mentorship programme under the project.

5. **Online Training on safety and participatory workshop for Journalists:** A total of seven



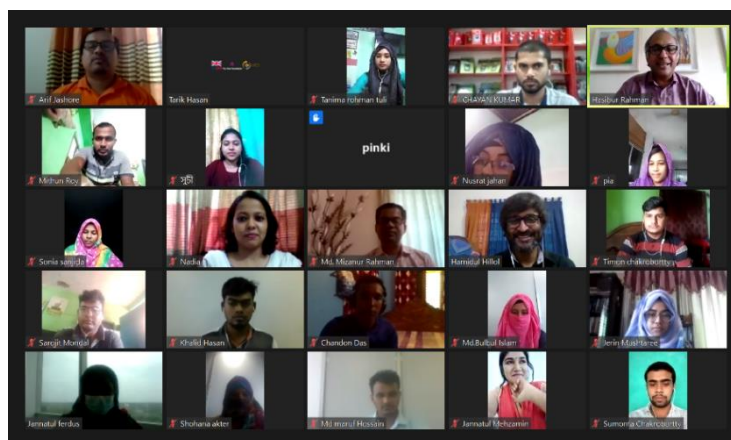
Online sessions, including a safety training and a participatory workshop were organized between the month of July and August. 20 national media houses including print, TV and online were selected and a letter requesting nomination of 7 journalists from each house, from 7 divisions was sent. Through this process, a total of 142 journalists

were selected for the online course on safety and security for journalists and a participatory workshop on Covid-19. Before the programme, the participants took part in a short survey on how they are coping with the pandemic. Findings of the survey brought up talking points for the participatory workshop.

6. **Online Survey:** The participants of the online training for journalist also took part in a short survey on how they are coping with the pandemic. Findings of the survey brought up talking points for the participatory workshop. The survey report was also discussed in the gatekeeper engagement meeting later, which had quite an impact on the decision-making level.

7. **Youth Engagement Programme on Covid-19 Safety and RTI:** MRDI partnered seven NGOs

in seven districts having youth programme and interest in making RTI as a cross component of their programme. A total of 205 young people (around 30 from each of seven selected districts) having technological knowledge and digital device for participating in the programme. Seven distance learning sessions through Zoom network were organized for them on how to



keep safe during Covid- 19 pandemic and how to access information using Right to Information (RTI) Act. Experts from MRDI and BRAC facilitated the sessions.

8. **Gatekeeper Engagement Meeting (Web Discussion):** To present the summary of the participatory workshops involving the local journalists before the media gatekeepers, a two-hour web discussion was held on 12 September through Zoom network. The objective of the



discussion was to draw attention of the policy makers and top management of media houses on how the local journalists are coping with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, challenges they face and how to address those. Media managers from 11 national television,

newspaper and online participated in the discussions moderated by Rejoanul Haq Raja, Head of News, Maasranga Television. Besides them, Kazi Faisal Bin Seraz, Country representative, Bangladesh, The Asia Foundation and Hasibur Rahman, ED, MRDI joined the web discussion. Furthermore, a total of 71 people registered most of whom are local correspondents who took part in the participatory workshop along with some newsroom managers.

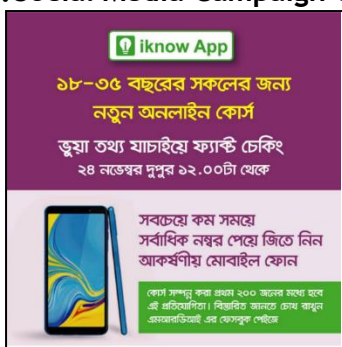
9. **Online Course on fact Checking:** MRDI developed an online course on fact checking targeting the youth. The objective of the course was to enhance capacity of youth on fact checking to fight disinformation during Covid 19 and how they would make authorities accountable using RTI during and post Corona situation. The course offers lessons on what is fact checking and why we need it; terminologies of fact checking; which news to check; how to verify news online; how to verify photos and videos; differences between traditional and new media; what is trustworthy news media and how to recognize trolls. MRDI signed MoU with 10MS and involved Fact-checking Specialist Qadruddin Shishir to develop the content of the course. The course was placed in MRDI’s existing mobile app, iKnow.

10. **Launching of Online Course for fact-checking:** The course was formally launched through

an online event. Hasibur Rahman, Executive Director of MRDI introduced the course with a brief presentation at the launching event. Syed Ishtiaque Reza, Chief Editor of Gazi TV discussed the scope and importance of the course for the youth, and aspiring journalists. Kazi Faisal Bin Seraz, Country Representative of The Asia Foundation was also present at the event as Special Guest.



11. Social Media Campaign on the online course for fact checking: A social media campaign



was also launched to promote and popularize the online course to the youth. Five short promotional videos were made and both MRDI and 10 MS posted the videos on their facebook page. A competition was declared among the first 200 course participants. A Mobile phone set will be given as a prize for the participant who will successfully complete the course in fastest time. This focused social media campaign run along with online media advertisement to popularize the course, particularly among young people for three months.

12. Gatekeeper Engagement Meeting: To build capacity of media and the reporters on producing in-depth stories on public interest issues, a dialogue with media gatekeepers/newsroom managers was organized. The gatekeeper engagement meeting aimed at convincing them how as part of the civil society and also as an independent entity media can play its role in raising the issues of public interest and contribute to creating political and civic space for a just society.

This meeting falls into the category of closed-door events that highlight issues on human rights and democratic space in Bangladesh, referred in the



logical framework provided by The Asia Foundation as output indicator 5.2. It paves the way to address grievance redress system, as journalists can bring forward peoples sufferings and demands through public interest reporting and in a way hold the authority accountable to address the issue.

The dialogue also brought the issue of capacity requirement of their correspondents in producing in-depth objective stories on public interest with authenticity. 10 newsroom managers of TV, online and print media were present at the event and discussed on the issue of capacity requirement of their correspondents in producing in-depth objective stories on public interest issues using RTI Act as a tool of investigation.

The discussion began with a brief introductory speech by Hasibur Rahman, Executive Director of MRDI. He initiated the long-standing debate over the definition of Public Interest Journalism and its scope to empower the people by amplifying their voice.

The major recommendations from the meeting are:

- Media houses should focus more on public interest reporting rather than trying to gain popularity.

- Editorial guidelines should create space to accommodate more public interest reports.
- Collective effort is needed from the media houses.
- Reporters should learn to get out from the set concept of public interest report and using cliché.
- The gap between the media and audience should be analyzed.
- District Level journalists should be given more space and opportunity.
- Self-censorship should be avoided.
- Media should invest more on investigation.
- Media should promote RTI as a tool of investigation.

Activity 4: Announcement of mentorship programme for the district correspondents: Mentorship on public interest reporting was announced through an open call over media. This is a three-month Mentorship Programme for District Correspondent. Objective of this programme is to develop the capacity of local journalists in Public Interest Reporting.

Interested journalists can apply online with approval from the respective Newsroom Chief. The call is open for all local Journalist working for national level media houses with at least 7 years' experience. Successful applicants will participate in an online training on Public Interest Reporting and plan their stories under the supervision of experts and mentors. Intending district correspondents of national media were asked to submit a story idea on public interest issue duly endorsed by the news manager with the application in a prescribed format. The end date was 31 December and a total of 29 Application were received by that time.