

Public Information

Public information is a key element of participatory governance since citizen/civil society participation, transparency and accountability in politics and government is simply inconceivable without information. Inadequate public access to information paves the way for corrupt practices and backroom deals. Freedom of information is recognized as a fundamental human right and citizens' access to information is hailed as a cornerstone of democracy across the globe. Freedom of information is also considered as crucial in securing and protecting other cultural, social, economic and political rights and in promoting equitable and humane development. While almost seventy countries have now enacted right to information legislation, in practice, citizen access to information remains limited in many parts of the world. Enhancing citizen access to and demand for public information is a first important step towards empowering citizens to participate effectively in governance processes.

Tools in the Public Information category

The Public Information category includes four tools

- **Advocating for Access to Information** – This is a set of advocacy strategies and methodologies aimed at mobilizing policy makers, legislators and communities towards enhanced public access to information, including lobbying for the adoption and effective implementation of Freedom of Information legislation, informing citizens of their information rights and promoting proactive demand for information.
- **Monitoring Access to Information** - The Access to Information Monitoring (AIM) tool developed by the Open Society Justice Initiative is a set of three instruments designed to capture information about a country's laws and practices regarding freedom of information. First, a legal template that provides a basis for assessing a country's laws and practices against established international standards. Second, a monitoring methodology that facilitates standardization in the submission of requests for information and the types of information requested. Third, a specially designed software that allows multiple partners in a range of countries to input monitoring data in a common format thus enabling comparative analysis of the results
- **Tools to Support Transparency** - This set of tools focuses on fostering transparency and access to public information with an emphasis on local governance while strengthening the capacity of both the CSOs and local government agencies.
- **Facilitating the Dissemination of Public Information** - This set of tools provides guidance on how to ensure the implementation of freedom of

information legislation. It provides advice both for public authorities (at national, regional and local level) and CSOs about putting in place appropriate institutional arrangements for disseminating relevant public information and establishing citizen-friendly mechanisms and procedures for accessing information.

Benefits

Key benefits of public information tools are:

- Securing, protecting and ensuring citizens' rights to information.
- Reducing corruption, through enhanced transparency and accountability.
- Contributing to the protection of human rights and social justice.
- Fostering an informed citizenry, thus facilitating effective citizen participation in processes of public planning and decision making.

Challenges and lessons

- Freedom of information legislation is necessary but not sufficient to achieve access to information.
- Political will is crucial to make Freedom of Information legislation effective.
- Given the frequent reluctance of public authorities to share information and the prevailing culture of official secrecy in many countries, proactive demand by citizens is crucial for achieving enhanced access to information.
- Access to information has to be balanced with the need to safeguard individual privacy and liberty.
- Public information dissemination has an important spill-over effect on other transparency and participatory governance efforts.

Key resources and organizations

Article 19

www.article19.org

- ☞ Article 19 is an organization that deals with and promotes a global campaign for free expression focusing on the Right to access information and combating censorship. Recent work by the organization focuses on getting the legal environment right to citizen's free access to information

Carter Center, USA

<http://www.cartercenter.org/peace/americas/information.html>

- ☞ Throughout the world, the Carter Center has been instrumental in providing technical assistance to legislators and civil society advocates in the drafting and passage of access to information laws. The Center has facilitated training and expert consultation to public servants with regard to archiving, document retrieval, and information request processing.

Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI)

http://www.humanrightsinitiative.org/programs/ai/rti/articles/intl_articles.htm

- ☞ CHRI is an international, non-governmental and non-partisan organization mandated to ensure practical realization of human rights in the countries of the Commonwealth. CHRI's Right to Information website is designed to provide legislators, advocates and the public with resources on international and Commonwealth principles and standards on the right to information. The site also provides a unique and comprehensive collection of national right to information resources for all 53 countries of the Commonwealth, including legislation, papers and links to other useful websites.

Freedom of Information Advocates Network (FOIANet)

<http://www.foiadvocates.net/>

- ☞ The Freedom of Information Advocates Network (FOIANet) is an international information-sharing network of organizations and individuals working to promote the right of access to information. Members of FOIANet are civil society organizations with active programmes to promote the right to know. FOIANet also runs a discussion list for news and debate on the right of access to information; there are currently over 400 people on this list, including CSO representatives and lawyers, academics, information commissioners and others with a specialized interest in the right to information. The network launched and promotes International Right to Know Day which takes place on 28th September of every year.

Freedominfo.Org

<http://www.freedominfo.org/>

- ☞ This site is one of the largest one-stop portal that describes best practices, consolidates lessons learned, explains campaign strategies and tactics, and links the efforts of freedom of information advocates around the world.

Institute of Press and Society, Peru
<http://www.ipys.org/ac-monitoreo.shtml>

- ☞ This site in Spanish provides useful links to other organizations and monitoring projects that have used the Access to Information Monitoring Tool in the Latin American context

Justice Initiative, Open Society Institute
www.justiceinitiative.org/activities/foifoe/foi

- ☞ The link provides information on Freedom of Information Laws in various countries.

Justice Initiative, Open Society Institute: *The Ten Principles on the Right to Know*

<http://right2info.org/resources/publications/JI%2010%20Principles%20R2K-Country%20list%202009.doc>

- ☞ The aim of Justice Initiative Freedom of Information Program is to promote the adoption and implementation of laws to enable exercise of the right to government-held information, as well as to information of public interest held by private bodies.

Media Councils in African countries
www.mct.or.tz

- ☞ Most media councils, especially in sub-Saharan Africa are currently engaged with supporting the enactment of media laws that enhance evidence based and investigative journalism. In the case of Media councils in Southern Africa, it has become common practice for the FOI legislation processes to be coordinated by the Media Councils which is also the case in Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Zambia etc.

Transparency International & UNHABITAT: *Tools to Support Transparency in Local Urban Governance Toolkit Series (2004)*

www.unhabitat.org/governance/activities_7

www.decentralisation.gov.na/.../urban_governance_toolkit.html

- ☞ The tool kit is a comprehensive collection of tools and methods to foster transparency in urban local government authorities

Transparency International (TI)
www.transparency.org

- ☞ TI deals with promoting openness and transparency in the running of public offices across the globe and their website is a treasure house of resources on public information.