

HELP US TO HELP YOU

The need to empower us all through the right to information

By Alison Ryan and Cecelia Burgman

All around the world there is talk about the people's right to information, freedom of information and the people's right to know and the voices are getting louder. All of these voices refer to the same life-changing and empowering concept – that everyone has a fundamental right to access information held by their government.

Each and every person has a right to seek and receive information from the government and other public bodies about their activities and the money they are spending: from the status of a licence application to the amount being spent on malaria prevention. The government is actually under a duty to provide people with that information unless doing so would cause serious harm to the public.

However, despite the fact that most governments around the world have committed to giving people access to information, the reality is in fact quite different. Respect for people's fundamental right to information is often overlooked in practice or treated as a very low priority, especially in developing nations. Unfortunately today, the Pacific Island nations fall squarely within this category, with no Island nation having a law that provides a specific and legally enforceable right to the people to access information.

Yet information is power. If people in the Pacific could practice their right to information they would be empowered to know about what the government is really doing and play a greater role in shaping their society, economy and politics. For example, accurate information helps people at election time in deciding which candidate is the best to represent them. When information is not available there is a danger that people will rely upon perceived affiliations which may or may not be grounded in fact, and may or may not determine the actions or the policies candidates will pursue.

Around the world the benefits of having the right to information have been seen to have many tangible outcomes. In India, the right to information was used by poor people to find out about their food entitlements and get the subsidised grains they were entitled to. In Mexico, it was used to find out about the then President's involvement in the murder of students and pursue justice through the courts. In the USA, it was used to find out about unsafe levels of lead in school children's lunchboxes. In Uganda, it was used to find out about the misappropriation of funds meant for children's schooling; this information enabled the children's parents to demand the money was spent correctly. As a result school enrolments increased significantly. In Laos, the right to information was used to stop the building of a dam that would displace many families.

In 2006, five countries in the Pacific – Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu – were named in the UN's list of the world's 'Least Developed Countries'. Economic and social development in these countries has been impeded by a lack of access to information about governmental policies, programs and the allocation of resources. In these countries closed governments have prevented communities from engaging in the development of policies that fundamentally affect their lives.

The right to information not only benefits individuals by empowering them to gain information from the government directly, but it can also change lives through improving the quality of the media's work. With a right to information, the media can be truly free, as it enables us to

access information which will keep the public better informed about the government's actions and allowing you to hold the government account for its unfulfilled promises and lack of action in the areas that you want.

We, the media, are in quite a unique position to influence society – we have the power to close the communication gap between the government and its people and to establish a more open government. Yet, without information, we are at times forced to rely on hearsay, half-truths or unsubstantiated information provided by a closed government. Even when information is available to us, we may be hesitant to publicise it due to concerns of governmental retaliation. Access to accurate information would ensure the quality of investigative journalism necessary to provide numerous benefits for development and democracy in the Pacific.

It is essential that we – the media – and you – the community – are both empowered with a legally enforceable right to access information. Although many Pacific Island nations have taken small steps towards promoting and enabling access to information, none have actually adopted a formal right to information law or policy. Such a law would provide the mechanisms for people to access information and should also provide for the protection of 'whistleblowers' - those who disseminate accurate information even if it portrays the government unfavourably.

The media in the Pacific region is a strong supporter of the right to information. One of the three objectives of the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) Constitution is to promote and defend freedom of expression and information. Various national media groups have also been active in promoting the right to information, working with civil society organisations and engaging governments on the issue. However, although the media has some persuasive power with the government, it is not enough. You the people have a vested interest in advocating for the legal entrenchment of the right to information and you can exert great influence in beginning the movement towards enacting a right to information law.

Therefore we are asking that you also get involved in telling your Government to recognise your right to information. You can speak to them directly –asking your MP for a law that makes sure government gives you information. You can bring the issue up before elections, telling candidates how important the issue is to you. You can also get involved with community groups who are working on the issue.

In any case, the most important thing is that you, and those around you, know that you have a right to information; that this right is powerful and can help you shape the world around you; and that you deserve to have your right to information recognised.