

**Meeting of Heads of Organizations of Sundergarh district, Orissa on
Right to Information
Sundergarh
30th July 2005**

Introduction

A meeting on Right to Information and the role of NGOs was held with 14 heads of organizations at Sundergarh on 30th July (for details see participants list). These organizations together with 13 other like-minded NGOs have formed a network called Confederation of Voluntary Organizations (CVO) in Sundergarh district. All these organizations are working on the issue of strengthening institutions of local-self governance i.e. they are primarily focusing on Panchayati Raj Institutions. Within this their main work is on activating Gram Sabhas and Palli Sabhas as well as imparting training to Sarpanchs and panchayat members. Besides this many of the organizations are working on women's empowerment, food security, gender issues, education, health and micro-credit. CHRI was invited by Suchit Ranjan Singh of REALS, Bhubaneswar to provide inputs on Right to Information and the recently enacted Right to Information Act 2005.

The purpose of this meeting was to:

- Provide an overview of the Right to Information Act 2005
- Discuss how the NGOs working in this district can incorporate this right to access government held information in their on-going work
- Discuss the role of NGOs in spreading awareness amongst the people about RTI act and to chalk out a strategy in this regard for the coming months

About the District

Sundergarh district is one of the larger districts of the state. It is divided into 17 blocks and has approximately 1700 villages. Tribal areas cover more than 51% of the district. The Provisions of Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) is applicable to this district. A large part of the district is covered with mining areas. Some of the major issues of concern in this district include:

- Food insecurity
- Insensitive local government and bureaucracy
- Lack of proper employment opportunities, wherein nearly 61% of the population are daily wage earners
- Women's issues including trafficking of women and girl child
- Mining and related environmental problems

Meeting Proceedings

The meeting began with a general introduction of the background and purpose of the meet. This was followed by an introductory session wherein all the participants introduced themselves and the work that their organizations are focusing on. After this Mr. Azad of DISHA gave a brief description of Sundergarh district and the key problem areas that has been mentioned in the previous paragraph. Mr. Suchit Ranjan Singh of REALS, Bhubaneswar summarized the discussions and pointed out the problems being

faced by the people and how Right to Information could be used as a powerful tool by the common masses to bring about a change in government functioning and thereby leading to an overall betterment of systems and empowerment of people.

After the introductory session Sohini Paul briefly spoke about her organization Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) and its work on Access to Information in India and the commonwealth. She particularly stressed on the work that CHRI is doing in India after the enactment of the Right to Information Act 2005.

Overview of RTI Act 2005

Subsequently, Sohini gave an overview of the main provisions of the national RTI Act 2005. She highlighted the fact that this Act covers all government departments and agencies at the center, state and local levels. It also covers NGOs, which are substantially financed by government. She further discussed about proactive disclosure of information as given in section 4 of the Act followed by the application for information procedure. For this purpose she said that all public authorities would have to designate Public Information Officers (PIOs) in each administrative unit to process applications and provide information within the given time limit of 30 days. There will also be Assistant PIOs at the sub-district level whose role will be to accept applications for request as well as appeals. She next spoke about the fees, which have to accompany the application as well as the fees in case certified copies of documents are needed. She said that BPL families do not have to pay fees at all. Next, she highlighted certain problems that could take place in relation to people not getting the requisite information. For example, an applicant might not get any reply within the stipulated time period, or the PIO knowingly might give misleading or wrong information, or the PIO rejects the information request. In such cases, the participants were informed that the RTI Act provides for an appeals mechanism, wherein the aggrieved person can appeal to the person senior in rank to the PIO as the first appellate authority. In case no PIO has been appointed in a particular government office, a complaint can be made to the State Information Commission, which is also the second appellate authority and has all the powers of a civil court. Sohini then briefly told the participants about the setting up of a State Information Commission in Orissa, and its main duties and functions. They were also informed that the committee for selection of Chief Information Commissioner has been formed under the Chairmanship of the Chief Minister Mr. Naveen Patnaik, the other members being Janki Patnaik (Leader of the opposition) and Dr. D. Raut, Minister for Panchayati Raj. Next, she told the participants about the penalty provision in the Act which the State Information Commission as per the Act could impose on an erring PIO. Finally s.8 re the exemptions in the RTI Act and the Schedule 2 were explained to the participants.

Discussion

The participants agreed that this revolutionary Act would be especially useful in a state like Orissa in order to change the apathetic and insensitive attitude of the bureaucracy. It would be a powerful tool in the hands of the people not only to hold the government machinery accountable but also to empower themselves.

Discussions took place on the fee structure. It was clarified that the fees will be specified in the rules, which are presently being framed by the Orissa government. They said that

presently they have to pay about Rs. 2/-per page for certified copies of documents from the panchayat.

Discussions also took place on documentary evidence that is needed to prove that information requested for has not been received within the given time period in order to appeal to the first appellate authority. In response to this it was mentioned that the photocopy of the application as well the receipt received from the PIO for the application fee paid could be used as documentary evidence in this case.

Linking RTI with their work on strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions, it was suggested that use of RTI law would provide the much-needed information for villagers to know about what their elected representatives are doing and the details of schemes, which are being implemented in their panchayat. Armed with this information the villagers can call for meetings of Gram Sabha and Palli Sabha in order to clarify doubts and bring about a certain measure of accountability and transparency in panchayat functioning. This in turn will help in overall strengthening of panchayats, an issue on which all the organizations are working.

Ways Forward

Acknowledging the fact that NGOs have an important role to play in seeing to the proper implementation of the Act, certain steps were discussed which the CVO could implement in the coming months.

Capacity Building Workshop on RTI for staff of NGOs: All the heads of organizations present in the meeting felt that one of the important roles of the NGOs would be to spread awareness about this Act amongst the people so that they actually exercise their right to access information from various government offices. In order to do this they felt that first the staff of all 27 organizations needs to be educated about the RTI law and its important provisions. In order to do this they proposed that a two-day district level capacity building workshop on RTI be organized in late August or early September. The resource persons should be from CHRI as well as Mr. Chitta Behera, RTI activist from Cuttack and Mr. Suchit Ranjan Singh.

Preparation of learning and educational materials on RTI: The group discussed that certain materials need to be prepared to spread awareness about the provisions of the Act. These include posters, handbills, and simplified versions of the RTI Act etc. Mr. Suchit Ranjan Singh shared simplified notes in Oriya on five aspects of the Act prepared by Mr. Chitta Behera. Photocopies of these notes were distributed to all present. These include:

- Obligations of public authorities for suo moto publications
- Procedure for citizens to access information from the government bodies
- Appeals and Complaints procedures
- Existing legal hurdles to implementation of RTI Act
- Framing of Rules

Mr. Singh also informed the participants that the Deogarh Pressure Group has printed copies of the RTI Act 2005 in English. This is being translated into Oriya and will soon

be available for dissemination. However, he also stressed the need to have a simplified version of the Act to be prepared which can be easily understood by all.

Participants List

	Name and Organization	Areas of intervention
1.	Janmejoy Patel, President Sundargarh Education Society	Education Governance
2.	Ajay Kumar Mohanto YAVARD	Livelihood Self-Governance RTI
3.	Balmukand Shukla VISSTAR	Livelihood Governance Health and Education
4.	Srikant Satpathy, Member Secretary ENVICARE	Environment Governance Child Rights Right to Information
5.	Pradeep Kumar Brahma, Secretary SEWAK	Governance Livelihood Micro Credit Low cost housing technology promotion
6.	Khirod Chandra Routra, Secretary UDYOG	Governance Right to Information Education
7.	Harihar Singh, Secretary Banaskoti Yubak Sangha	Education Micro finance Sports
8.	A.K. Azad DISHA	Food Security Local-self governance Child Rights Gender issues
9.	Narendra Bagh, Secretary Youth Organization for upliftment of tribals and harijans	Women's empowerment Governance Food security Health (HIV/malaria) Primary education
10.	Prem Shila Patel, Secretary Indira Mahila Kalyan Parishad	Women's empowerment, SHG RCH Governance
11.	Bharati Nayak LVP	Governance Health Women's empowerment Land issues
12.	Chakradhar Pruseth	Right to Information

	KBP	Health
13.	Anejlla Ekka, Secretary CAUSE	Gender Child Rights Panchayati Raj Women's empowerment
14.	Remish Ekka, Secretary Angna	Food Security Women's empowerment
15.	Somnath Naik, Secretary, SES	Education Governance