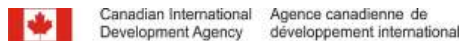


Report of  
**National Sharing Event on promoting of RTI Act in the  
context of local governance in Bangladesh**



**Venue:** Baton Rouge, Plot-15, Block-CEN, Road-103 Gulshan-2, Dhaka

June 2011, 2011



## Background

Intercooperation as part of its local governance programme (Sharique) entered into a collaboration with World Bank Institute (WBI) primarily to produce three training modules on Rights to Information (RTI) and finally help promote RTI in Bangladesh. The first phase ended in September 2010. A long and intensive consultation process culminated into publication of these modules. In August 2010, the modules were shared in a national event before the end of the first phase of the project. It is noteworthy to mention here that 33 trainers from 31 organizations were trained on the two modules.

A second phase of the project was planned and implemented for relatively shorter period (6months). The objectives of the current phase were as follows:

1. To further develop, expand and train a pool of trainers that deliver RTI trainings at the local level on the demand side to Community Based Organisations (CBO) and on the supply side to Union and Upazilla Parishads
2. To stimulate information request filings and monitor response from different agencies
3. To document the experience of module design and delivery through a cascading system of Training of Trainers – trainers to CBO
4. To foster and strengthen collaboration with the Government as well as non-government actors in RTI to

actively disseminate the training modules and findings of the project in Bangladesh by harnessing the Horizontal Learning forum to bring the RTI practices ‘most replicated’ by local governments into the curriculum of NILG, BARD and RDA.

5. To capture the lessons learned and share them with different stakeholders in order to follow up the implementation of the RTI Act, as well as to initiate dialogue for policy changes

As part of the plan, the lessons learnt were captured and a national sharing event was organized on June 21, 2011.

### Target Guests:

**Chair and moderator:** Felix Bachmann, Delegate, Intercooperation-Bangladesh

**Chief Guest:** Mr. Hedayetullah Al Mamun, Secretary, Ministry of Information, Bangladesh

### Special guest(s):

- Professor Sadeka Halim, Information Commissioner, Bangladesh.
- Mr. Tommaso Tabet, Assistant Coordinator, Local Governance, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Embassy of Switzerland.
- Mr. Marcos Mendiburu, World Bank Institute, Washington DC.

**Other Guests:** Different national and international NGOs, civil society organizations, donor agencies, activists, academics, journalists, trainers on RTI, and IC staff.

**Participants:** A total of 131 participants<sup>1</sup> attended this event.



As per the program the event started with a welcome speech by Felix Bachmann, Delegate, Intercooperation-Bangladesh.

In his speech, Felix mentioned that it was evident in IC's development programming that information is power. The component of access to information was always an integral part of Sharique itself. Now access to information has been legalized and become the Right to Information in Bangladesh.

After his remarks, a presentation by IC followed.

**Presentation:** ATM Azmul Huda, deputy delegate Intercooperation and national coordinator-Sharique made a presentation<sup>2</sup>. In his presentation he explained the background of the sharing event, the goals of phase II, process followed in phase II including development of the resource pool, baseline study,



trainings for both demand and supply side, results of RTI training, knowledge management in the project, lessons learned, recommendations and next steps. Provided the availability of fund, IC would further work for deeper understanding of how RTI is taking its roots in Bangladesh and contributing to mainstreaming of RTI in Bangladesh.

#### **Panel Discussion:**

Huda's presentation was followed by a panel discussion on three issues in particular: Awareness raising among Upazila level officials about RTI; harmonization of RTI Act provisions with other key initiative like UISC; and the protection of the RTI applicants. The panel discussion moderated by Kashem Majumder, Professor, Government and Politics, Jahangirnagar University included Soheli Ibn Ali, Senior Programme Officer-SDC, Md Masum Billah, Faculty-Jagannath University, Ms Sanjida Sobhan, Manusher Jonnyo Foundation, Md Hasibur Rahaman, MRDI and Luis F. Esquivel, WBI.

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<sup>1</sup> See annex-1

<sup>2</sup> See Annex-2



Sohel Ibne Ali pointed out the need of sensitization of Upazila level officials of both government and non-government officials to promote RTI at local level. He also emphasized the importance of both bottom-up and top-down approach to be followed in mainstreaming RTI. Mr Billah asked to take RTI not only as a Right, but also as a tool of empowerment of the citizens. He also asked to use section 3 of the Act as much as possible to find better legal coverage to make RTI happened, especially at local level.



Ms Sobhan emphasized to connect the use of RTI with the livelihood improvement issue. She particularly pointed out the greater need of information by poor citizens that are related to the government safety net schemes. Mr. Hasibur considered capacity building and awareness raising of local journalists as a

potential ingredient for promoting RTI at local level.



Mr. Luis stressed the fact that all countries implementing RTI legislation face similar challenges including lack of awareness and use of the RTI Act by citizens, bureaucratic resistance from government officials to implement such legislation etc. He then put emphasis on proactive disclosure which potentially contributes to lesser submission of RTI applications and thus decreases the probability of conflict or harassment of requesters. Additionally, he mentioned that while it might not be clear whether UPs are covered under the RTI Act, it is important to recognize that UPs keep information that is more relevant for citizens, hence the importance of its disclosure. Mr. Luis mentioned that social intermediaries are important as they contribute to build the capacity of citizens to request information and guide them on the use of such information. He concluded by saying that although Bangladesh faces challenges regarding RTI implementation, significant progress has been made.



The moderator finally summed up the discussion by saying that “proactive disclosure has the potential to address many problems that the country is confronting with regard to RTI. Apart from the Government, NGOs and local media have a big role in promoting RTI at local level”.

**Reactions of the participants:**



Taleya Rahaman, chief of Democracy Watch commented on the role of community mobilization, especially youth groups in supporting RTI applicants. She also emphasized the importance of mainstreaming of RTI especially by means of integrating RTI into school curriculum.



Tirza Theunissen, Advisor-policy (governance and gender), Embassy of the kingdom of Netherlands commented that the experience of IC proved the uniqueness of utilizing RTI at local level. Thus any other actors including development partners may make best use of the experiences as well as the tested modules, materials that are being used by IC. In addition, RTI should be integrated as a transversal theme in any sectoral program (e.g. water and sanitation.).

**Speech of the Special Guests:**

Mr Tommaso Tabet recognized the IC-WBI initiative as a great start in the process of building a stronger RTI movement at local level in collaboration with the community and NGOs.



Mr Marcos Mendiburu, World Bank Institute, commented on various issues.

On the extent to which UP were mandated by the RTI Act in Bangladesh, he acknowledged that while legal interpretation could require time, he encouraged the audience to be creative. In this regard, he suggested that development partners -including the international cooperation- could encourage the government to support "pro-active transparency" and ATI provisions in its programs.

On protection of RTI requesters, he agreed with Hasibur Rhaman from MRDI about the importance that the media report cases of harassment to requesters. In addition, social intermediaries -either trusted NGOs, community based organizations or others- could help submit the request on behalf of individuals.

He continued highlighting that media should not only use RTI for investigative reporting but also covering how other stakeholders could make use of the Act for their daily issues. The latter, in turn, could help increase people's trust in public institutions and service delivery if access to and better quality are enhanced. In addition, he mentioned the need for civil society organizations to document how RTI works for everyday citizens.

Finally, he mentioned that capacity building is a long process and that is not only about workshops or training. While undertaking capacity building efforts, expectations of the mobilized community members around the use of RTI need to be managed

accordingly: 1) having access to information may not necessarily translate automatically into access to services- for instance, water-; 2) the Act establishes a specific timeline and process to be followed for submission of requests and appeals; 3) access to documents differs from access to information; 4) quality of information disclosed may n be poor; 5) the need to understand and interpret the information obtained in order to act upon. So patience is needed in order to build local capacity.



Professor Sadeka Halim came up with the opinion that RTI compliance of both NGOs and Government agencies was the key factor to promote RTI in Bangladesh. She expressed her concerns with the performances of NGOs especially in appointing their designated officers and taking the information requests of the citizens. She also requested to RTI professionals/activist to understand the problems of the supply side while working for RTI. She especially pointed out the century old bureaucratic systems which continues to obstruct to perform a RTI officer at per. She asked it interpret Union Parishad to make RTI happened at Union Level. She also requested the media

community to play their due role in promoting RTI in Bangladesh. Ms Halim informed that unlike to other government agencies, Information Commission Bangladesh turned into a very field oriented organization which was evidenced through many visits paid by the representatives of Information Commission at district and lower levels.

**Remarks of the chief guest:**



Mr Hedayetullah Al Mamun, the honorable Information Secretary of Bangladesh opined to see RTI in light of the ' Vision 2021' of the present government' which was build upon the concept of digitalization of governance. He also thanked to the Information commission for their wonderful performance in promoting RTI in Bangladesh, especially in such a short time. He also requested to take both macro and micro view in addressing the RTI issues in Bangladesh. He finally gave his sincere thank to Intercooperation, SDC and World Bank Institute to contributing to moving RTI forward in Bangladesh.

**Conclusion:**

It came out well in the sharing event that Intercooperation offered a good

demonstration on how RTI Act worked practically at grass root level in Bangladesh in such a short time. It was proved enough by this demonstration that UP was equally obligated enough to provide information to its citizens on their demand and proactively. It was also acknowledged that capability of both demand and supply side was the key determinant of promotion of RTIs in Bangladesh. The role of media in promoting RTI remains underexplored who needs to come forward to deal with this issue soon. It was agreed in the meeting that only a functional collaboration among governments, NGOs, civil societies and media houses would be able to promote RTI in Bangladesh. The issue of the protection of RTI applicants came out quite prominently though not conceiving any clear prescription on it.

Participants also lauded this joint initiative of WBI, SDC and IC on such an important issue that the country was looking for. It was also hoped that there would be a spill-over effect of this good practice that was demonstrated by the project. The need of following up of the RTI practices in 16 districts was also realized in the event.

## Intercooperation Information Sharing Event 2011

### List of Participants

**Topic: Right to Information in the light of strengthening local governance**

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Venue: Baton Rouge Restaurant

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**Promoting Right to Information Act in the context of local governance in Bangladesh**



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**Road Map**

- Background
- Goal
- Baseline Information
- Achievements of phase-II
- Lessons Learnt
- Way Forward

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**The first Phase: Aug 2009-Sept-2010**

- Developed 3 Training modules
- ToT to 33 trainers from 31 NGOs



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Overall goal of this project is to build capacity on both the supply side and the demand side of the right to information equation at the local level and disseminate the lessons and experiences at the national level.

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**Phase-II Nov'10- June '11**

- Preparation (baseline, monitoring)
- Developed regional RTI resource pool
- Training to citizen, actors in union boundary through out IC working areas
- Document and share lessons learnt for replication & policy influence

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**Baseline about the state of RTI in project locations**

Total respondents- 1,593 (48% female)

- 25% respondents were found not familiar with selection procedures of key safety net opportunities. Only 3% perceives the safety net management is high transparent process
- 1.09% of the respondent somehow familiar with RTI act
- 0.53% were found seeking information to 9 offices of which UP constitute maximum(35%) information offices while local election office and NGOs did it minimum (2%)
- 0.71% respondents considers RTI law has clear potential to contribute to improvement of livelihoods status of rural poor.

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**Achievements:**

- Four regional resource pools developed (129 trainers)
- 132 courses conducted in 132 unions (3,059 participants)
- 25,000 citizen from 900 villages trained
- 450 application submitted to 19 offices (43.3% are women)




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**Achievements (contd..)**

- 56% of the application for the information related to safety net schemes
- Second highest information request related crops and livestock
- 62% intended information was delivered in time
- 11% information either denied or not responded




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**Lessons Learnt**

- Results is the key to the citizen rather than the process
- UP is intended citizen's centre for information
- RTI makes the UP decision more pro-poor
- RTI remove the mistrust
- Although initial hassles happens with the application but RTI happens
- Protection of the applicant is a factor of promoting RTI




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**Way Forward**

**Intercooperation:**

- Follow-up the results;
- Regional resource pools in other regions;
- Support existing resource pools to replicate.




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**General:**

**Sensibility of government officials of Upazila level:** a key factor to make citizens RTI happened

**Harmonizing the concept of Union Information Service Center (UISC) and RTI Act:** removing the cloud on for local access to information.

**Protection of the APPLICANTS:** a key requirement for promotion of RTI




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**Thank you for Passionate hearing!!!**

