

Report on Access to Information activities of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative Africa Office from January to December 2005.

Introduction

CHRI worked to expand public's knowledge of the right to information, re-activated the Right to Information Coalition and advocated for the promulgation of the Right to Information Bill.

Access to Information

Right to Information

The revitalised Coalition on the Right to Information Bill was very active throughout the year. Strategic meetings were held throughout the year with coalition members such as the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD), Centre for Environmental Law and Development (CELD), Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) and Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA). A meeting was arranged (Nov 14, 2005) with Right to Information Coalition members, and invited stakeholders to discuss various matters such as

- Coalition's goal to increase membership
- Action plan needed to increase awareness of coalition and RTI Bill

As a follow-up to the meeting, formal introductory letters of invitation were forwarded to potentially new members of the Coalition (letters were forwarded to the Executive Directors of their respective organisations). The Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), Abantu for Development and the Institute of Democratic and Economic Governance (IDEG) expressed sincere interest in becoming active members of the coalition.

In 2002, a Right to Information Bill was prepared by the Attorney General's Department. The draft bill was reviewed in 2003 and 2005 and has been re-submitted to Cabinet. The objective of the Bill is to provide a legal framework for the right of access to information held by government agencies. Right to Information is a fundamental human right guaranteed by Article 21 (1) (f) of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana.

The meetings enabled the Coalition to synthesize various critiques written from civil society actors, concerning the Right to Information Bill into one Consolidated Critique. The Coalition thus held several meetings with stakeholders to present the critique to them.

The Coalition met with the Minority Leader of Parliament on 5th December 2005 to present a copy of the critique to him. He praised the coalition for putting together the critique and suggested that the bill should be presented as private members bill so as to speed its passage in Parliament.

Meetings were also held with the Minister of Information, Mr Dan Botwe on 23rd September, 2005 and the Government's Spokesperson on Good Governance, Mr Frank Agyekum on 21st November, 2005 to present copies of the critique to them. They commended the Coalition on the work and assured them that they will examine the critique and ensure it's incorporation into the main work. They however noted that it's the willingness of the government to see to the Bill being passed and assured the Coalition of their support.

On 28th September, 2005 the Coalition marked the International Right to Know Day in Ghana by holding a press conference to present the civil society consolidated critique of the bill. Several media houses were present to cover the conference. Some of the stories which made headlines include:

- 'Right to information vital to good governance', Monday October 3rd edition of the Chronicle',
- 'Check exemptions in Freedom of Information Bill, reported in the Mirror on Saturday October 1st 2005.
- 'International Right to Know Day Marked' reported on the Ghana website (www.ghana.gov.gh) on 30th September, 2005.
- 'Info Law Can't Come this year', as captioned by the Enquirer of Monday 3rd-5th October 2005.
- The Public Agenda of Friday October 7th 2005 had its headline as, 'Freedom of Information is non-negotiable'
- 'Coalition calls for passage of Right to Information Bill' on the Ghanaweb (www.ghanaweb.com) and
- 'Right to Information, Government amazed at Attorney-General's decision', reported in the Chronicle on Thursday October 6th 2005.

The Consolidated Critique was also serialized by the Enquirer newspaper in two installments in October, 2005.

Presentations on the RTI

The Coordinator made several presentations on the RTI at different workshops and conferences throughout the year. The presentations include:

- 'Transparency and Accountability through Improved Access to Information' at a conference organized by the World Bank
- 'Assessing the development and implementation of freedom of information legislation in the Commonwealth: challenges and prospects' at the Commonwealth Law 2005 conference and
- 'The role of the media and freedom of information', at the Pan African forum on the Commonwealth Principles of Accountability and Relationships at Nairobi, Kenya.

Strategy Advocacy and Lobbying Plans for 2006

The Coalition intends to intensify its advocacy and lobbying machinery in 2006 to ensure adequate public knowledge, education and input. To this end the Coalition aimed at:

- Raising awareness and public education on the importance of the successful passage of the RTI Bill;
- Organize workshops for MPs, civil society, religious groups, political parties and cross-sections of the public;
- Write articles, distribute publications and engage in radio commentaries on radio and television;
- Meet with identifiable organisations and institutions such as TUC, GNAT, NMC, GJA, Parliament, NCCE and Traditional rulers, and
- Finally personalize the bill by categorizing it and educating specific groups who can identify with/affected by/benefit from relevant sections of the bill.