



Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative

NGO in Special consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations

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2 February 2006

Hon. Etienne Sinatambou MP
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Dear Sir,

Members
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Sanjoy Hazarika

RE: Drafting of a Freedom of Information Bill for Mauritius

I am writing from the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), an independent, non-partisan, international non-government organisation mandated to ensure the practical realisation of human rights in the lives of the people in the Commonwealth. CHRI's Right to Information programme assists Commonwealth member states to develop strong right to information (RTI) laws and to implement them effectively.

In August 2005, I wrote to Prime Minister Hon. Dr Navinchandra Ramgoolam enquiring about the status of Government efforts to draft and implement a Freedom of Information Bill. (I have enclosed a copy of that letter for your reference). CHRI has not received a response to that letter from the Office of the Prime Minister. I understand that the Ministry of Information is now drafting a Freedom of Information Bill, which is intended to be submitted for consideration at the next session of Parliament.

I wanted to take this opportunity to commend the Government for taking this step forward and to offer the support of CHRI's RTI team to your Ministry to assist with the drafting process. For example, we can assist with legislative research, can provide guidance on best practice legislative practices in this area or can review any drafts of your proposed Bill to ensure it accords with international openness standards. Notably I have attached at Annex 1 a summary of key principles which should underpin any effective right to information law for your reference. These principles are based on international and regional standards, evolving State practice, and the general principles of law recognised by the community of nations.

CHRI has considerable experience in this area. Our RTI team has reviewed a number of draft right to information bills throughout the Commonwealth, including most recently, Kenya, India, Fiji, Guyana, Cayman Islands, Malawi and Sierra Leone (please view our website at <http://www.humanrightsinitiative.org/> for more). We have working on right to information issues for almost a decade and lately have been closely involved in supporting Indian Government initiatives to implement their new right to information law.

FCRA Registration No. 231 650671; Registration No. S-24565 under Societies
Registration Act; Registration No. D.I.T. (Exemption)/94-95/C-390/94/417 U/S 80-G
Supported by: Commonwealth Journalists Association, Commonwealth Trade Union Council,
Commonwealth Lawyers Association, Commonwealth Legal Education Association,
Commonwealth Medical Association
Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Commonwealth Press Union.

At this early stage, I would like to take this opportunity to encourage the Government and your Ministry in particular to develop any Bill in a participatory manner. Experience has shown that for any right to information legislation to be effective, it needs to be respected and 'owned' by both the government and the public. Participation in the legislative development process requires that policy-makers proactively encourage the involvement of civil society groups and the public broadly. This can be done in a variety of ways, for example, by: convening public meetings to discuss the drafting process and the content of any law; strategically and consistently using the media to raise awareness and keep the public up to date on progress; setting up a committee of stakeholders (including officials and public representatives) to consider and provide recommendations on the development of legislation; inviting submissions from the public at all stages of the legislative drafting process; and publishing and circulating the draft Bill widely for public comment and giving any such comments due consideration.

Once more, I would like to commend the Mauritius Government for committing to a new era of government openness and transparency by taking the first step forward towards meeting the fundamental right of citizens in Mauritius to access information concerning their governance. A strong, well-drafted right to information law will be a vital tool in promoting government accountability and effectively facilitating public participation in national decision-making.

For your information, I am enclosing a copy of a comparative table of Commonwealth right to information laws which may provide some guidance on common provisions. If we can be of any assistance with developing a right to information Bill for Mauritius, please do not hesitate to contact me. Of course, once a draft Bill is produced, we would also be very pleased if you would send CHRI a copy for comment. I can be contacted on (0)9810 199 745 or (011) 2685 0523 or via email at majadhun@vsnl.com. Alternatively, please contact Ms Charmaine Rodrigues, Co-Coordinator, Right to Information Programme at charmaine@humanrightsinitiative.org.

Yours sincerely



Maja Daruwala
Director

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Annex 1: Best Practice Legislative Principles

CHRI's 2003 Report, *Open Sesame: Looking for the Right to Information in the Commonwealth* (see enclosed), captured the key principles which should underpin any effective right to information law, drawing on international and regional standards, evolving State practice, and the general principles of law recognised by the community of nations. Article 19, an NGO which specifically works on right to information, has also developed "Principles on Freedom of Information Legislation" which were endorsed by the United Nations Special Rapporteur in 2000.¹ The Organisation of American States² and the Commonwealth³ - the latter of which Mauritius is a member - have also endorsed minimum standards on the right to information.

These various generic standards have been summarised into the five principles below, which I would encourage you to consider when you finalise your own right to information bill.

Maximum Disclosure

The value of access to information legislation comes from its importance in establishing a framework of open governance. In this context, the law must be premised on a clear commitment to the rule of maximum disclosure. This means that there should be a presumption in favour of access in the objectives clause of any Act. Every member of the public should have a specific *right* to receive information and those bodies covered by the Act therefore have an *obligation* to disclose information. Any person at all should be able to access information under the legislation, whether a citizen or not. People should not be required to provide a reason for requesting information.

To ensure that maximum disclosure occurs in practice, the definition of what is covered by the Act should be drafted broadly. Enshrining a right to access to "information" rather than only "records" or "documents" is therefore preferred. Further, the Act should not limit access only to information held by public bodies, but should also cover private bodies "*that carry out public functions or where their activities affect people's rights*". This recognises the fact that in this age where privatisation and outsourcing is increasingly being undertaken by governments, the private sector is gaining influence and impact on the public and therefore cannot be beyond their scrutiny. Part 3 of the South African *Promotion of Access to Information Act 2000* provides a very good example to draw on.

Bodies covered by the Act should not only have a duty to disclose information upon request, but should also be required to proactively publish and disseminate documents of general relevance to the public, for example, on their structure, norms and functioning, the documents they hold, their finances, activities, any opportunities for consultation and the content of decisions/policies affecting the public. Section 4 of the new Indian *Right to Information Act 2005* provides a useful model.

In order to support maximum information disclosure, the law should also provide protection for "whistleblowers", that is, individuals who disclose information in contravention of the law and/or their employment contracts because they believe that such disclosure is in the public

¹ Hussain, A. (2000) Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression submitted in accordance with Commission resolution 1999/36, Doc.E/CN.4/2000/63, 5 April. See also Ligabo, A., Haraszti, M. & Bertoni, E. (2004) *Joint Declaration by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and the OAS Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression*.

² See Organisation of American States - General Assembly (2003) *Access to Public Information: Strengthening Democracy*, resolution adopted at the fourth plenary session, June 10 2003, AG/RES.1932 (XXXIII-O/03).

³ See (1999) Commonwealth Freedom of Information Principles, in *Promoting Open Government Commonwealth Principles And Guidelines On The Right To Know*, Report of the Expert Group Meeting on the Right to Know and the Promotion of Democracy and Development, Marlborough House, London, 30-31 March 1999.

interest. Whistleblower protection is based on the premise that Individuals should be protected from legal, administrative or employment-related sanctions for releasing information on wrongdoing. It is important in order to send a message to the public that the government is serious about opening itself up to legitimate scrutiny.

Minimum Exceptions

The key aim of any exceptions should be to protect and promote the public interest. The law should therefore not allow room for a refusal to disclose information to be based on trying to protect government from embarrassment or the exposure of wrongdoing. In line with the commitment to maximum disclosure, exemptions to the rule of maximum disclosure should be kept to an absolute minimum and should be narrowly drawn. The list of exemptions should be comprehensive and other laws should not be permitted to extend them. Broad categories of exemption should be avoided and blanket exemptions for specific positions (e.g. President) or bodies (e.g. the Armed Services) should not be permitted; in a modern democracy there is no rational reason why such exemptions should be necessary. The law should require that other legislation be interpreted, as far as possible, in a manner consistent with its provisions.

Even where exemptions are included in legislation, they should still ALL be subject to a blanket "public interest override", whereby a document which is presumed exempt under the Act should still be disclosed if the public interest in the specific case requires it.

Simple, Cheap and Quick Access Procedures:

A key test of an access law's effectiveness is the ease, inexpensiveness and promptness with which people seeking information are able to obtain it. The law should include clear and uncomplicated procedures that ensure quick responses at affordable fees. Applications should be simple and ensure that the illiterate and/or impecunious are not in practice barred from utilising the law. Officials should be tasked with assisting requesters. Any fees which are imposed for gaining access should also not be so high as to deter potential applicants. Best practice requires that fees should be limited only to cost recovery, and that no charges should be imposed for applications nor for search time; the latter, in particular, could easily result in prohibitive costs and defeat the intent of the law. The law should provide strict time limits for processing requests and these should be enforceable.

All public bodies should be required to establish open, accessible internal systems for ensuring the public's right to receive information. Likewise, provisions should be included in the law which require that appropriate record keeping and management systems are in place to ensure the effective implementation of the law.

Effective Enforcement: Independent Appeals Mechanisms & Penalties

Effective enforcement provisions ensure the success of access legislation. In practice, this requires that any refusal to disclose information is accompanied by substantive written reasons (so that the applicant has sufficient information upon which to appeal) and includes information regarding the processes for appeals.

While internal appeals provide an inexpensive first opportunity for review of a decision, oversight by an umpire independent of government pressure is a major safeguard against administrative lethargy, indifference or intransigence and is particularly welcome where court-based remedies are slow, costly and uncertain. The fear of independent scrutiny ensures that exemption clauses are interpreted responsibly and citizens' requests are not unnecessarily obstructed. While the courts satisfy the first criteria of independence, they are notoriously slow and can be difficult to access for the common person. As such, in many jurisdictions, special independent oversight bodies have been set up to decide complaints of non-disclosure. They have been found to be a cheaper, more efficient alternative to courts and enjoy public confidence when they are robustly independent, well funded and procedurally simple.

Best practice supports the establishment of a dedicated Information Commission with a broad mandate to investigate non-compliance with the law, compel disclosure and impose sanctions for non-compliance. Experience from a number of Commonwealth jurisdictions, including Canada, England, Scotland and Western Australia, has shown that Information Commission(er)s have been very effective in raising the profile of the right to information and balancing against bureaucratic resistance to openness. Of course, there are alternatives to an Information Commission. For example, in Australia, the Administrative Appeals Tribunal has appeal powers and in New Zealand and Belize the Ombudsman can deal with complaints. However, experience has shown that these bodies are often already overworked and/or ineffective, such that they have rarely proven to be outspoken champions of access laws.

The powers of oversight bodies should include a power to impose penalties. Without an option for sanctions, such as fines for delay or even imprisonment for wilful destruction of documents, there is no incentive for bodies subject to the Act to comply with its terms, as they will be aware that the worst that can happen is simply that they may eventually be required to disclose information.

In the first instance, legislation should clearly detail what activities will be considered offences under the Act. It is important that these provisions are comprehensive and identify all possible offences committed at all stages of the request process – for example, unreasonable delay or withholding of information, knowingly providing incorrect information, concealment or falsification of records, wilful destruction of records without lawful authority, obstruction of the work of any public body under the Act and/or non-compliance with the Information Commissioner's orders.

Once the offences are detailed, sanctions need to be available to punish the commission of offences. International best practice demonstrates that punishment for serious offences can include imprisonment, as well as substantial fines. Notably, fines need to be sufficiently large to act as a serious disincentive to bad behaviour. Corruption – the scourge that access laws assist to tackle – can result in huge windfalls for bureaucrats. The threat of fines and imprisonment can be an important deterrent, but must be large enough to balance out the gains from corrupt practices.

Monitoring and Promotion of Open Governance:

Many laws now include specific provisions empowering a specific body, such as an existing National Human Rights Commission or Ombudsman, or a newly created Information Commissioner, to monitor and support the implementation of the Act. These bodies are often empowered to develop Codes of Practice or Guidelines for implementing specific provisions of the Act, such as those relating to records management. They are usually required to submit annual reports to parliament and are empowered to make recommendations for consideration by the government on improving implementation of the Act and breaking down cultures of secrecy in practice.

Although not incorporated in early forms of right to information legislation, it is increasingly common to include provisions in the law itself mandating a body to promote the Act and the concept of open governance. Such provisions specifically require that the government ensure that programmes are undertaken to educate the public and the officials responsible for administering the Act.