

Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives Press Release:

Implementation of Access to Information and Transparency Provisions in LGO 2001 Demanded

Rawalpindi, April 21, 2006: Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives, Pakistan (CPDI-Pakistan) has demanded the local government authorities in Rawalpindi district to respect citizens' right to information, and ensure that members of public are facilitated and encouraged to participate in the planning and implementation phases of development projects. Citizens' right to information is guaranteed under Article 137 of Local Government Ordinance 2001 but the town administrations and the district government in Rawalpindi have yet to recognize its importance and implement it. At present, even the very ordinary kind of information is hard to access, and one has to run from one office to other to eventually hear, in most cases, that the requested information is an official secret.

CPDI-Pakistan has documented cases where officials of the district government denied access to even annual budget and list of development schemes, which are clearly supposed to be public documents as these are laid for approval before town and district councils. Officials also denied access to monthly and annual expenditure statements and copies of contracts awarded for development projects. Such attitudes show that either officials are unaware of access to information and transparency provisions in the LGO 2001 or have a strong vested interest in keeping them secret and out of public scrutiny. It is despite the fact that Article 114(5) of LGO 2001 reads as follows: "A statement of monthly and annual accounts and such other necessary statements shall be placed at a conspicuous place by the local government concerned for public information".

Similarly Article 137 says that "every citizen shall have the right to information about any office of the district government, Tehsil Municipal Administration and Union Administration". It further provides that "information about the staffing and performance of the office of a local government during the preceding month shall, as far as possible, be displayed at a prominent place within the premises of the office for access by citizens". None of these provisions are currently being implemented by the town administrations or district government.

Access to information is extremely important as it is a pre-condition for any effective citizens' participation in development planning and monitoring of development projects. Implementation of right to information can expose inefficiencies and corrupt practices, and can contribute to improving the quality of service delivery and efficient implementation of development projects. Once implemented, it would be difficult for senior officials to treat sweepers, gardeners and sanitary staff in the service of local governments as their personal staff and keep them posted on their residences. Similarly, it would become difficult for corrupt officers to approve semi-finished or poor quality public works and release funds to contractors. Access to information will give citizens the power of public audit, which could significantly help in improving the quality of public service delivery and governance.

It is also impressed upon citizens to learn about their legal rights and insist upon their realization for the purpose of promoting transparency and public accountability in the local government. Any one can file an information request and, if it is denied, the office of provincial ombudsman or courts can be approached to seek redress. CPDI-Pakistan has been successful in acquiring some information from the Rawalpindi district government under the Article 137 but only after the intervention of Punjab Ombudsman. What is needed is that citizens engage the local governments to demand implementation of procedures whereby it is easier, quicker and cost effective to access information and records held by government departments.

Yours' sincerely,

Omar Sadik
Project Manager

Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives, Pakistan (CPDI-Pakistan)
Islamabad, PAKISTAN, URL: www.cpdipakistan.org