

Two-Day Regional Conference

on

Transforming the Freedom of Information Regime: Making the Right of Information a Reality

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Organized by

Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI-Pakistan)

JOINT DECLARATION

The text of the unanimously approved Declaration is as under:

1. **Right to Information:** Access to information is a recognized right of all citizens.
2. **A joint effort between the civil society and the state functionaries** must continue so as to work together for implementation and consolidation of the existing provisions in the said laws on Freedom of Information along with active dialogue to amend and improve the three existing laws.
3. **Reforming and Improving the Existing Freedom of Information Regime in Pakistan:** The existing FOI laws consisting of Freedom of Information Ordinance, FOI2002, the Local Govt. Ordinance, LGO2001 and the Sindh Ordinance on Freedom of Information, 2006, are inadequate and need a review in line with internationally recognized best practices. Some relevant observations to be kept in mind include:
 - (a). Obsolete Secretive Laws (Official Secrecy Act 1923) used to suppress information, which govt. officials are supposed to share, must be reviewed/ abolished by the Parliament or immediately brought under the FOI 2002.
 - (b). All Organizations being funded by Public Exchequer as well as Civil Society Organisations must be brought under the FOI 2002.
 - (c). The Procedure for Access to Information should be made easier and cost beneficial for the Public.
 - (d). The FOI 2002 must also be implemented with regard to access to information in Northern Areas of the country. The same may also be suggested to the government of Azad Jammu and Kashmir.
4. **De-classification of documents/ Reports** concerning matters probed and investigated must be done after 20 years.

5. **Protection of Whistle Blowers:** The FOI2002 must ensure protection of whistle blowers, that is, the public functionaries, journalists and citizens unveiling malpractices in any state department.
6. **Active Disclosure:** all State departments and offices must follow the policy of active disclosure regarding the policies, decisions and implementation of policies and decisions, etc through display on websites, timely publications of proceedings, announcements on public places, etc.
7. **Opening up of Parliamentary Committees/ Sub Committees:** Mostly meetings should be open to participation of all stakeholders especially the civil society organizations and media (with the exception of in camera session only once deemed necessary); Thus, the offices of the respective Chair should display their schedule of meeting, share agenda of meeting and minutes, reports and recommendations, statements of conflict of interest with all the stakeholders. Members of the Committees should disclose any conflict of interest on a particular issue in discussion.
8. **Sensitization and Capacity Building of all officers:** The right of information in general and the Freedom of Information Laws must be made part of the curriculum at different courses undertaken by the civil servants as well as local government representatives at NIPA, Civil Services Academy, etc. Civil Society Organisations and State Departments can work together to inculcate a new mindset among state functionaries that recognizes access to information as the right of public and consequently a pro-active approach of facilitating the same while imparting their duties.
9. **Standardization of Record Keeping:** All government departments must be facilitated with trained staff, infrastructure and technical expertise as well as requisite resources to develop and maintain standardized arrangements for record keeping at all offices.
10. **Transparency in Education:** Education must be practically devolved from the provinces to the local government after quick development of their capacity and the policy of active disclosure as envisaged in the LGO2001 must be ensured. Policy of Active Disclosure through display at public places, involvement of public and stakeholders in taking decisions and policies, and easy access to information must be recognized as a right of all citizens. The same must be practiced vis a vis health and other services, etc.
11. **Participatory Budget making:** The Budget making procedure in the local government must ensure contact and active dialogue with public and the same may be replicated through the Parliamentary Committees in the Federal as well as Provincial Houses so as to inculcate a participatory budget making tradition.

- 12. Coalition of Civil Society Organisations:** The Civil Society Organizations have a critical role in public awareness and education regarding the utility of access to information regime. They should form a coalition with regard to make enhancing the freedom of information at all levels so as to make focused efforts to:
- (a) Undertake media literacy of citizens.
 - (b) Develop a strong networking to support all social movements of common people, that is, labour unions, teachers and students movements, etc.
 - (c) Revival of all trade unions under an objectively chalked out Code of Conduct so as address the basic question of brining positive change in the society.
- 13. Enabling easy access to information for physically disable persons:** State functionaries must be sensitized with regard to facilitation of access to information for physically disable persons of the society.

**THE SAID JOINT DECLARATION WAS UNANIMOUSLY
ENDORSED BY ALL NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL
DELEGATES AT THE CONFERENCE.**