



Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative

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Executive Committee
B.G. Verghese
Chairperson

Mr. Jean Sese
Director General
Prime Minister's Office
Vanuatu

P.H. Parekh
Treasurer

11 May 2005

Dear Mr. Sese,

Re: Highlighting the importance of the right to information in the Pacific Plan

Maja Daruwala
Director

I am writing from the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), an independent, non-partisan, international non-governmental organisation, mandated to ensure the practical realisation of human rights in the countries of the Commonwealth.

Members

T. Ananthachari
N.R. Madhava Menon
P.P. Rao
R.V. Pillai
Anu Aga
K. S Dhillon

CHRI's Access to Information Program works towards the adoption and implementation of freedom of information regimes in Commonwealth member states. As you are no doubt aware, recognising and implementing the right to access information is a simple, but extremely useful, step to open, effective and responsive governance. The right to information is also essential to facilitating meaningful participatory development. For a relatively small cost and investment of time, entrenchment of an effective access to information regime increases government transparency and reduces corruption, and thereby supports economic growth.

We note the stated commitment of the Pacific Forum to devise a strategy for promoting good governance and sustainable development in the Pacific Islands by means of the Pacific Plan. In this context, CHRI would like to encourage you to ensure that the importance of implementing freedom of information (FOI) regimes in the Pacific is recognised in the Pacific Plan. This need not be a burdensome requirement for governments, because although FOI legislation is ideal, governments can take action on this issue simply by committing to greater public information dissemination and access by the bureaucracy.

Entrenching a right to access public information has been shown internationally to be a cheap but effective means of increasing public participation in governance and development. We note in this respect the Forum's 2004 commitment to "give the greatest possible support to maintaining and increasing efforts by the Forum Secretariat to enhance the governance capabilities of Forum members and Forum-related agencies"

Notably, one of CHRI's Right to Information Coordinators, Ms Charmaine Rodrigues, visited the Forum Secretariat in September 2004 and discussed the issue of the FOI with key ForSec staff. We were very pleased with their encouraging response and have already provided a briefing paper to ForSec on FOI for use as a resource in one of their recent CROP meetings.

More recently, in a letter to CHRI, Mr Greg Urwin, Secretary General of the Pacific Forum Secretariat, stated: "In developing the Pacific Plan and the Forum's future policies under it, we are giving consideration to the ways in which the Forum may be able to contribute to promoting the right to information in member countries." CHRI urges you, as members of the Pacific Plan Taskforce, to support this initiative and include a reference to FOI in the final draft of the Pacific Plan. Please note in this respect that we have already suggested small edits on this point to the Pacific Plan drafters

Please note that CHRI has a breadth of expertise, which can be drawn on to, support the development of effective information access regimes in the Pacific. Already, we have strong ties in PNG, Solomon Islands and Fiji, the target countries for our Pacific Right to Information Programme. For example, in Fiji, we have already supported civil society efforts to draft an FOI law, and in Solomon Islands we are working with civil society on getting FOI on to the policy agenda as well as with government officials. I am enclosing a copy of our 2003 report, *Open Sesame: Looking for the Right to Information in the Commonwealth*, for your information. This may give you a better sense of CHRI's comparative advantage in this area.

We are keen for you to consider us as a resource that you can call on to support the development of strong access to information regimes. Please do not hesitate to contact us if there is anything we can do to assist, including sourcing and providing materials, technical support and contacts with international organizations which specialize in specific aspects of access to information implementation, such as records management or e-governance.

Please contact Charmaine Rodrigues, who leads our Right to Information International Programme (charmaine@humanrightsinitiative.org) at our New Delhi Headquarters if we can be of assistance. Resources and guidelines on RTI can be found on our website at www.humanrightsinitiative.org/programs/ai/rti/rti.htm and the Report can be downloaded at: http://www.humanrightsinitiative.org/publications/chogm/chogm_2003/default.htm.

Kind regards,



Maja Daruwala
Director