



Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative

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

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27 September 2005

Dear Dr Mohamed Ibn Chambas

RE: Right to Know Day on 28 September – Developing a Disclosure Policy for ECOWAS

28 September will be celebrated as International Right To Know Day, as declared by the International Freedom of Information Advocates Network (FOIA Network) of which CHRI is a member. CHRI would like to take this opportunity to urge you to advance the process of developing an Information Disclosure Policy for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Executive Secretariat and more actively promoting right to information legislation in member states.

As you would be aware, many intergovernmental and supranational organisations have now entrenched the right to information. For example, the EU, WTO, UNDP and every multilateral development bank all have disclosure policies. Informal channels advise that the Pacific Forum Secretariat is also in the process of developing a disclosure policy. In contrast, the ECOWAS Executive Secretariat's failure to implement an information disclosure policy falls well outside best practice at other similar organisations.

The Commonwealth has repeatedly recognised the importance of the right to information, affirming most recently at the 2003 CHOGM that: "Among the objectives we seek to promote are...the right to information". It is imperative that ECOWAS now act quickly to address this policy gap. Notably, the development of an information disclosure policy need not be an onerous task. At a minimum, such a policy could simply begin by capturing in writing the approach to disclosure currently implemented at the Executive Secretariat. By at least clarifying what the Executive Secretariat is already comfortable releasing to the public, when and in what form, the public can easily access information. Ideally, any disclosure policy should be developed in accordance with international best practice which promotes maximum disclosure and minimum exceptions.

We would be very grateful for a response from your office reiterating ECOWAS's commitment to the development of an information disclosure policy, setting out a timeline for the process and advising which officers within the ECOWAS Executive Secretariat are responsible for this task. We also strongly urge you to hand responsibility for managing this process to a division head. This would ensure that the development of an information disclosure policy is given sufficient importance within the ECOWAS Executive Secretariat and is recognised as being integral to improving its own governance and accountability and is not simply an information management initiative.

I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Kind regards

Maja Daruwala, Director