

Press Release
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SOUTH ASIAN AND AFRICAN EXPERTS CALL FOR STRENGTHENING RTI ENFORCEMENT

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27 October 2017, Dhaka Experts from South Asia and Africa meeting in Dhaka today called for strengthening processes to ensure the right to information of all persons, and for ensuring integrity of Information Commissions and recognition of Governments as key stakeholders.

“All Governments in South Asia must demonstrate their commitment to transparency and accountability by taking immediate steps to effectively implement right to information (RTI) laws”, was the unanimous demand of RTI experts from the region

Members and staff of Information Commissions, along with lawyers, journalists and civil society members from 6 countries - Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka in South Asia - and Kenya and South Africa - met in Dhaka on 26-27 October 2017.

Professor Dr. Md. Golam Rahman, Chief Information Commissioner and Mr. Nepal Chandra Sarkar, Information Commissioner, Bangladesh Information Commission opined that legislative measures are required to ensure speedy disposal of appeals and complaints when Designated Officers do not provide information about life and liberty matters within the statutory time limit of 48 hours. Dr. Khurshida Begum Sayeed, Information Commissioner, Bangladesh said that developing a culture of transparency was crucial for the successful implementation of the RTI Act.

The Social Architects (TSA), Research Initiative Bangladesh (RIB) and Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) hosted the meeting.

Dr. Shamsul Bari said that RTI is a strong weapon to make activities of public authorities more transparent and held them accountable. RTI is about reinstating citizens’ pride in being citizens.

Discussions focused on procedures for seeking information and performance of governments and public authorities in bedding down the transparency regime, appeal and complaint procedures before Information Commissions, the role of the courts in relation to RTI proactive and routine information disclosure, including both low tech and high tech solutions.

Panelists discussed the selection process of Information Commissions, ensuring transparency and in a process and some insulation from political interest. They highlighted the need for capacity building of RTI service providers/officers.

Panelists urged governments and Information Commissions to put in place accessible and disabled friendly access to information, digitalization of public records and information management.

Based on the urgency in matters relating to information about the life and liberty of an individual under threat, they called for Commission to prioritize the queries of information pursuers.

Social media can be an ally in the promotion of people's access to truthful and reliable information on the working of public authorities in the age of "post-truth" and "alternative facts".

Participants also urged government bodies and NGOs to collaborate for spreading awareness among the people about RTI laws. In order to encourage public authorities and civil servants to implement the law effectively, a scheme of incentivizing performance should be instituted along the South African model.

Panelists also addressed exemptions to RTI including privacy/data protection – and the role of Information Commissions, Governments, civil society and the media in promoting awareness of RTI.

The Sri Lankan Commissioners and IC Secretariat (the newest RTI Commission in the region) staff earlier paid a day-long visit to the Information Commission of Bangladesh. The IC of Sri Lanka identified through dialogue and observation with members from other ICs in the region and independent experts, the best practices in ensuring access to information and accountability of authorities, in order to develop their own standard operating procedures and working practices.

Participants shared best practices, with a particular focus on the provision of new remedies to protect fundamental rights, and on ensuring accountability of both public and private authorities.

The regional meeting made an overall assessment of the status of implementation of the RTI legislation, examining the use of RTI in country specific contexts in the context of civil and political and economic and social rights, mapped out challenges and evaluating successes.

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