Orientation of CSOs, CBOs and VDOs on Right to Information

Objectives

1. To develop understanding of CSOs on RTI and promote its utilization for bringing about accountability and transparency in governance.
2. To facilitate formation of network of CSOs in the state which will carry out awareness drive and advocacy on RTI

Venues of workshop: Two day State and district level workshops were organized during April – December 2006 in Haryana, Uttaranchal, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. About 474 representatives from Civil Society Organizations participated in the workshop.

Table 1: Workshops on Right to Information 2005

S.No.	Venue of workshops	Date	Participants		
			Male	Female	Total
1	Ahmedabad, Gujarat	June 28-30,2006	-	-	32
2	Chandigarh, Haryana	July 18-19, 2006	23	16	39
3	Dehradun, Uttaranchal	July 26-27, 2006	51	14	65
4	Shimla, Himachal Pradesh	August 1-2, 2006	26	14	40
5	Jaipur, Rajasthan	Sep 5-6, 2006	26	14	40
6	Ranchi, Jharkhand	Oct 30- Nov 1, 06	24	8	32
7	Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh	Nov 9 – 10, 2006	23	12	35
8	Patna, Bihar	Dec 5-6, 2006	25	5	30
9	Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan	Oct 12, 2006	-	-	31

10	Karauli, Rajasthan	Nov 27, 2006	-	-	30
11	Four regional workshops – Lalitpur, Mirzapur, Lucknow and Sitapur (Uttar Pradesh)	Oct- Dec, 2006	-	-	100
	Total		198	83	474

Source: workshop reports

Programme Design: Two-day module programme design was adopted for conducting the training programme on RTI. The session plan is mentioned below but it was adapted as per the requirement of the state. The purpose was to orient the civil society organizations in a structured way, so that they are able grasp the concept and critical details of the Act fully.

DAY ONE

Session 1 :Objective of the workshop, Introduction & Expectations of the participants

Session II: Good Governance and Right to Information

Session III: Awareness on RTI – Matching Card Game

Session IV: Panel Discussion " Experience of RTI in the state " [Chief Information Commission or Information Commissioner being one of the panelists]

Session V: Understanding Right to Information through Snake and Ladder game and case studies

DAY TWO

Session I: Recap of First Day

Session II: Group work - Drafting of application for accessing information

Session III: Application of RTI in select cases & Experience Sharing

Session IV: Charter of demands on RTI

Session IV: Action Plan

Last Session: Evaluation & Thanks giving and concluding session

Programme Activities:

It was endeavour of the facilitators to make the training sessions/workshops participatory in nature. For the purpose, group work, group discussions, open sessions, films and games were integrated into the training sessions. For example, session on "drafting of application" oriented the participants on writing application and appeals under RTI Act 2005. The participants were divided into four groups and they were asked to write applications for accessing information from Public Information Officers. It was a skilled-based session in which the participants were oriented on basics of writing application and appeals. Some other participatory methods of training like Snake and Ladder game and Card game on RTI were appreciated by the trainees. They developed understanding on the Act through games. Games were designed purposively for emphasizing the provisions of RTI Act, which is often difficult to grasp in lecture-oriented method.

Overall focus of the workshop was orienting the participants on the key provisions of RTI Act, skill building on drafting application under Right to Information Act, use of RTI to monitor development schemes like NREGA and using success stories to convince the participants that RTI is the effective tool for strengthening transparency and accountability. Moreover these workshops provided a platform for interaction with Chief Information commissioner of the states and RTI Activists, which helped the participants in understanding the state specific issues and field experiences, related to RTI. Simultaneous, media linkage provided wider dissemination of issues on RTI discussed in the workshop. In the last session of the workshop, some operational issues of RTI were discussed and Charter of Demands by the CSOs was adopted that was later sent to State Government, State Information Commission and important Public Authorities. The participants also prepared an Action plan on using RTI in their programme and promotion of RTI.

Learning Materials: Following learning materials on RTI were prepared by the facilitators for distribution among the participants:

- Pamphlet on RTI
- Understanding RTI in simple language
- RTI Act 2005
- Case studies on RTI
- RTI rules of the concerned state

- Utilization of RTI in National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
- Right to Information: Procedure for application and appeal
- Role of Voluntary sector and RTI

Key Issues Discussed in the Workshops:

- The workshop brought to light some key issues and challenges in operationalization of RTI Act. In Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, high rate of application and additional fees and limited options for mode of payment are major areas of concern. While Uttaranchal has been very progressive in the implementation of RTI but appointment of 'Gram Pradhan' as a Public Information Officer is of concern to the people as he is not the person who has the data related to development Activities in the village. Field level experiences from Uttaranchal show that the state bureaucracy is ready to give information but people are not aware enough to ask information under the Act. Thus, it is a challenge for civil society organizations to launch major awareness drives among the people in the state.
- In Uttarachal, interface of Chief Information Commissioner, Dr. R S Tolia, State Information Commission and Head of task force on RTI with VDOs and citizens helped in solving several queries of participants on RTI and brought to light the pro-active nature of State Information Commission. In Himahcal Pradesh, Chief Information Commissioner highlighted the main points of RTI Act in the workshop.
- One of the surprise findings of the workshop was the slow implementation of RTI in Rajasthan. It was supposed to be the most progressive state as movement for RTI was launched here nearly a decade ago. But applicants in the state are facing difficulties in submitting application to the PIO due to non-cooperative behavior of PIO. Other Issues are generic in nature but also needs attention e.g. many Public Authorities and departments including SICs have not implemented the provision of Pro-active Disclosure under Section 4 of the RTI Act seriously. The appointment of APIO, PIOs and DAAs by Public Authorities are still awaited. Poor awareness on RTI among government officials and people in general hinders implementation of RTI.

- The IEC materials are the important means to spread awareness on RTI Act. Keeping this in view a RTI Brochure was developed by PRIA-AP and the workshop was seen a suitable forum for its release. The Public Information Commissioner (PIC) Mr. Dileep Reddy (Journalist) formally opened the RTI Brochure in Telugu. The media persons from Vaartha and Eenaadu covered the programme.

- In his address, Mr. Reddy explained the vibrant history of the Act and stated that it is one of the most democratic and people friendly Act. He pointed out that it makes the 'Public Authority' get out from the laid back attitude and the provision for pro-active disclosure is the most important feature of the Act. Delving into the status of implementation of the Act, he shared experiences of his visits to various departments. He felt that government officials must be made to change their superiority mind set and subscribe to the good governance concept. This would take time but is bound to happen. The role of civil society hence lies in monitoring the implementation of the provisions of the Act and bringing to light the anomalies in the implementation of the Act to the notice of SIC/CIC.

- Panel discussion on RTI in Rajasthan was very good as four experts who had been working on RTI for nearly a decade were invited to share their experiences. The panelists were the Activists of Majdoor Kisan Shakti Sanghthan (MKSS), People Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL) and other NGOs. Large number of issues related to RTI e.g. provisions of RTI Act, history of MKSS, role of State Information Commission, Status of RTI in Rajasthan etc. were discussed by the panelists. After the discussion by the panelists, the session was thrown open for questioning to the participants; they came up with number of issues related to poor implementation of RTI in Rajasthan. The deliberations brought to light several problems of implementation of RTI in Rajasthan.

- In Jharkhand, Shri Vaidnath Mishra, Information Commissioner, State Information Commission, Jharkhand was invited for the workshop. He discussed in detail the provisions of the Act, the difficulties of State Information Commission in implementing the Act and status of RTI in Jharkhand. Emphasizing the importance of RTI, Mr. Mishra said that RTI could become the tool for second independence in India. But mere enactment of the law does not ensure social accountability; hence RTI should be utilized properly by the people for making it effective. He said, "If we do not take advantage of the Act and the underprivileged and downtrodden do not benefit from it, then RTI would be meaningless". Explaining the difference between evolution and revolution, he said that awareness about the RTI Act could slowly bring evolution in the Indian society. Mishra urged the NGOs to spread awareness about RTI Act, for the purpose, slogan of "each one, teach one" should be adopted.

- In Bihar, Shri P N Narayanan, Information Commissioner, State Information Commission, was invited for the workshop. He discussed in detail the provisions of the Act, the difficulties of commission in implementing the Act and status of RTI in

Bihar. He said that it is a tool, which can usher in accountability and transparency in governance in India. He assured all help of State Information Commission to the NGOs working on RTI in Bihar. He further added that two rooms in the office of State Information Commission could be utilized for conducting awareness generation on RTI.

- After conducting workshops for Civil Society Organizations in ten states, some critical details about the implementation of Right to Information could be revealed. In most of the states, PIOs are not cooperative with the applicant and they are not accepting applications, the Public Authorities have not taken Section 4 (1) b of the RTI Act seriously and State Information Commissions are very averse to levying penalties. In all the workshops, issue of proposed RTI amendment bill, 2006 on 'file notings' was discussed and it was decided to sent protest letter to the Prime Minister and all the concerned authorities expressing anguish over the amendment.

Achievements:

- Provisions of Right to Information Act were discussed in detail in the workshop and clarifications were made not only with regard to Act but also about the implementation difficulties.
- Chief Information Commissioner and other officials of State Information Commission were invited for interface with CSOs and citizens, which helped to solve several queries of participants on RTI. The interface also convinced the people that the Act is being taken seriously by the bureaucracy.
- The workshop provided a platform to the participants to share the experiences of RTI in their state and develop a strategy on RTI for the state.
- A charter of demands on RTI highlighting the main demands centered on the effective implementation of RTI in the state was sent to respective state governments. This charter of demands was signed by representatives of CSOs who attended the state and district level workshop.
- Action plan on RTI was drawn up in each workshop and objectives were set for awareness drives, campaigns and filing applications for accessing information. The workshop provided a road map for 474 CSOs for taking up Activities related to RTI.
- Media linkage was good as the issues raised in the workshop were highlighted in the newspapers.