

## THE SOLOMON ISLANDS GETS CLOSER TO THE GOVERNMENT

Governments may take different measures to provide information even in the absence of a right to information law. In the Solomon Islands, the government made an agreement with an organisation that operates computer "information kiosks" in rural areas. The kiosks are used to send out a weekly news bulletin on government activities to reach people living in rural areas. As well as keeping people better informed about what the government is doing, the kiosks also give them a means to provide feedback to the government.

However, the best way to ensure the government gives you information is by passing a special law recognising your right to information and outlining the details of how and where you can get it. It should also give details of the information that the government must always make available, even if no one asks them for it.

### GET INVOLVED!

There are a number of ways you can influence your government to pass a right to information law. One of the most important things to do is to talk to your friends, family and colleagues and let them know that they have a right to information – raising public awareness is the first step. Express your ideas in every way you can because every idea is valuable. You could also:

- Speak to the government - ask your politicians to pass a law that makes sure that the government and public bodies will provide you with information. You could ask what steps they are currently taking to protect your right to information.
- Vote - election time is a good opportunity to get politicians to listen to you about the right to information. Tell them how important your right to information is and ask them to include it in their election promises.
- Speak to your newspapers, radio and television stations – journalists understand how important your right to information is as they themselves need accurate information to do their jobs properly. Ask them to help spread the message of right to information and increase support for a new law.
- Get involved with community groups - Find out if there are already groups in your area campaigning to have a right to information law passed. Work together to make your voices louder to the people running your country. If there are no groups campaigning for the right to information, then you could form one yourself or even just talk about the right to information at your workplace, church or at your child's school.



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## INFORMATION IS POWER

Democracy means taking an active role in  
your own governance  
Information is the key to democracy

You have a

## RIGHT TO INFORMATION



## **DON'T YOU THINK YOUR GOVERNMENT SHOULD TELL YOU:**

- About its actions and decisions that affect your day-to-day life?
- The names of the people responsible for looking after your school and health clinic?
- How much money they have set aside to spend on building and fixing the roads in your neighbourhood?

### **YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO OBTAIN INFORMATION FROM YOUR GOVERNMENT**

You vote the government to power and your taxes are used to carry out a range of public welfare schemes and activities.

So, when the government is elected by you and run by your money, shouldn't it tell you what it is doing and why?

## **'YOUR RIGHT TO INFORMATION' – WHAT IS IT?**

Although you may have heard a number of terms used, for example 'freedom of information', 'access to information', or 'the right to know' - they all have the same meaning:

In the course of its work the government collects a lot of information about the country, what activities it will undertake and how it will spend the money it has. It also collects a lot of personal information about individuals.

This information is a public resource that can benefit everyone, but getting it can sometimes be very difficult. Many governments prefer to keep the information they hold a secret – this is not how it should be.

Many countries worldwide have agreed that everybody has a human right to access information from their government and other public bodies about their activities and the money they are spending.

The government has a duty to provide that information, unless giving it out would cause serious harm to the public, such as by threatening national security or invading on someone's personal privacy.

## **WHY IS RIGHT TO INFORMATION IMPORTANT?**

If you can get the information the government has, you can better understand what they are doing and make sure that they are fulfilling the promises they made to you at election time.

The benefits of using your right to information are many.

## **1. YOU CAN PARTICIPATE IN YOUR DEMOCRACY**

Information allows you to make informed decisions about which candidate or party to vote for at election time instead of having to rely on hearsay about their performance. You can also use your right to information to hold government officials to account once they are in power; for their policies, decisions and actions. If governments have to tell you what they are spending public money on, you can see for yourself what services you could be benefiting from, such as schooling or health care schemes. If you are unhappy with the services you receive, you can tell government exactly what you think should change, and help to design and implement new policies.

### **THE UGANDANS SAVED THEIR MONEY THROUGH THEIR RIGHT TO INFORMATION**

The right to information is a practical way to become more involved in developing the programmes that directly affect our lives. For example, in 2002 in Uganda, an environmental organisation used their constitutionally guaranteed right to information to make the government give them information about a dam they were planning to build. The information they were given showed them that "Ugandans will pay hundreds of millions of dollars in excessive power payments if the World-Bank-financed Bujagali Dam proceeds according to plan." As a result, the project was put on hold<sup>1</sup>.

Now it's your chance to use your right to information and participate in your democracy

## **2. GOOD FACILITIES ARE YOURS NOW**

You and your community can have a real influence over which public facilities are available to you. The government should 'proactively disclose' information about community projects and services which may benefit you. This means that they should regularly publish information about the schools, hospitals, roads, healthcare facilities they are building and the welfare programmes they are running. You can then use this information to ensure that these services are actually provided and demand better service when they are below the promised standards.

## **3. MAKE YOUR COUNTRY SAFE AND STABLE**

Your country's political and economic stability can be strengthened when you have access to information about what the government is doing for you. This can increase trust in government more and

<sup>1</sup> Ugandan Judge Orders Release of Key Document on Bujagali Dam, 22 November 2002, <http://www.freedominfo.org/ifti1102.htm#1> as at 22 July 2003.

make you feel that your opinions and needs are being taken seriously. Information can also help to make sure that minority groups have an equal say in the decisions the government makes so that they do not feel shut out. This in turn helps to reduce the likelihood of internal conflict and supports reconciliation in post-war situations.

## **4. YOU CAN EXPOSE CORRUPTION**

In many countries, corrupt officials continue to take the money that is intended to benefit the people. When you can access information about what money the government receives and plans to spend, you can see when corrupt officials have taken it for themselves. When officials know that you have this information and can scrutinise their spending, they are much less likely to engage in corruption in the first place.

## **5. HELP YOUR COUNTRY'S ECONOMY DEVELOP**

Investors are more likely to invest money in a country where the government makes accurate information about its economy available. Also, when information is available, the government must show that they spend their money well, you can demand that they spend it in the places where it is needed most and on the options that are the best value for money. This helps to make sure that everyone benefits from the money the government receives, including the poorest people in your society.

### **PEOPLE POWER IN INDIA**

In India, the poorest people got together and fought for a specific law to ensure that they would get information from the government. They proclaimed 'You are spending our money, show us the account books!' They got the law they wanted.

Because of the right to information in India:

- Poor people got the subsidised food grains they were entitled to from the government
- People made sure the government built new roads and repaired old ones
- Doctors started making regular visits to local healthcare centres
- Schools received the free first aid kits they were entitled to.

## **INFORMATION IS YOURS BUT HOW DO YOU GET IT?**

Some countries have a 'right to information' law that protects the people's right to get information from their government; other countries' Constitutions guarantee this right. Some countries have laws that allow people to get specific types of information such as personal information or information about the environment. For example, in Chile they have a law that gives people a right to ask for information about the environment.