

‘Combating Corruption in Rajasthan State, India, by Applying RTI Act as a Tool’

The Final Dissemination Meeting (FDM) – A Brief Report

HCM-RIPA, Jaipur, February 15, 2008

Background

CUTS Center for Consumer Action, Research & Training (CUTS CART), Jaipur in active partnership with the Partnership for Transparency Fund (PTF), Washington DC organised one-day Final Dissemination Meeting on February 15, 2008 at HCM-RIPA, Jaipur, under the project titled ‘Combating Corruption in Rajasthan State, India, by Applying RTI Act as a Tool’. The one-year pilot project, which was started in March 2007, is implemented with a focus on the rural areas of the Tonk and Jaipur districts under the Ajmer and Jaipur administrative divisions respectively.

Objective

Since the project is heading towards its conclusion, the day long Final Dissemination Meeting was convened with an aim to disseminate achieved outcomes of the project, primarily the results through filing RTI applications under the RTI Act, 2005 and recommending collectively the government at national and sub-national level to curb corruption in the governance and public life. It also aimed towards providing an opportunity to consolidate comments from wide range of participants and presenting a clear agenda to the members of Consortium of Groups Combating Corruption (CGCC) that has been formed under the project in Ajmer and Jaipur administrative divisions to intervene intensively in curbing corruption.

Participants

The key participants, other than the vigilant citizens, were MD Kaurani, the Chief Information Commissioner (CIC), Rajasthan; AK Pandey, Additional Chief Secretary & Development Commissioner, Government of Rajasthan; Sohini Paul, Project Officer, RTI Project, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), New Delhi and representatives from various “right base advocacy groups”, CGCC members from Ajmer and Jaipur divisions, *Panchayati Raj* members from Tonk and Jaipur districts, including Manju Saini, the *Pradhan* (Head) from Shapura block, Jaipur district; academicians; lawyers, media persons and NGOs working on RTI. The Project Management Team (PMT) consisted of George Cheriyan, RK Sharma, AB Paul and Ajnish A Bishwas coordinated the meeting.

Proceedings

The meeting was opened with welcome and introductory remarks by George Cheriyan followed by a brief PowerPoint presentation jointly by AB Paul and Ajnish Bishwas on project's background, achievements against project envisaged outcomes, key findings of the filed survey and the applications that are filed under the RTI Act, 2005 in Ajmer and Jaipur divisions. Along with sharing the key findings of the baseline survey, the main focus of the presentation was the final outcome (end result) of the project as mentioned below:

- Increased level of awareness in the target districts.
- 42 empowered civil society organisations (CSOs) in two divisions.
- Vibrant CGCC (informal Group) in place in two Divisions.
- CGCC playing the role of “watchdog” and also works as local resource centre on RTI.
- Accomplishment by CGCC in filing 737 RTI applications against the target of 500 on schemes/programmes meant for the poor and on other key services.
- Enabling environment that has been created at the grassroots, which has enhanced the transparency and accountability in the governance process and contributing towards addressing corruption.

In addition, the analysis of the implementation of the RTI Act in the state brought out several recommendations. Some of them are:

- The single window system, which exists only in the district of Bhilwara in these two divisions, is an ideal model, which can be replicated in other districts too.
- The capacity of the information providers needs to be enhanced to handle the increasing RTI applications.
- Various government departments need to follow the proactive disclosure, strictly.
- The existing government mechanism needs to be fine-tuned towards showing a positive attitude towards information seekers and an easy process to facilitate the filing of application needs to be put in place.

While delivering the inaugural address, Rajasthan State CIC, MD Kaurani said that CSOs and government must work together in making the RTI Act effective and in turn to combat corruption. He further said the level of awareness has increased in Rajasthan, especially in the rural areas tremendously during the last one year. Earlier, when the Act came into existence, mainly the government employees were making use of it, now the common people are making good use of it. He further said that information will always enhance the transparency, and

transparency in turn will help in eliminating corruption. In this manner, access to information contributes towards combating corruption. But the main reason for corruption in government is the delay in delivering the expected services, he added. As there is no time period set for delivering each service, Kaurani, suggested that like Anti-Corruption Act, there should be an ‘Anti-Delay Act’, which will automatically eliminate the corruption.

AK Pandey, Additional Chief Secretary to Government of Rajasthan, who is also the RTI first appellate authority for the Rajasthan Government Secretariat, delivered the keynote address. He pointed out the supply side (information providers). While acknowledging the power of information in empowering the people, he said the RTI Act had come ahead of time, due to two reasons. One, in most case the required information is not readily available with the government, which has to be created, and which is one of the reasons for delays in providing the required information. Secondly, the mindset of the bureaucracy, which was conditioned towards the ‘Official Secret Act’, is taking time to change. He said, earlier the government mechanism usually worked late night and used all communication strategies to gather information from down the line, mainly to provide response to the questions raised by any of the 200 members of the Legislative Assembly. But now the situation is that the entire 60 million common people of the state, is elevated to the status to enjoy this privilege, which was earlier enjoyed by only the legislators. So the government mechanism needs to be strengthened to face this challenge.

Sohini Paul from CHRI, New Delhi said there is need for rigorous follow up to maintain the momentum generated through this project. She underlined the need for documenting each of the cases for wider dissemination, follow up the cases and to prepare a model for proactive disclosure, which can be used by various departments. Besides, Ashok Kumar Vaishnav and Banwari Lala Bairathi, the CGCC members from the Ajmer and Jaipur divisions respectively, shared their successful experiences while dealing with government mechanism and addressing corruption by applying the RTI Act, 2005.

Key Comments

The participants’ comments/statements that were assembled during the event are consolidated and put briefly in a matrix as below:

Appreciation	Critique	Recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The project is unique in terms of taking forward 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The unnecessary filing requesting irreverent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Imparting training to government functionaries

<p>the recommendations of the RTI National Convention that was held in N. Delhi, October 13-15, 2006</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A great change has been noticed in last one year. • The local bodies i.e. municipalities, municipal corporations, <i>panchayats</i> etc., are the most important bodies where the citizens are filing applications maximum. • However, cases of imposing penalty up on guilty government officials are low, but this has worked tremendously. • The RTI Act, 2005 is great gift to the citizens of independent India. 	<p>information deprives the needy citizens from their rights.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since, in government departments the records are not update and information is not readily available, the citizens has to have face problems at least for the next 2-3 years. • Mostly, requisite fee deposit mechanism under the Act should be simplified. • The delay in providing information is also major cause of corruption thus; government should take immediate measures to avoid the situation. • Still, the mindset of service providers, especially those belongs to government has yet not prepared imbining their duties under the Act. 	<p>up on RTI Act, 2005 is most essential.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There should be proper documentation of cases and results of the applications that were filed under the RTI Act, 2005 for wider dissemination. • Besides, pinpointing the flaws in government mechanism, simultaneously, the CSOs should come forward in support particularly towards the “proactive disclosure” under the Act. • The project should not only be replicated in remaining five divisions of the Rajasthan State but also in many other states of the country. • On the basis project execution so far, a comprehensive training module should be developed. • To ensure corruption free governance, better, if the Consumer Protection Act (COPRA), 1986 is also applied adequately along with the RTI Act, 2005.
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