For People's Rights and Empowerment

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At one of the parallel seminars, 'Role of Right to Information Commissions: Functions, Interactions with other Stakeholders, Reporting Mechanisms and Performance Indicators,' discussions took place regarding the mechanisms to be used by the information officers, commissioners and of course the government to make the Right to Information Law (RTI Law) more accessible to the common people. Moderated by Saber Hossain Chowdhury, MP, Bangladesh Parliament, experts from India and Mexico were present at the seminar to share their experiences while working with the RTI Law in their respective countries.



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One of the major concerns regarding the implementation of the Right to Information Law is accessibility to information by regular citizens of the country. A majority of the people either cannot read or do not have the education to comprehend a law that is being implemented especially for them. A major fundamental that the commission should practice once the Right to Information (RTI) law is implemented is proactive disclosure. Venkatesh Nayak, the Project Coordinator of CHRI, India, says that the government officials should not wait for people to come and ask for information that they might need. "You give it to them whether they ask for it or not." Among other points, Nayak stresses on public education. "Conducting community based workshops regarding the RTI Law is an absolute necessity," says Nayak. "But it is not enough and will not gain as much." Nayak says that the awareness of the right to know and ask questions should be instilled amongst students from an early age and be made a part of the academic curriculum. "This way a whole generation can be developed."

The commission must also be clear about procedures and directions in terms of implementing the law maintaining records, how they will be transferred, keeping track of applications and making sure that a reply is made, etc. According to Sailash Gandhi, the Commissioner of the Central Information Commission, India, people expect reply once they file complaints or ask questions to the information officer. "The officers must reply to letters, appeals and take actions within the required time, preferably in less than 90 days," says Gandhi. "Otherwise, the whole RTI Law will be of no purpose."

There are at least 20 exemptions in the Right to Information Law, meaning that in the 20 mentioned circumstances, access to information is denied, for instance in the case of state secrets and security. However, situations pertaining to human rights and corruption cases are not exempted from the RTI Law. While drawing up comparisons, Juan Pablo Guerrero Amparan, Commissioner of the Mexican Federal Access to Information Institute, says that there are no exclusions in the Right to Information Law in Mexico, unlike the one