



## HUMAN RIGHTS *advocacy*



# Access to information at the grassroots

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INFORMATION can lead to interaction into transaction and resulted towards the aimed transformation i.e. development. And for this government and non-government recent initiatives of setting information & services centres at upazila and union level can play a vital role as it is in most of the cases situated in common public places where anyone can have access to basic information and communication tools to not only find and get together information but also communicate with others- developing their skills with technology. This began, few years back, merely as an information hub now transformed into a movement- a strong network- of groups and organizations- with the aim- to establish information and communication technologies role accelerating development at the community level.

Information and services centres are one of the most rapidly growing applications of Information and Communication Technologies i.e. ICTs in the developing world. Their rationale lies in shared-access models that allow provision of a wide range of services to more users at lower cost than privately-owned home or office computers which are often out of financial reach of poor people. Although the word information and services centres conjures up the image of a newly setup centre with computers and internet, the centre can very well be in a post office, a Union Parishad, a city corporation, a school, a shop or wherever. Some of these can be rights-based and some of these can be profit-driven, and some can employ a mix.

The primary goal of an information and services centres is the public provision of tools and skills to enhance communication and the sharing of information. A number of administrative and operational arrangements are possible, and although community information & services centres can be organizationally differentiated from franchises and cyber cafés they are all functionally of the same genre. Whatever the management model, there is general consensus that the information & services centres concept is a valid development tool.

Information and services centres exist in almost every country in South Asia and Bangladesh is not an exception in this regard. They exist under a variety of names that reflect their diversity and richness. People use them as community

centres and learning centres, places where people can meet, talk, share stories, and learn new skills, access information resources and online courses. People use them as technology centres, to make photocopies, to access the internet, to contact family members in distant places and to get important information regarding agriculture, health, education and so on. They enable communities to access new knowledge and information that can be incorporated with local knowledge. Finally, people use them as business centres, to transact business, to pay bills, to look up business opportunities, to advertise services, to develop marketing materials, etc.

Information and services centres have the potential to help break down some of the largest barriers to development that is presently faced by low-income populations, particularly in rural areas. Use of an information and services centres would enable a rural inhabitant, for example, to gain on-line access to distant productive assets and services; opportunities to learn better practices through formal and informal sources; to crucial market intelligence through informal networks that enhance bargaining power; to information on projects, financing institutions and options and support for the rural population; to expanded distant job opportunities and timework; and to persons with similar interests willing to work for a common cause.

Present information & services centres of Bangladesh disseminate information to the rural community through various methods e.g. text contents, multimedia contents, animated contents, video documentary etc. To disseminate the information, information and services centres use mobile phones, Internet, email, sometimes printing services of the contents, brief written explanation, customized consultation etc. In some areas information and services centres provide community people's access to online newspapers. Usually the information & services centres operators read out the contents preserved in digital format to the illiterate people. Some information and services centres have taken social mobilisation and training initiatives to aware the community people about different social and human development issues.

One of the major strength of information and services centres is the recruitment of intermediaries from the local area who can communicate comfortably with the people and understand the commu-

nity dynamics. Computer literacy of the intermediaries and information and services centres staffs helps them use modern technologies to provide better information and value added services. Some information and services centres practitioners arrange training on operational aspects for the information and services centres staffs which help better manage the organization as a whole. Local information intermediaries have good capacities for personal networking and build confidence among local people about different activities undertaken by the information and services centres.

At the community level both government and non-government service providers do exist. They are involved in operating various development activities in the rural areas. However, government and non-government organisations do not have any substantial role in providing specialized information services to the communities. In most cases still people depend on traditional sources such as neighbour, local physician, teachers and media for information regarding various aspects of life. Only agricultural extension worker plays a major role through providing useful advice and information about agriculture to the community.

The information and services centres can be a repository of indigenous knowledge generation. Old and experienced people (village doctors, farmers, technicians) in the community may be of immense use. They have invaluable indigenous knowledge, which can be explored, generated and used for socio-economic development of the locality. This indigenous technology is effective and environment friendly. (e.g. use of decomposed fish instead of insecticides to drive away insects from eggplants field or trap of light can be used in restraining insects from paddy field).

e-UP could be a good opportunity for the government of Bangladesh and others to introduce e-Government at Local Government Institutions (LGIs) to strengthen their capacity. In Bangladesh UPs are formally entrusted with gazette compulsory and optional functions. ICTs can support the UPs to perform these civic functions like informing people about the services, setting up web notice board that will include all the relevant UP information like budget allocation or block grant for the UP for a year, the area covered under the UP, new development schemes; preserve all information about local people and resources through database, relief and vulnerable group distri-



buton, birth and death registration etc.

Present ICT Act and the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2009 are the two key sources, allowing delivery of financial and critical basic needs services utilizing digital means and modern technologies. Absence of the right to information legislation supplemented by outdated regulations denying people's fundamental right to know and access to basic needs services. Global norms should also be reviewed together these two acts which will build the framework for e-Governance following to e-Development- resulting development in the region.

The primary legislation for the sector should consist of the framework that will be used to regulate the sector. To the extent possible, this should be issued through a legal instrument not susceptible to easy revocation by a government authority in order to ensure stability and predictability. It should lay out the basic elements and framework, such as the establishment of the regulator, the powers and responsibilities of the regulator, the role of the minister responsible for communications, enforcement powers and ability to sanction. While the primary

legislation should address fundamental regulatory issues such as universal service and interconnection, the details of such issues are better addressed through secondary legislation. When looking at primary legislation in both civil and common law traditions, many of the same elements are included.

People's participation in development planning, budget preparation and development projects implementation can be ensured. The management information system of the UP can be digitalized and the UP will have its website which will contain useful information regarding the structure, functions, activities, services of the locality. For instance, records of various services provided by the UP are not maintained properly and records are non-accessible to the beneficiaries which could have paved the way for creeping corruption. Through digitalizing the UP, a better scientific accounting and record keeping system can be developed. Record keeping will become more transparent and updated. Local service providing organisations at the field level and their staff (e.g. health worker, social worker, agricultural extension worker) will

receive necessary information from Information and services centres and ensure people's access to information.

Though Bangladesh has many other problems of overriding importance, its journey has started with due emphasis on e-Governance at the state level. But making the facilities of e-Governance accessible to all strata of people remains a critical problem for Bangladesh because the state is ill equipped to make it happen sooner rather than later. Electronic governance depends on the use of IT by the general population. e-Governance promises a lot to better the service providing functions. It also augurs well for democracy as it has the makings of enhancing people's participation through widespread internet access. If the digital divide is negotiated well, e-Governance- because of its extensive facilitating dimensions has every chance to make the world a better place to live in. Its true significance lies in the proposition that it would pave the way for making people's choices more extensive and sophisticated, enhance people's participation in the spectrum of state policy making thereby giving democracy a better foundation.

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## LAW *campaign*

# Revive the rivers

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RIVERS, often called the life lines of the world or more often the blood lines of the human race have always cherished man from cradle to grave. Today's world is the contribution of the rivers as all the civilizations have started their journey from the river banks. Almost all the towns, cities and localities were formed by the bank of the river. The towns and cities where we live in today were developed by the utilization of the offerings of the rivers. In doing so, we have exploited the rivers causing serious injury to them. Bangladesh, especially the city of Dhaka is not an exception to this. Some recent newspaper reports reveal that truth. The rivers around the city are being narrowed and polluted by the insensible human behaviour towards them.

River pollution is a major problem considering our socio-economic and geographical context. All the rivers around Dhaka are more or less polluted which are increasing gradually. The Buriganga is the most polluted river of the country. The dwellers of the city depend on and suffer from the Buriganga in various ways.

Reasons behind river pollution are diverse and various actors are responsible for those harmful activities to the nature and environment. Dumping of wastes, carrier and land grabbing among others may be identified as the reasons behind the pollution and narrowing of rivers.

We have laws, rules and policies on water resource management, though we do not have law especially on rivers and their management which led to river pollution and river grabbing. The rivers



are being managed by some existing laws which to some extent inadequate and outdated to handle the river management in these days. To discuss about a few, the Bangladesh Water Development Board Act, 2000 can be mentioned. The Act was enacted to ensure development and management of water resources of the

country. In this aspect, the rivers and their management can be covered by this Act. Before the passing of this Act, the Act of 1972 was in operation which was repealed later. Under the provision of this Act (section 3) a board named the Bangladesh Water Development Board is established to perform the activities for efficient

development and management of water resources.

The Board under this Act is authorized to monitor the flow of water of the rivers and channels and underground aquifers as well. For efficient water resource management, the Act has provisions to develop standards and guidelines for operation and maintenance of all water management structures and to take all necessary actions and projects to develop the water management. The Act categorizes two types of functions to be taken by the board; the structural and non-structural functions. For development of rivers and water resources, the board can construct dams, barrages, reservoirs, embankments and while on the other side it can break all illegal structures built on the rivers. To ensure the navigability of the water course the Canals Act 1864 deals with the channel which includes river, canal, khal, nala or water, whether natural or artificial.

Under this Act, the government can authorize any person to make and open any navigable channel, or to clear and deepen any navigable channel, and to stop any watercourse, or make any tracking path. Any other acts necessary for the making or improvement of any such channel can be done within the jurisdiction of this Act. Recently, a taskforce formed by the government has identified some bridges on the rivers around the city which have created obstacles of water flow of the rivers. The HC last June issued a set of directives to complete the demolition of illegal structures and remove the debris by November 30 this year. The drive should continue until all illegal structures are demolished. But we fol-

lowed that the HC had to deliver the directive again on January 24 this year to start the demolition as stipulated by its earlier previous order. Beside the Act, the court at its own motion took the initiative to free the rivers from grabbers which is a step forward made by the High Court to protect the rivers. Concerted actions by all stakeholders can ensure the protection of rivers, which we lag behind. Breaking illegal structures from the rivers, re-excavation and de-siltation of the rivers done by the authority formed under the Act of 2000 should be guided by a sustainable strategy which in the long run will ensure a proper river management standard.

Before the passing of the Act of 2000, we have got in hand a policy on protection and development of environment of the country. The objectives of the Policy are to delineate some guiding principles for protection and development of environment. In the Policy, we do not see any special focus on river management or protecting the rivers from pollution. However, in clause 3.5 of the policy we see some reflections on water development, flood control and irrigation while clause 3.5.5 of the policy particularly stated about protection, management and development of the water bodies. To give effect to the Policy of 1992, the Conservation of Environment Act was passed in 1995 which has given special focus on the formation of an authority to deal with the issues on environment and its protection. We, in this Act like the previous Act and Policy, find no special attention on the river issue. But specific provisions are there on imposing restrictions on vehicles emitting smoke injuri-

ous to health and environment. It was very realistic to impose such restrictions upon the vehicles in those days, because in the 1990s, air pollution was a vital issue of environment concern. But today water pollution, especially the river pollution is added to it with more signs of dangers to life. Application of remedial, corrective and preventive measures in a more coordinated way is required to save the rivers from polluters and grabbers. The authority set up under the Act of 1995 has scope to take both remedial and corrective measures against the polluters under section 4, 7, 8 and 9. The Act of 1995 carries the legacy of the Act of 1997 (Environmental Pollution Control Ordinance) and the Act of 1970 (The East Pakistan Water Pollution Control Ordinance 1970). To try the offences under the above laws, the government has enacted the Environment Court Act, 2000. The Court established under the law has jurisdiction to try the offences under the Act of 1995 or any other law regulating environment in Bangladesh.

Even with all these laws in hand; pollution and illegal occupation of rivers are going unabated throughout the years as if the polluters and the grabbers are above laws. But stricter actions as initiated by the highest court of the country will protect rivers from death. To do so, a coordinated approach by all concerned is needed. Both long term and short-term processes should be there to manage the rivers and their resources. Implementation of law and above all social awareness is necessary to protect the rivers from death.

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