

RIGHT TO INFORMATION

Is it catching on?

More auto-rickshaws!

It will compound Dhaka's traffic jams

THE horrific traffic congestion that Dhaka commuters must suffer everyday has become a chronic problem. Contrary to expert opinion and the numerous studies done on the subject, we are surprised to learn that the government is planning to introduce 5,000 new auto-rickshaws on Dhaka streets in a move that will inevitably make the situation worse, not better. A bus carries approximately 50 passengers. Three auto-rickshaws lined up takes the same space as a bus could carry, at best 12 passengers. Road space in the city is limited and hence, the introduction of so many 3-wheelers may benefit the individual passengers wanting to move from one location to another, but it will do little to facilitate mass movement of people in this city of 15 million or so residents.

Going by what has been printed in this paper, we know that an average of 317 new vehicles hit city streets daily and the bulk of commuters rely on derelict and inefficient buses to travel. Given that road space remains sorely inadequate for a city the size of Dhaka, of which only 8 per cent make up the roads, it has become imperative to maximise road space in the most efficient way. That can only be done if we go for increasing public transport instead of encouraging 4-wheel passenger vehicles and 3-wheelers. And introduction of new buses alone will not help the situation because old minibuses carry too few passengers for the space they occupy, continue to ply the streets, and upping the number of buses will simply create more traffic congestion. We urge authorities to reconsider introduction of so many 3-wheelers, especially when there are more viable options.

Safe street food, finally!

Keep up the good work

WE are delighted and relieved to learn about an initiative by the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) to ensure that street food is prepared and served in a hygienic way. As part of an ongoing 'Safe Food Programme', FAO have donated food carts for vendors; icddr,b has also chipped in and training has been given to these vendors to make sure that the food they will sell is safe.

For Bangladesh, for far too long, food safety is something that is not guaranteed especially when it comes to street food. Many people, especially in the city, depend on street food for sustenance but the level of hygiene of the vendors and the way it is prepared, is frighteningly poor. This results in people contracting all kinds of stomach related diseases, some of them being very serious and difficult to cure. Contaminated food can also cause fatalities. Thus this endeavour, to educate vendors on personal hygiene, safe, clean handling, storage and serving of food, couldn't have come at a more opportune time.

The chief health officer has promised that the DSCC will monitor the activities of vendors and make sure they practice what they have been trained to do. This includes making sure they wear gloves, caps and clean uniforms when handling food and knowing how to keep it safe for consumption. It has been announced that more such carts will be provided for the DSCC to distribute. We commend the DSCC mayor for facilitating such a programme and hope that it is more widespread. In a city that is growing exponentially in terms of its population,

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

THERE are different ways to measure how the Right to Information (RTI) regime is working in a country. A common measure is to see if citizens' demand for information to public officials is increasing steadily. This would indicate that they are becoming more aware of the law and its importance in exercising their democratic right to monitor the work of the government and its machinery. By doing so, they also seek to ensure that public officials are transparent in their work, abide by the laws and are accountable to citizens.

Another measure is to see if public officials are becoming more alert to their duties to citizens and responding to their demand for information in a timely and courteous manner. The idea is that improvements in this regard will eventually lead to systemic change in the way they serve people.

At a different level, the progress of RTI can also be assessed from the nature of information citizens seek from public officials. They resort to the law for various reasons. They may ask for information for personal needs or grievances, like the status of their application to a government office, say for a passport or a license or for electric or gas connections or benefits under a safety-net programme, such as VGF cards, old age or maternity benefits etc. By resorting to the law, they basically convey to public officials that the days are over when they could hide behind the shield of official secrecy to deny citizens their right to know how they go about their jobs.

Beyond personal interest or grievances, citizens may also ask for information that concern welfare of their neighborhood. They may ask, for example, for information relating to repair work on a road or a bridge - when will they be completed, who are the contractors, how were they chosen etc.? This they do to check if any unfair practices are involved.

Information may also be sought on matters that affect the well-being of all citizens. For example, issues concerning the construction of a nuclear power plant - whether the necessary safety measures are in place and compliance with relevant laws has been ensured.

At a higher level, citizens may also ask for information that relate to policy matters, governance issues, legislation, performance of people's representatives and the like. Experience has shown that as people become used to RTI and

understand its potential to impact governance, they learn to scale-up their demand for information, going beyond personal matters to include those that are linked to the good of the society and nation as a whole.

On these counts, how does RTI fare in Bangladesh? To answer, let us consider the indicators identified earlier. To begin with, the quantum of the use of the law by citizens is still negligible. That people's awareness of the law is very limited is obvious from the relatively small number of information requests made to public offices, though it is increasing.

Unfortunately, there is no dependable way to know exactly how much use is being made of the RTI Act by people from different walks of life. NGO experience shows that many RTI applications from marginalised communities do not get recorded as those who obtain benefits by simply using the law do not care about

society as a whole.

We looked at over 80 decisions of BIC, covering the period from October 2015 to February 2016. Our objective was limited to assessing the subjects of applications rather than analysing the decisions themselves. We reserve that for a future column.

Readers may recall that in some earlier columns we had stated that in the initial phase, the RTI Act was largely used by underprivileged and marginalised communities, helped by NGOs, to access their claims under various safety-net programs of the government. However, in the past couple of years, more and more middle class applicants have come in and begun to seek information of a more varied and multifarious nature.

Following are a few examples of information sought by RTI applicants in recent months. They are presented as bullet-points due to space limitations.

NGO experience shows that many RTI applications from marginalised communities do not get recorded as those who obtain benefits by simply using the law do not care about receiving a formal response. Officials concerned also do not wish to record applications and may even avoid reporting them to concerned offices, as they often resort to irregular practices to dispose them off.

receiving a formal response. Officials concerned also do not wish to record applications and may even avoid reporting them to concerned offices, as they often resort to irregular practices to dispose them off. More importantly, no dependable mechanism has yet been found to collect information from all sources. So the numbers reported by the Information Commission may not be fully correct.

There is, however, a surer way to assess qualitative progress by checking the decisions of the Bangladesh Information Commission (BIC) and analysing categories/nature of information citizens seek, which lead to complaints for denial. In this month's column, therefore, we decided to check if RTI applicants are scaling up their demand for information from more mundane personal benefit/grievance-oriented subjects to larger transparency and accountability issues, affecting collective wellbeing of

Applicants wanted to know from concerned authorities:

- percentage of railway tickets reserved for VIPs, railway officials and ordinary citizens.
- amount of money allotted to a MP for development work in his constituency, the amount spent on each project, including proof of expenditure.
- list of services provided by a Upazila Health Centre with names of doctors and list of medicine distributed free, including names of recipients.
- amount of money provided by a Upazila Council to a Union Council for development work, projects undertaken and statement of accounts.
- action taken against persons involved in leaking question papers of public exams.
- number of primary schools in a given Upazila, number of vacant teachers' posts and teachers on leave prior to retirement (LPR).

- amount of money spent by a Cantonment Board in past four years, how much of it was provided by the government and how much from own funds.
- membership of school management committees and resolutions of their meetings.

Majority of other applications were of a similar nature. They show that citizens are increasingly asking for information, which bear on transparency and accountability of public bodies and their adherence to the laws. This forebodes well for the future of the RTI regime. But more such applications are required for systemic impact.

Before concluding, a closer look at a case study may help readers understand the appalling disdain of government officials to citizens' demand for information. The case relates to an RTI application addressed to the Officer-in-Charge of a local police station asking for an order of the High Court on a writ petition filed by the applicant had reached the police station. As the latter refused to receive the hand-delivered application, the applicant re-submitted it by registered mail. When this too yielded no response, he filed a complaint to BIC. The latter had to fix a third date for the hearing, as the respondent police official failed to appear on the first two. On the third day too, he failed to appear, though served with summons by a more secure method. So, the hearing took place in his absence. After considering all factors, BIC decided that the police officer should not only provide the information sought by the complainant but also pay a fine of Tk. 5,000 and face disciplinary action for his brazen disregard of the law.

The case highlights the attitude of many public officials who continue to believe that they are above the law and can disregard it at will. In fact, in majority of cases considered by BIC over the years, the defaulting public officials agreed to provide information only after being summoned to complaint hearings. This is a sad state of affairs and calls for serious corrective measures, including more frequent use of penalty provisions of the law.

The RTI column usually appears on the 15th of every month. However, as the newspaper will not be published on April 15, we are printing it in advance.

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How e-GP save taxpayers tens of billions each year

BJORN LOMBORG

EACH year, Bangladesh spends more than Tk. 72,000 crore on government procurement. That includes paying for anything from Padma Bridge to pencils for government offices and everything in-between. Imagine if this process could be done just 1 percent more efficiently - that would save Tk. 720 crore. As it turns out, it can likely be improved by closer to 10 percent, saving billions of takas that could pay for other projects or services.

Government procurement is fraught with inefficiency. Companies and contractors that want to provide goods and services to the government must currently apply for a tender in-person, showing up at a government office to physically file forms. Sometimes, contractors who have political connections are best placed to win bids, or even to block other contractors who might be able to offer better prices. On other occasions, winning bidders subcontract the work out to other firms, taking their own cut along the way and pushing costs higher and higher.

These practices in public procurement can lead to delays, cost overruns, and subpar output, which all add up to higher costs for the government - which ultimately means higher cost to taxpayers and donors.

How can the national government improve its procurement and ensure that taxpayer funds are spent as wisely as possible?

New research by Wahid Abdallah, a research fellow at the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, examines the effects of transforming the current procurement system into one that uses online systems. Abdallah's study shows that electronic government procurement (e-GP) holds enormous potential benefits for the country - each taka spent on such efforts will do a phenomenal Tk. 663 of good.

An ongoing project started in 2008 by the national government, in conjunction with the World Bank, aims to reform public procurement. By 2011, four Bangladeshi agencies had implemented electronic procurement, representing about 10 percent of all public procurement. The hope was that having contractors bid through online submissions, rather than physically lodging forms in-person, would cause the number of bids to increase significantly. All bidders could also check to see who ultimately won a bid online, increasing transparency of the process.

If anyone can easily bid on a government contract from their office or even own home, and if everyone feels that the process will be fair, more companies are likely to bid. And more bids for a given project means more competition, which should also lead to lower prices tendered to the government.

The research analyses data from the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), one of the four agencies that implemented e-GP in 2011. Government procurement items fall into one of three categories: goods, services, or so-called "works," which lies somewhere in between and often applies to



infrastructure projects. Most of LGED procurement is for works, which also represent 73 percent of all government procurement.

LGED first introduced e-GP as a very small pilot in 2012, when less than 1 percent of all the department's items were procured electronically. In 2013, however, this share jumped to 61 percent as more LGED staff were trained and more bidders registered for the online process. Today, about 95 percent of LGED procurement uses e-GP, which is about as high a rate as can be expected for any agency, given donor stipulations that require using traditional procurement for certain projects.

Before any project, LGED engineers make their own cost estimate for every item that will be procured. This provided a clear measure to track the effects of e-GP. Unsurprisingly, as more and more users adopted e-GP, prices went down - the new price was typically 11.9 percent lower.

The effects of expanding e-GP across most of the other 90 percent of government procurement would be humongous. The costs are straightforward. The majority goes toward purchasing computers and software, costing Tk. 98.58 crore. It will also require training staff to handle e-GP nationwide, as well as paying for operations and maintenance. The total value of these costs spread across the indefinite

future equals Tk. 144 crore.

The benefits would dwarf these costs. Expanding e-GP would bring savings of an estimated Tk. 5,274 crore per year. Across the entire future, e-GP would give total benefits of Tk. 95,677 crore. And this is a cautious estimate, because it includes savings on works procurement only, given that the LGED analysis covered works only. So in all, each taka spent to expand e-GP would yield at least Tk. 663 in benefits.

To give a sense of proportion, total expenditures by the Road Transport and Highways Division were Tk. 5,560 crore for the most recent year data are available (www.mof.gov.bd). So, the benefits from e-GP could pay for nearly all government spending on road systems.

Electronic procurement promises massive benefits to the national government and savings for taxpayers. Would this be one of your top priorities for Bangladesh? Let us hear from you at <https://copenhagen.fbapp.io/e-procurementpriorities>. We want to continue the conversation about how to do the most good for every taka spent.

The writer is president of the Copenhagen Consensus Center, ranking the smartest solutions to the world's biggest problems by cost-benefit. He was named one of the world's 100 most influential people by *Time* magazine.

COMMENTS

"Public bus, not autorickshaw"

(April 12, 2016)

Sumey Islam

The best solution is bus. But here safety is a problem. Bus drivers never fully halt to let off the passengers. I am not saying autorickshaws are super safe but they are better than trying to jump out of a running bus. The authority should look into changing the way the bus system works.

Adam Rashid

It is too late. The damage is done. No matter how many flyovers or other desperate tactics anyone might think of these will not ease the traffic congestion problem.

Mustafizur Rahman

One step forward two steps back.

"No load shedding despite heat wave"

(April 12, 2016)

Romzanul Islam

Is this a joke? If you really missed incidences of load shedding, come to Chittagong and see how horrible it is.

Iftekhar Alam Rajib

We are suffering from load shedding.

Mohiuddin Shafin

Its not load shedding, loads of laughter!

Len McAlpine

Climate change is real.