

# RTI Act: Are users getting smarter?

**SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ**

IN July 2016, a man in Comilla asked the local UNO for some information about taxes and markets including the rules for tax collection from sellers in the local market and whether receipts are provided to taxpayers; whether permission was given to fill the canal adjoining the market, and whether it was leased and to whom; whether measures were undertaken to have the canal recovered from illegal occupiers; and documents on such measures; whether the eateries in the market area are regularly checked to ensure quality of food and, if so, copies of inspection reports.

As usual, the complainant received no response to his Right to Information (RTI) request nor to his appeal. As a result, he complained to the Bangladesh Information Commission (BIC). Shortly thereafter, the complainant was beaten up by assassins, made to sign a blank paper to withdraw his complaint, and threatened with dire consequences unless he apologised to the Union Council Chairman.

The Commission directed the Designated Officer (DO) of the office concerned to provide the requested information to the complainant within the next seven workdays. It further directed him to take necessary legal measures with the help of the UNO and local police head against those found to have been involved in assaulting the complainant, and report back to the Commission. While it is doubtful that the last step took place, the complainant's message sent a strong message through its directives: public authorities must respond to RTI requests. If only the Commission had imposed a fine on the DO, as has been prescribed in the law, the message would have been even stronger. [For further details, see complaint no. 04/2017 on the website of BIC: <http://www.infocm.gov.bd/site/view/publications/2014-2016>]

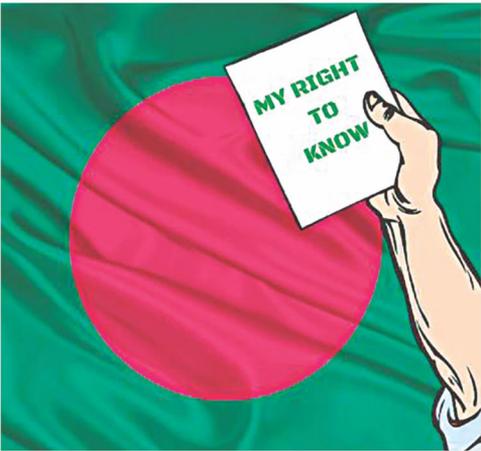
The RTI Act is the only law in the country that allows citizens to monitor the work of

the government and expose wrongdoings. By seeking appropriate information from the vast reservoir of records held by the government, citizens can reap two broad categories of benefits: those of a personal nature and those that benefit society at large. The latter is brought about by ensuring transparency and accountability in the work of public officials, leading to systemic change over time on how they perform their duties.

Personal benefits accrue largely to the most vulnerable and marginalised in our society. Many of them have submitted RTI requests, asking for information about distribution of benefits under the safety-net programmes of the government. Many received benefits, such as old-age and maternity benefits or vulnerable group feeding cards, simply by asking for details of the beneficiaries' list. These are often enough to alert authorities that even the most downtrodden are now aware of their rights and ready to fight for them. It is a shining example of how RTI can help the government to achieve its objectives and the citizens to obtain their legitimate entitlements from it.

The use of RTI to seek redress for personal grievances is equally popular. RTI has been used by students appearing in various public service examinations to find out if they were fairly treated by the examiners. Whether the desired information is received or not, the applications alone help alert the authorities that their performance is being watched by citizens.

On the broader societal good, RTI has ended and ultimately changing the way government relates to the people, there are many examples, too. A student's application to see the relevant documents between a contractor and concerned city authorities led to the contractor undertaking fresh work to re-carpet a road in the applicant's neighbourhood. RTI requests for the list of medicines to be distributed freely by rural clinics led to such lists being put up on the walls of clinics. In many places, RTI has ended longstanding corrupt practices



surrounding the programme.

Recent decisions of the Bangladesh Information Commission indicate how, despite the slow growth of RTI as a tool for social change, there is a growing maturity among users of the law.

In one case (complaint no. 02/2017), the complainant had asked the concerned district authorities whether permission was sought and given to set up markets for sacrificial animals in residential areas for the Eid festival. He asked if specific markets were established legally, and if not, what actions were taken against the persons involved and

their outcome. He also wished to receive a copy of the related government policy and rules. He filed the complaint as he did not receive any response to his RTI request nor to his subsequent appeal.

At the BIC hearing, the respondent Designated Officer (DO) promised to provide the desired information. The BIC directed that this should be done within 14 workdays. As in all such RTI cases, it was up to the complainant to decide what to do with the information received. If irregularity or corruption is detected, it is for him or her to pursue the matter, since BIC has no authority

in this regard. Whatever the action taken, it is safe to say the case has alerted the concerned authorities that such matters are now being closely observed by citizens. This, in turn, may have been beneficial impact on the administration.

Another recent complaint (no. 03/2017) involved a RTI request to the Prime Minister's Office for information on the number of people who had travelled as part of the PM's team to participate in annual UN General Assembly meetings from 2010 to 2015. The total cost involved and who bore the costs, the specific duties of the participants and all office orders in that regard.

The DO of the Prime Minister's Office duly provided the information relating to numbers but failed to do so on costs and duties of the participants. For the latter, the complainant had appealed, but after getting no response, he complained to the BIC.

At the complaint hearing, the DO explained the reasons for not providing the rest of the information but promised to do so by seeking them from the respective offices and the people concerned. The Commission directed him to do so within 20 working days.

This is a shining example of respect to the law from the highest level of the government and should be an example for other authorities to emulate.

The above cases also highlight the vast gaps that still exist between the promise of the law and the reality surrounding its implementation. However, they also evoke a glimmer of hope. Citizens are fast learning about the power of RTI to force public authorities to change their servile mindset of the past and accept transparency and accountability as the new norms. The authorities, too, are slowly realising that the days of wanton disregard of citizens' wishes are over.

Shamsul Bari and Ruhi Naz are Chairman and Project Coordinator (RTI section) respectively of Research Institute Bangladesh (RIB). Email: rib@ricech-bd.com

# Affordable housing: An urban myth or reality?

**ASIF SALEH**

M OHAMMAD Ali sent his home to river erosion, and was forced to come to Dhaka in search of a better future. He is just another face in the sea of 6.5 million people who have migrated to Dhaka.

Ali shares a squatter settlement with five other people. As a rickshaw-puller, his average monthly income is Tk 5,000, which places him just above the national poverty line. The rent costs him Tk 3,000 per month. His utilities cost Tk 550 a month, and this excludes food and other living expenses. Ali faces eviction on a regular basis, a reality for 35 percent of people in Dhaka, who currently live in informal settlements.

As Dhaka's population expands, so does its housing crisis. Currently, seven out of 10 households in Bangladesh dwell in conditions that are not permanent. In Dhaka alone, there are over 4,000 informal settlements, or slums, home to 3.5 million people—who form a majority of the urban workforce in the country. Evidently, affordable urban housing is rapidly becoming a primary issue in Bangladesh.

Land is a scarce resource in the country. This scarcity and lack of access to affordable housing compel many to spend over 50 percent of their total income on rent, despite already living on the poverty line.

The exorbitantly high housing costs leave little to spare for food and other basic necessities, adversely impacting the overall wellbeing of the society and exposing families to a dire cycle of poverty.

Urbanisation in Bangladesh is a reflection of current global practices. At present, four billion people (54 percent of the world's population) live in urban centres, while one billion people live in urban slums. This is a significant increase from the turn of the last century, when it was less than 15 percent. In light of ongoing urbanisation, this figure is expected to grow further. The Sustainable Development Goals make specific provisions for the urbanisation phenomenon in 17 SDGs



policy-makers in the policy stipulations for low-cost urban housing, its implementation requires further deliberation. A number of challenges hinder the implementation of the policy recommendations, including a weak urban policy environment, lack of institutional capacity, inadequate infrastructure, lack of a comprehensive development plan and, most importantly, for the purpose of our discussion, a lack of coordination among development partners.

Government and non-government institutions, academia and the private sector need to work collaboratively on a common platform, in order to increase the salience of the issue, and innovative and scale-affordable quality housing for low-income groups. Pilot models are already in place; the UNDP, for example, has launched a low-income housing model and so has the National Housing Authority. A local collective constituting BRAC University's architecture department, Alive, a local NGO, and the Asian Coalition of Housing Rights piloted a community-led housing model in Jhenaidah.

Meanwhile, with the aim of opening the way for collaborative discussions, strategic planning and future initiatives related to affordable housing, BRAC's urban development programme is organising a national convention on housing finance for people living in urban poverty on Sunday, October 15, 2017.

Even in their pilot phases, the low-cost housing models mentioned above are exemplary. However, if we are to enable sustainable transformative change, scaling is necessary. Financing these low-cost housing models is an investment towards more sustainable cities for everyone.

The mayors of city corporations and municipalities alike will have to play a bigger role as change makers. They must tackle urban housing challenges and address region-specific problems that arise from rapid urbanisation. A more active role in solving the urban housing crisis is a step towards sustainable living in densely populated urban centres.

Asif Saleh is the senior director of strategy, communications and the empowerment of BRAC.

**Scarcity of land and lack of access to affordable housing compel many to spend over 50 percent of their total income on rent, despite already living on the poverty line.**

11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable." The New Urban Agenda explicitly highlights the lack of access to affordable housing as a critical factor in urban poverty.

"Housing Policy: Affordable Homes" took centre stage as the theme for this year's World Habitat Day, a global event held by the United Nations on October 2, 2017. The focus on affordable housing recognises its significance as a precondition for tackling inequalities, reducing poverty, and addressing climate change.

In Bangladesh, the housing concern has turned into a full-blown crisis. Every year, around half a million people migrate to Dhaka from around the country

In order to keep up with this fast-paced population growth, the demand for housing requires introducing 120,000 new units every year. The housing deficit quadrupled in the last decade and, in the absence of adequate measures, the deficit is projected to increase to 8.5 million units by 2021.

**What steps have been taken thus far?**

Bangladesh has made significant progress in the planning of affordable housing policy. The country is a signatory to the New Urban Agenda, which stipulates that housing is a right and a requirement for realising transformative social change. The government also has a National Housing Policy, which was approved by the cabinet in April 2017 and guarantees housing for every citizen. The Bangladesh government's 7th Five-Year Plan, which came into effect in 2015, makes specific provisions for affordable urban housing as a policy concern under its national urbanisation strategy. It presents urban housing and poverty reduction strategies, and puts forth some recommendations including creating efficient housing markets, improving financing mechanisms, easing access to land and housing, upgrading existing informal settlements and introducing low-cost rentals.

**What next?**

Despite the concerns expressed by

PHOTO: STAR

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**EMILIANO ZAPATA**  
A LEADING FIGURE IN THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

*It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

<b>ACROSS</b>	27 Schoolbag item	7 Basketball coach
1 Word starter	29 Office helper	Pat
7 Cincinnati team	33 Schoolbag item	8 Market concern
11 Brining back	34 Dike's kin	9 Propriety
12 "Law & Order"	35 B-B — boy	10 Put in a container
SVU" (co-star)	36 Per —	16 Mortise partner
13 Pressed	37 Addition column	18 Down source
14 Nuts	38 Film set on	20 Less diluted
15 Producers	Pandora	22 Read
16 Choir members	39 Keeness	23 Kind of wax
17 Addition column	40 Bike pair	24 Spot to jot
18 Pooh's pal	<b>DOWN</b>	25 Chide
19 Go around	1 First-rate	28 "Don't Cry for Me" singer
21 Coffee, slangily	2 Showed over	31 Rock genre
22 Lewis Carroll or Mark Twain	3 Summum up	32 Fruit basket items
25 Worker in a garden	4 Skillful handspinning	34 Wash
26 Nevada resort	5 Composer Charles	36 Upper limit
	6 Struck out	

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

**FOCUS SHOOT**  
TEARFUL ELDER  
ALL ELDERLY  
LOT OAT NED  
STATUS MARS  
LITERAL

**WALE SEINER**  
ATE EMB UNO  
WANT AN EYES  
ANTES AMBIT  
SCENE PIERCE

**BEETLE BAILEY**

LOOK! A FLOWER! THAT'S A WEED!

BUT IF WE LET IT SPREAD WE COULD HAVE A WHOLE FIELD OF FLOWERS!

FORGET IT! BEETLE! WEEDS HAVE TO BE REMOVED!

**BABY BLUES**

MOM, WHEN I WAS IN THE EIGHTH GRADE, I WENT TO CANADA ON A SCHOOL TRIP.

WELL, WHEN I WAS IN THE EIGHTH GRADE, I WENT TO CANADA ON A SCHOOL TRIP.

SOMEDAY I'M SPUNNING I'M HARKEN!

YOUR DREAMS... AND SOMETIMES... YOU DON'T TRAVEL TO FANTASY LAND!