

How citizen engagement with RTI law is transforming lives

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

We were particularly encouraged by the remarkable growth in citizens' understanding of the value of the law in monitoring the work of public authorities and drawing their attention to peoples' concerns. They had begun to grasp the tremendous transformative power of the law.

DURING the construction work of a regional highway in Dinajpur, local inhabitants were increasingly bothered by the dust it generated. One of them, Mosaddekul Islam, fired by his new-found knowledge of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, asked the concerned public authority what measures were taken to ensure that no harm was caused to the local population by its operation. On receipt of his RTI request, the project engineer immediately directed the construction firm to spray the affected areas with water twice a day, which was promptly done.

This and similar other stories were shared last month among activists and fans of the RTI Act from all over the country. They had gathered for a virtual meeting to find out how the law had fared during the pandemic. It appeared that fear and devastation caused by the pandemic had spurred their appreciation of the tremendous importance of transparency and accountability in governance. Our earlier fears about the negative impact of the crisis on the operation of the law were largely belied.

We were elated not because a larger number of citizens were utilising the law or had become more proficient in seeking pertinent information from public authorities, nor because the latter had become more responsive to peoples' information requests. Nor had the Information Commission become more attentive to removing impediments citizens face in applying the law, or more prone to chastise public officials for disobeying its provisions. We were particularly encouraged by the remarkable growth in citizens' understanding of the value of the law in monitoring the work of public authorities and drawing their attention to peoples' concerns. They had begun to grasp the tremendous transformative power of the law. A few examples will illustrate the point.

RTI application stops embezzlement of public fund

An RTI activist, Mominul, of Taraganj upazila of Rangpur, once discovered that a group of day labourers who were beneficiaries of the government's "40-day Work Programme", meant to help the unemployed during times of employment scarcity, were engaged in earth-filling work under its "Housing Programme" for the homeless. As he knew that there were separate budgets for the two programmes, he suspected that the contractor was perhaps trying to dupe the government by engaging the work programme beneficiaries on the housing programme, thereby embezzling the money allotted for the latter. So, he decided to ask for copies of relevant project documents from the project coordinator's office. Soon after submitting his RTI request, he came to know that the concerned labour force was removed from the earth-filling work under the housing programme and engaged in road construction work elsewhere. As the news spread, peoples' appreciation of the timely RTI intervention by Mominul spread far and wide.

RTI halts illegal money collection by traffic police

RTI activist Marufa Akhtar of Dinajpur town was vexed by the police practice of seizing auto-rickshaws under one pretext or another and releasing them afterwards against payment of a so-called fine without any money receipt. She decided to submit an RTI request to the local police authority seeking to know if there was any rule about not providing money receipts against fines levied and how the money thus collected was accounted for. She was soon informed that the police super had issued orders to stop the practice and that the defaulting police officials would be properly dealt with in the future. The odious practice has reportedly stopped now.

RTI resolves long-standing problem for a local community

RTI activist Nowshad Hossain



ILLUSTRATION: COLLECTED

of Dinajpur came to know that the construction work on a road in Chirirbandar upazila had remained stalled for over 18 months. He decided to submit a RTI request to the upazila authorities asking for information relating to the suspension of the work for such a long time and the expected time for its completion. Within ten days of his submission, local residents were pleasantly surprised to find that the construction work had resumed.

RTI reveals irregularities in purchase of musical instruments

RTI buff Mominul Islam Sarker of Taraganj upazila in Rangpur wanted to find out how many cultural bodies of his area had received government fund designed to promote cultural activities. He submitted an RTI request to the upazila office asking for the list of local clubs which received such funding during the year 2019-2020. On the basis of the response he received, Mominul checked with his local club and discovered that not only was no musical instrument bought with the money, but the fake receipt adduced as evidence of such a purchase was a voucher from the local brick kiln.

The news both amused and angered the local population. Mominul subsequently submitted a complaint to the upazila executive.

RTI application stops irregularity in agricultural service

The same Mominul Islam Sarker of Taraganj upazila, now well-known in the area for his RTI activism, submitted an RTI request to the upazila agriculture office asking for the list, with photographs, of local cardholders and recipients of government stimulus packages on agriculture. He received the information in due course. Upon checking the list, he discovered that same pictures appeared on cards of different persons and there were other irregularities as well. So, he followed up with another RTI request seeking reasons for the irregularities and asking to know whether remedial measures were taken. In his response, the designated officer admitted that irregularities were indeed found, and remedial measures already taken. It increased Mominul's faith in RTI, as his earlier efforts to engage the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) in this regard had failed.

The examples give us hope about the future of RTI in the country. They demonstrate the progress made in inculcating an awareness among the users that the law can be invoked for myriad reasons, impacting society and the nation at large, and not for personal needs alone.

To translate the progress into furthering the overall objectives of the law more proficiently, it may be useful for the captains of RTI to unpeel the various components of the concept. Towards that end, we share below our own perceptions of the subject and hope that others in the civil society will do the same.

To us, the RTI law aims to do the following: 1) promote citizens' role in monitoring the work of the government and other public bodies; 2) help citizens share their concerns on specific governance issues with the relevant public authorities through seeking pertinent information on them; 3) assist public authorities to realise that their work is being watched by the people and they may face consequences for any delinquency; 4) create opportunities for public officials to interact with the people and become more people-friendly and law-abiding; 5) change the age-old, "ruler-ruled" mentality in people's mind and make them realise that public officials are not their masters but allies; 6) contribute to systemic change in the way public authorities do their job; 7) inculcate a sense of "citizenship entitlement" among the people and make them feel that they have a say in governance matters, whatever their place in society; and 8) strengthen democracy by facilitating the development of a "whistle-blower" role for citizens to alert the government about irregularities in governance and promote transparency and accountability in public work.

We leave it to the readers to decide how many of these objectives have been achieved through the above examples.

Shamsul Bari and Ruhi Naz are Chairman and RTI Coordinator respectively of Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB). Email: rib@citech-bd.com

Food and the Planet

JAYDEV JANA

OVER the past century, the onset of industrial agriculture and the Green Revolution (more synthetic fertiliser, better pesticides, modern management techniques, better irrigation methods, and more productive cultivars) kept pace with the growing population and made a mockery of popular environmental books such as "The Population Bomb" (1968) by Paul Ehrlich that confidently predicted mass famine and death by the 1980s. While the current production of food is sufficient to meet the demand even for the projected global population of 9.8 billion in 2050, a new UN report reveals a stubborn reality of "immense" challenge: globally, more than 820 million people (or one in nine people) are hungry and malnourished, and the figure is rising.

Among the starving people, "about 7 to 8 million people die every year of hunger or hunger related causes," as estimated by the World Food Programme (WFP). Global hunger today is a consequence of many factors including poverty, natural disasters, lack of economic access (whether people can afford food) and physical access (whether food is reaching them), failed states and war.

India has proudly been projected by its government as self-sufficient in production as well as an exporter of food. But tragically, the availability of food to its people is so inadequate that the country stood 97th among 125 countries in Oxfam's Food Availability Index (2018). The Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2020, which ranks India 94th among 107 nations, has once again brought to the fore the government's failure to provide adequate food to a substantial segment of population despite the enactment of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) in 2013. With over 200 million food-insecure people, India is now home to the largest number of hungry people in the world.

In economics, the Engel's law establishes a strong and positive relationship between the level of income and the demand for greater varieties of food, and also indicates an element for projecting food demand growth. According to the law, as incomes increase, the demand for livestock products such as meat, milk and eggs rises, compared with the food of plant origin such as cereals. Livestock products are not only tasty and provide high-value protein but are also important sources of a wide range of essential micronutrients, in particular minerals such as iron and zinc, and vitamins such as vitamin A and vitamin B12. This change of food habits is known as dietary transition. The demand for livestock products, particularly meat, is growing. Over the past 50 years, meat production has more than quadrupled. Growth in meat consumption accelerates as countries pass through middle-income stages.

Worldwide, the growing addition for livestock products is putting too much pressure on land, water and environment

leading to climate change. Half of the world's habitable (ice and desert free) land is used for agriculture. The area covered is around 51 million square km. Around 70 percent of global freshwater withdrawals are for agriculture. Nutrient-rich pollutants of agriculture caused eutrophication in 78 percent of global ocean and fresh water.

When it comes to tackling greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions vis-à-vis climate change, the focus usually tends to be on "clean energy" solutions—the deployment of renewable or nuclear energy, or transition to low-carbon transport. Indeed, energy, whether in the form of electricity, heat, transport or industrial processes, accounts for 76 percent of GHG emissions. But the global food system, which broadly encompasses production and post-harvest processes such as processing as well as distribution, is a key contributor to emissions.

Since 2018, scientists from world

GHGs emitted every year due to human activities. This means, our food system is as polluting as sectors like electricity and heat production (which accounts for 25 percent of GHGs) and industry (21 percent), and are more polluting than transportation (14 percent) and buildings and energy use (16 percent).

Under the 2015 Paris Agreement, nations set a target to limit global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius, preferably to 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to pre-industrial levels. Based on scientific evidence, an IPCC report concludes that in order to limit warming to 2 C, CO2 equivalent CO2e emissions would need to be reduced by 25 percent by 2030 (compared to the 2010 level) and go to zero by 2070. To reach 1.50 C, CO2e emissions would need to go down by 45 percent by 2030 and to zero by 2050. The food system itself is enough to heat up the planet above the 1.5 degree C target under the Paris Agreement sometime between

for livestock (16 percent) as for crops for human consumption (8 percent). Agriculture expansion results in the conversion of forests, grasslands and other carbon "sinks" into cropland or pasture resulting in carbon dioxide emissions. Here, "land use" is the summation of land-use change, savannah burning and organic soil cultivation (ploughing and overturning of soil).

Third, supply chains account for 18 percent of food emissions: this chain consists of transport (6 percent of food emissions), food processing (4 percent), packaging (5 percent) and retailing (3 percent).

Fourth, crop production accounts for 31 percent of food emissions. Twenty-one percent of food emission comes from crops for direct human consumption, and 6 percent from producing animal feed. Moreover, there are direct emissions which result from agricultural production. This includes elements such as the release of nitrous oxide from application of fertilisers and manures, methane emissions from rice production and CO2 from agricultural machinery.

People across the world are becoming concerned about climate change. On an average, 8 in 10 people see climate change as a major threat to their country. So, it is essential to reduce GHG emission of food production. The September 2020 assessment by UNEP says that reducing land-use change and conservation of natural habitats alone could lower emissions by 4.6 gigatonnes of CO2 equivalents (GtCO2e) a year. Reducing food loss and waste, which accounts for 8 percent of anthropogenic emissions, could lower the emission load by 4.5 GtCO2e. Improving production methods and reducing methane from livestock could lower emissions by up to 1.44 GtCO2e. A massive 8 GtCO2e of emission reduction could be achieved by including higher proportion of plant-based foods in the diet than animal-based foods.

The EAT-Lancet Commission on Food, Planet, Health has set global targets for food systems that are environmentally sustainable and human health. Since all of the 14 GtCO2e from food system cannot be eliminated by 2050, as it is intrinsic to the biological processes in plants and animals, the commission has set the planetary boundary for food production emissions, or carbon budget, at a maximum of 5 GtCO2e. The remaining 9 Gt could principally be mitigated by shifting of diets from animal-based diets to plant-based diets (Vegan diets) and by changing production practices and reducing food loss and waste. CO2 emissions from plant-based products are as much as 10-50 times lower than most animal-based products.

In the words of Albert Einstein: "Nothing will benefit the earth and increase the chances for survival of life on Earth as the evolution of a vegetarian diet."

Jaydev Jana is a columnist at The Statesman. Courtesy: Asia News Network (ANN)



PHOTO: REUTERS

over have been working overtime to understand the unexplored links between food systems, health and climate change. The most important insight from their study is that there are massive differences in GHG emissions from different foods. Overall, animal-based foods tend to have a higher footprint than plant-based. CO2 is the most important GHG, but not the only one; agriculture is a larger source of other GHGs. Hence, to capture all GHG emissions from food production, researchers expressed them in kilogramme of CO2 equivalents (CO2e).

In September 2020, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) along with three international organisations, EAT, WWF and Climate Focus, released a report that says that the food production line of the world—which involves everything from growing and harvesting crops to processing, transporting, marketing, consumption and disposal of food and related items—that sustains around 7.8 billion people accounts for about a quarter (21 to 37 percent) of

2051 and 2063. This has been noted in the November 2020 issue of the Science journal. There are four key elements to consider when trying to quantify food GHG emissions.

First, livestock and fisheries account for 31 percent of food emissions: Livestock—animals raised for meat, dairy, eggs and seafood production—contribute to emissions in several ways. For example, ruminant livestock—mainly cattle—produce methane through their digestive processes (in a process known as "enteric fermentation"). Manure management, pasture management, and fuel consumption from fishing vessels also fall into this category. This 31 percent relates to on-farm "production" emission only. It does not include land-use change or supply chain emissions from the production of crops for animal feed (these figures are included separately in the other categories).

Second, land use accounts for 24 percent of food emissions: twice as many emissions result from land use

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Slate-colored
 - 5 Disgusting
 - 10 Try to hit
 - 12 Main artery
 - 13 Person in a fashion ad
 - 15 For each
 - 16 Pig's place
 - 17 Notre Dame's Parseghian
 - 18 Become sharply attentive
 - 20 Went out, as a fire
 - 21 Glossy
 - 22 Son of Seth
 - 23 Hog the mirror
 - 25 Horn sound
 - 28 Whiskers
 - 31 Just
- DOWN**
- 32 "Paper Roses" singer Marie
 - 34 Sleuth Spade
 - 35 Take wing
 - 36 Homer's bartending pal
 - 37 Firefighters, in slang
 - 40 Like Poe tales
 - 41 Spock's father
 - 42 Winter gliders
 - 43 Seed holders
 - 8 Sound system
 - 9 Leafy courses
 - 11 Fragrance counter bottle
 - 14 Mouth of a furnace
 - 19 Energetic
 - 20 Jeans material
 - 24 Cake courses
 - 25 Honchos
 - 26 Tooth layer
 - 27 Writer Leonard George
 - 29 Horror director
 - 30 Was a noisy sleeper
 - 33 Office fixtures
 - 35 Club costs
 - 38 Young one
 - 39 Faucet

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.



WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS

T R A P M A N I C
 E N O R A T O R
 A L I T D O N A T E
 C A S S I U S L E G
 E Y E H O L E I R A
 S P I T S T O N E H A I R
 H A N S B E T T O N E D
 O R E B L A S T I T
 W A X R E S P I R E
 E D I S O N O B O E
 R E L O A D T I N T
 S E N D S S A S H

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

