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RTI Act 2009: A powerful tool against poverty



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Rezia Khatun, a 36-year-old woman, became destitute after her husband suddenly died. With three children to look after, she resorted to begging for a living.

One day, Rezia met Sabikunnahar, a Right to Information activist trained by D.Net, a reputed Bangladeshi NGO. Rezia learnt from Sabikunnahar how to access various government services and decided to apply for a Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) card, under the government's social safety-net programme. Together they went to see the chairman of the local Union Parishad (UP) in Netrokona district, and described her situation to him. The chairman agreed to provide her a card but failed to deliver. Subsequently, Sabikunnahar learnt that the government was allocating more VGD cards and asked Rezia to apply for one. But her application was denied on the plea that no additional allotment of VGD cards were available.

Later on, Rezia and Sabikunnahar came to know that their local MP was distributing VGD cards through party members instead of going through the Union Parishad. Together, they decided to submit an RTI application to the UP Secretary, wherein Rezia asked to know how many VGD cards had been allotted to their Union that year, whether she was eligible for one and how the cards were distributed.

The UP Secretary provided Rezia the desired information which revealed that she was in fact eligible for one. As a result, the UP Chairman was compelled to allot a VGD card for her. Since then, Rezia gave up begging.

Rezia's is just one story among millions. Bangladesh's socio-economic development is now widely acclaimed. By many metrics, the development trajectory of Bangladesh is very impressive. The fall of poverty incidence to around 30 percent from 60 percent not very long ago has confounded critics who had predicted the country to be a perennial "basket case" at the time of its birth.

A key factor for success is the government's social safety-net programmes under the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS). These are aimed at helping the most vulnerable to cope with specific hardships. Popular among the programmes are Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), hundred days' work, old age benefits, maternity benefits, benefits for widows, oppressed, and destitute women, etc.

The importance of NSSS to the government was underlined by the Finance Minister in his budget proposal earlier this month. He announced that the programmes would be made more targeted and focused, with increased coverage and allocation. Tk. 452.30 billion, which is, 13.28 percent of the total budget of the country and 2.31 percent of GDP, has been budgeted for FY 2016-17. It is 16.98 percent higher than the previous year.

While the government's commitment to the programmes and their positive outcomes are well-established, circumstantial and anecdotal evidences reveal that the benefits of the programmes do not always reach the rightful claimants. In fact, a widely held view is that about 30 percent of the benefits go to non-deserving claimants through corrupt practices of officials concerned. Whatever the slippage, it is obvious that the government's objectives would be better served if they were eliminated or at least reduced.

Some hope was generated in this regard by the adoption of the Right to Information Act, 2009. A number of NGOs and social activists in the country immediately saw the tremendous power of the Act to promote transparency and accountability in the work of public officials and thereby to combat corrupt practices that have accrued over the years in the delivery of safety-net benefits.

The NGOs went about spreading awareness of the Act to people, particularly at the grassroots level. In many cases they helped them, literally by holding their hands, to make RTI applications to concerned authorities. By asking to see, for example, the lists of safety-net beneficiaries and how they were compiled, the applicants were able to make the authorities realise, though in a very limited scale, that their days of abuse of the system and arbitrary decision-making were over. Citizens are now empowered to probe how government decisions are made.

Initially, the authorities were able to skirt the problem by offering the desired benefits to the applicants in order to avoid providing written responses. They feared that such responses could expose their wrong-doings. Over time, however, the applicants came to understand that apart from getting the benefits, they must also insist on written responses to promote systemic change. But alas, such interventions are very few and far between. There are not enough NGOs or activists in the

country who have the means or interest to help such people. It is strange that a politically and socially alert nation like Bangladesh is still to discover the power of RTI.

On the other hand, members of a landless group of women in Meherpur district, organised by Nijera Kori, a reputed NGO of Bangladesh, learnt about irregularities in the allocation of cards under the Maternal Health Voucher Scheme of the government. Through it, impoverished pregnant women are entitled to many free health services.

The members met with expectant mothers who claimed that the cards were being distributed to women from wealthier families. Moreover, health officials had taken bribes of Tk. 200 per card from each of the 20 pregnant women who had received the cards in their area. Bribes were asked from four other families who were denied the cards for not paying the bribes. So the members decided to use RTI to obtain the correct information.

The President of the Gangni Landless Committee and three other members, who were trained by Nijera Kori on RTI, jointly submitted a RTI request to the Upazila Health Officer seeking information on the maternal health voucher scheme. They asked in particular how many cards were distributed monthly in the concerned UPs and Municipal Corporation under the scheme; the criteria for selection of families for distribution of cards; who selected the beneficiaries and distributed the cards, etc.

In response, they only received some quantitative data on the number of cards distributed in the respective areas. Upon discussing the matter among themselves, the group decided to file a formal RTI appeal with the appellate authority and to collect specific evidences of irregularities. On July 29, 2010, more than 200 men and women staged a demonstration against irregularities in the project and handed over a memorandum with signatures of community members to the civil surgeon, copied to relevant government offices.

Upon probing, the civil surgeon found that in the areas concerned, the cards were indeed given to relatively wealthier families and there was corruption in project implementation. As more than 300 members of the landless committee had gathered in the village during his visit, demanding justice, the civil surgeon had to provide them with particulars about the programme, including beneficiary profiles, selection criteria and procedures.

Armed with these, the group gathered in the village, identified local beneficiaries, and proposed the names of 20 impoverished and pregnant women for benefits under the scheme. All 20 were given the cards and benefits under the scheme. The health officer was transferred out of his post after alleged irregularities and corruption were proven. He was also forced to return the money he had collected as bribes.

Such is indeed the power of RTI. And yet the Act is hardly known for being put to use in significant numbers. It has so far worked mainly with the marginalised and disadvantaged communities because of the help of NGOs and activists. The educated and the middle classes are yet to be fired by the powerful reach of the law. If only they extended a helping hand to the needy to obtain their rightful claims under various programmes of the government, the RTI ball will keep rolling till

others begin to pick it up. Additionally, it will quicken the pace of reducing poverty and achieving middle-income-country status for Bangladesh sooner than later.

If, however, the law is not put to use by citizens in significant numbers, there is a danger that it may slowly wither away. That will be a great loss indeed for the nation. Citizens will lose the only law of the land that allows them to monitor the work of the government. And the government will be deprived of people's support to advance its reform and development programmes.

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