Most countries of the world have moved in the past 50 years from the age-old practice of government secrecy towards making their work largely accessible by the public through Right to Information (RTI) or Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation. Despite this slow revolution, secrecy in government work remains a deeply entrenched tradition. Even in more mature democracies, governments remain ever ready to limit the operation of the law whenever possible. We saw this during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

This resistance is not difficult to understand. Governments do not like that their shortcomings or wrongdoings are discovered by citizens. RTI/FOI acts are instruments to make that possible. They arose from citizens’ rights movements, to the growth of consumerism, to distrust of the bureaucracy, to the struggle for press freedom, etc. They gave rise to public pressure on governments to adopt the law.
In more recent decades, additional factors have influenced government decisions. Not least, international lenders often tie loans to the recipient governments' adoption of transparency and accountability legislation to fight corruption. In fact, supranational bodies like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, and the Council of Europe have promoted the law as an essential component of open and democratic government.

When such laws take shape, countries may be ill-prepared for them: the government may not have the capacity or willingness to apply the law, and citizens may not be equipped to make use of it. Such revolutionary laws require a fundamental change in the mind-set of public authorities to move away from their deep-seated secretive tradition, and in the community at large. As a result, the law remains largely unutilised or underutilised in many countries including Bangladesh.

Countries fare better where the adoption of the law was preceded by a peoples' reform movement, or where the civil society is deeply committed and works unitedly to reap the benefits.

Effective implementation of the law is thus dependent upon a clear understanding by citizens of its objectives and goals and their preparedness to use it. This cannot happen without a serious commitment of civil society groups, such as non-governmental organisations and voluntary agencies/associations working for peoples' welfare in various sectors. They must remember that there are no areas of public life (in which public authorities are engaged) that cannot benefit from the application of the RTI Act. In fact, in Bangladesh, whatever progress has been achieved in implementing the RTI Act so far was possible due largely to the commitment and dedication of many NGOs. There is a need for more.

We call on development workers, professional groups such as doctors' and lawyers' associations, and all those working in other sectors of public life to realise their stake in the law. Not to speak of journalists and media houses, of course. Any area of activity where government and other public bodies are involved, either directly or indirectly, can benefit from their promotional and watchdog role.

We propose a road map for these organisations.

**Educate your members, stakeholders, boards and beneficiaries.**
Hold workshops, seminars, community dialogues—whatever platforms work for your group. Use these to achieve several goals as outlined below.

Help citizens understand the importance of RTI not only for their personal needs, but also for the good of their neighbourhood, village, town, city and the country at large. Show how RTI can bring about good governance.

Draw attention to the unique and distinctive nature of the law. One: RTI is pre-eminently a peoples' law, enacted to empower people vis-à-vis the government and other public authorities. Unlike other laws that are enforced by governments, the RTI Act can only be enforced by citizens. Two: the act provides creative opportunities for citizens to use it for improvement of public services. The more creative and imaginative they are, the more useful can be the outcome of their interventions. Three: the law provides a direct role for citizens to play in the governance of the country, an area which was traditionally the sole preserve of governments. Four: it is a law that governments are most wary of because of its capacity to unearth unpleasant truths about their activities. And five, perhaps most importantly: it is a law which can lead to improved citizen-government relationship and thereby contribute to better governance for the people.

**Publicise stories about the use of RTI.**

Use interpersonal communication, scholarly publications, the media and social media to talk about the law. We have done that regularly in this column and intend to continue to do so.

**Be inspired by others.**

We can draw lessons from experience accumulated over the years in our own country. One: the most formidable hurdle for RTI users is their intrinsic disbelief that the government attitude towards official secrecy has changed at all. In fact, it may have even worsened in recent years, as witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Two: what assurances are there that public authorities, confronted with unpleasant information requests, will not retaliate by various means at their disposal? Three: what if they do not respond to the requests, or the independent compliance mechanism of the Information Commission does not do its work? And four: is it worth spending time and money to appear before the Commission for complaint hearings if there is no assurance that the provisions of the law would prevail?
Remember that all such laws go through teething problems. Some of these have begun to fade as both citizens and public officials become accustomed to the law. The need is to accelerate the improvements, which can only happen by using the law more, not less.

As long as the law is not abused to settle private scores and used primarily to make the work of public offices more transparent and accountable, leading to systemic changes, there is reason to be optimistic. Helping citizens to learn to use the RTI Act through seeking information on more innocuous subjects in the beginning has led to improved understanding and better interaction between citizens and public offices.

Civil society groups can play an important role to accelerate the momentum by playing a watchdog role for a seamless operation of the law, and RTI practitioners are available to advise and help, including the present authors.

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