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## Revisiting the role of RTI for sustainable development



'While other laws allow governments to regulate public life, the RTI Act lets citizens regulate the work of governments themselves.' Photo: Collected



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We must not forget that we cannot bring good fortune for the people if our characters do not change! By rising above nepotism, corruption and self-deception, all of us have to be engaged in self-criticism, self-restraint, and self-purification."

These are words Bangabandhu used to address the nation on December 25, 1974, underlining his views on good governance. Thirty-five years later, his daughter, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, translated them into the Right to Information Act (RTI) 2009.

She quoted them in her own message to the nation, contained in a government document published in October 2012. Entitled "Commitment for Golden Bengal: National Integrity Strategy of Bangladesh", it outlined her government's vision to achieve Bangabandhu's dream of Shonar Bangla.

The importance of good governance for lasting development came into sharp focus during last month's celebrations of the golden jubilee of the independence of Bangladesh and the birth centenary of Bangabandhu. As successive speakers from home and abroad extolled the phenomenal development of the country under her leadership, Prime Minister Hasina reiterated her commitment to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 to keep the momentum.

Goal 16 of the SDGs underscores the importance of a properly functioning administrative system for sustainable development. Right to information is considered an essential part of it as it empowers people with knowledge to demand services from public authorities and promote accountability on development issues.

But RTI is difficult to implement. While other laws allow governments to regulate public life, the RTI Act lets citizens regulate the work of governments themselves. Obviously, they do not like it and are often unprepared to implement it sincerely. Only citizens can do that.

Certain aspects of the system must, however, be set up by the government. Proper rules and regulations, necessary institutions as well as infrastructure including an independent Information Commission—which are essential for its implementation—can only be established by the government. This was done fairly quickly in Bangladesh.

The government also has to ensure that public authorities comply with the provisions of the law. It cannot function properly unless they abide by its provisions and respect legitimate demands for information from citizens. The impartial role of the Information Commission is also fundamental for fair dispute resolution between the two sides. The government can help by ensuring a transparent selection process of the commissioners.

But for all these to happen, citizens must lead. Their collective efforts to remove all impediments to its use, and ensure due respect for its provisions, keeps the law thriving in many countries. Otherwise, it stumbles.

More importantly, however, citizens must use the law efficiently to realise its full potential. This is not easy, and is acquired through long practice. Most people see RTI as a tool for public accountability. However, there is more to it than that. Scholars have identified two main models based on the nature and extent of information citizens seek from public bodies with public or

private goals. Obviously, the use varies between countries. The more advanced a society is, the higher is the level of its RTI use.

The public goal model is indeed based on the accountability concept. Under it, citizens seek information mainly for political mobilisation and oversight of public work. They are normally linked to matters of public interest. Social activists, journalists and political workers are the main seekers of such information. By obtaining information on the performance or decision-making activities of the government, they can, for example, demand better public services and denounce corruption.

The accountability model is, however, only "the tip of the iceberg". The use of RTI for private goals is more the norm. Under this model, people seek information primarily for private/personal goals of a mundane nature, with little potential for publicity or demand-making on behalf of collective goals.

Examples of such use include information for private problems, such as in the business sector (e.g. policies, rules and regulations, tenders, contracts), for personal needs (e.g. government benefits such as Safety Net programmes), for official procedures (e.g. obtaining passport, gun license) etc. While such use is legitimate, it may be asked if they justify investments in costly RTI mechanisms, as much of such information can be obtained by means other than RTI. So why RTI?

We need to answer that question in Bangladesh because private needs are still the main reason for RTI use here. Should we be satisfied with such use? If not, what should be our strategy? Sticking to low-level intervention means that the accountability goal is underutilised and the impact of the law on sustainable development is minimised.

True, the accountability path is more difficult, for two reasons mainly. First, the unhelpful attitude of many public officials who fear negative consequence arising from disclosure; and second, using the law for accountability purposes requires people to be knowledgeable about government procedures. People with such knowledge have so far stayed away from RTI. Unless they are brought in, there will always be a gap in this area. This, in turn, impacts negatively on the availability of enough knowledgeable persons to form pressure groups to make meaningful demands on the authorities for amelioratory measures.

The situation, however, is not hopeless. Despite shortcomings, the law has survived for almost twelve years, albeit somewhat hesitantly. There is a slight increase in the number of annual RTI demands. The latest Annual Report of the Information Commission records around 12,000 requests made in 2019 compared to 7,000 recorded in earlier years. The number, though, is still negligible given the size and political level of the population.

Before we conclude, some reflections on the roles of the three main protagonists may be in order. The government must appreciate that to sustain the pace of development, people's participation in the process is essential. RTI can help to do that. There is clear evidence that RTI interventions by citizens in the delivery of government's Safety Net programmes for disadvantaged groups have yielded positive results. It can be extended to other areas too.

A sure way to boost peoples' participation in the RTI process would be for the government to appoint an RTI enthusiast at the Information Commission. By doing so, the RTI regimes in India, Sri Lanka, and more recently in Pakistan, were patently energised. The same can happen if the Information Commission is encouraged to apply the penalty provisions of the law on defaulting public officials more confidently.

Much has been said already about what citizens can do to advance the law. Perhaps the most important requirement on their part is to have faith in the system. Negative attitudes, however justified, will take us nowhere. The government is not a monolith and there are many government officials who have shown faith in the law. Others will emerge through practice, because the law benefits everybody.

The website of the Cabinet Division of the Prime Minister's Office, which coordinates implementation of the RTI Act by different ministries, informs us that nine committees/working groups have been set up over the years at different levels of administration to ensure that the progress of RTI is assessed regularly and coordinated properly. This is indeed very encouraging. But citizens must keep tabs on them through RTI.

Another government document deserving citizens' attention is entitled "Connecting Government to Citizens: Implementing Right to Information Act 2009 in Bangladesh: Strategic Plan 2015-2021". Available on the Cabinet Division's website, it provides a clear picture of the government's strategy on RTI. By monitoring implementation, citizens can ensure that the promises are kept. Together we can sustain the momentum of our impressive development record.

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