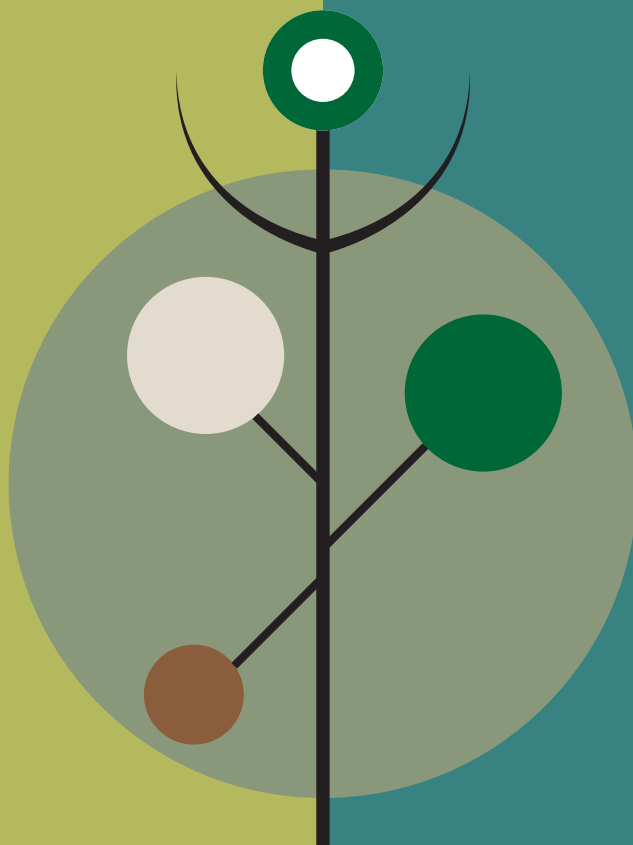


A CUMULATIVE REPORT
TO ASSESS PROJECT
PERFORMANCES FOR
PROJECTS TITLED

"ADVANCING ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY THROUGH THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION"

FROM 2018 TO 2023



A Cumulative Report to Assess Project Performances
for Projects Titled
**"ADVANCING ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY
THROUGH THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION"**
FROM 2018 TO 2023

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Jully 2024

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Chapter 1: Introduction	3
Methodologies and Methods	5
Chapter 2: Understanding the Core Principle of RTI Act 2009 in Bangladesh	7
Chapter 3: Prescribed Process of the Right to Information Act	10
Chapter 4: Key Achievements Advancing Accountability and Transparency through the Right to Information	12
Projects Performance	16
Chapter 5: Using Case Studies to Highlight RIB's Achievements	21
Chapter 6: Challenges Faced in the Implementation of the RTI Processes and Projects	29
Chapter 7: Concluding Remarks and Recommendations	35
Strengthening Implementation	35
Capacity Building	36
Engage Civil Society	36
Addressing Challenges	36
Recommendations for additional enhancement of skills and knowledge	38
Recommendations for Future Campaigns	38
Recommendations for Enhancing Communication Materials	39
Recommendations for Future Local Advocacy	39

Executive Summary:

This Cumulative Assessment Report evaluates the impact of three phases of the project titled “Advancing Accountability and Transparency through the Right to Information (RTI)” implemented by Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB). The project, which spanned from 2018 to 2023, aimed to promote transparency and accountability in public institutions by raising awareness and increasing the utilization of the RTI Act among citizens, particularly in marginalized communities. The project received support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and was implemented in eight districts of Bangladesh: Dhaka, Gazipur, Dinajpur, Nilphamari, Rangpur, Bogura, Rajshahi, and Moulvibazar.

Key Achievements:

1. **Increased RTI Usage:** Through the efforts of RIB and its partners, a total of 13,771 RTI applications were submitted during the project period. The initial phase focused on encouraging ordinary citizens to use RTI to request basic public services and entitlements, while later phases shifted focus to more complex issues involving transparency and accountability. Significant engagement occurred in rural and marginalized communities where 4700 RTI applications were submitted in the first phase alone.
2. **Capacity Building:** RIB facilitated capacity-building workshops, training sessions, and awareness-raising programs to enhance the understanding of the RTI Act among citizens, community-based organizations (CBOs), and public officials. Key partnerships were formed with legal aid organizations, civil society groups, universities, and RTI activists, leading to an increase in RTI defenders across the country.
3. **Strengthening Government Transparency:** The project fostered a culture of transparency in public service delivery by facilitating dialogue between public officials and citizens. This led to improved public service delivery in sectors such as healthcare, education, and land management. Government officers in the target districts, particularly in Dinajpur and Rajshahi, began including RTI activists in decision-making processes for services like beneficiary selection for public programs.
4. **Empowerment of Marginalized Communities:** The projects empowered marginalized groups by increasing their knowledge of their rights under the RTI Act. Citizens used RTI to challenge government actions and secure transparency in areas like public healthcare, environmental sustainability, and service delivery.
5. **Strategic Partnerships:** RIB formed partnerships with civil society organizations, legal aid groups, and journalists to support RTI advocacy, training, and awareness campaigns.

6. **Key Case Studies:** Several case studies demonstrated the power of RTI in exposing corruption, ensuring environmental sustainability, and improving government service delivery. Notable examples include the successful exposure of corruption in a government housing project in Nilphamari, and efforts to address deforestation through RTI in Dinajpur.

Challenges encountered: Despite the successes, several challenges hindered the full realization of the RTI Act's potential. These included:

- Bureaucratic delays and resistance from public officials.
- Security Concerns for Whistle-blowers: RTI activists and whistle-blowers faced threats and harassment from local authorities when filing sensitive information requests.
- Lack of awareness among public officials about their responsibilities under the RTI Act.
- Financial barriers for marginalized citizens when submitting RTI applications.

Lessons Learned: In the report there is an emphasis on the need for continuous advocacy, awareness-raising, and capacity-building to ensure sustained RTI use. It calls for improving the responsiveness of public officials, enhancing whistleblower protections, and addressing bureaucratic hurdles.

Recommendations:

- **Increased Awareness and Advocacy:** Further educational campaigns and community outreach programs are needed to increase both the demand for and supply of RTI. This includes enhancing the capacity of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), RTI activists, and community leaders to effectively use the law.
- **Capacity Building:** Training programs should be expanded to improve public officials and citizens understanding of the RTI Act and its importance. This would ensure more timely and accurate responses to RTI requests. Continued training for both citizens and public officials on the RTI law and its implementation is crucial for fostering transparency and accountability.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the long-term impact of RTI initiatives and track progress in improving government transparency and accountability.
- **Strengthening the Information Commission:** Ensure that the Information Commission is adequately equipped and empowered to handle appeals, resolve disputes, and enforce compliance with the RTI Act.
- **Proactive Information Disclosure:** Public authorities should proactively share key information online, reducing the need for formal RTI requests.
- **Enhanced Legal Protections for Activists:** Strengthening the protection mechanisms for RTI activists and whistle-blowers is essential to ensure their safety when challenging corruption or inefficiencies

Chapter 1: Introduction

Democracy refers to the active and significant involvement of the public in matters concerning the government and public affairs. In a democratic government, being responsive to public opinion is crucial. This requires ensuring that information is readily accessible to people. The right to information necessitates the involvement of individuals in the governance and administration processes. The Right to Information is the sole legitimate legislation in Bangladesh. This law is the most popular, citizen-centric, and change-oriented law in the history of Bangladesh administration. The Right to Information (RTI) Act has a significant influence on the people and has a profound impact on the transparency of the government administration. It requires public authorities to disclose information about government rules, regulations, and decisions.

Additionally, it mandates that all records be appropriately organized and indexed to facilitate access to information as per the Act's provisions. Information is synonymous with knowledge, as knowledge empowers individuals and enhances their strength. If the information pertains to government and administration, the individual becomes engaged in good governance and adopts a proactive and self-protective approach while also demonstrating a tendency for growth. The Right to Information (RTI) Act grants authority to the citizens to combat administrative corruption, irregularities, and the unresponsive behavior of administrative machinery. The entitlement to information fosters openness and responsibility in the operations of all governmental entities. Through this legislation, the citizens of Bangladesh have been granted the authority to scrutinize, evaluate, and analyze the actions and choices made by the government to ensure they align with the principles of public interest, effective governance, and fairness.

Since the law came into force and prior to that, RIB has been crucial in promoting the RTI Act 2009 in Bangladesh. It has effectively raised awareness about the law and its proper implementation among many, especially those from marginalized and disadvantaged communities. It is confident that its efforts towards these groups have contributed to enhancing transparency and accountability in the work of public officials. RIB believes that the key to advancing the RTI Act 2009 in Bangladesh is to generate more RTI requests consistently in a more targeted manner. This will facilitate comprehension for both parties involved in the legal system, including understanding the different prerequisites of its procedures, the complexities of its implementation, and the necessary adaptations to overcome the challenges encountered by individuals seeking to utilize the law. From the perspective of demand, citizens would comprehend the appropriate implementation of the law, which entails receiving their rightful entitlements from the government and, thereby, fostering a more transparent and responsible relationship between the government and

other public institutions. The supply side would also recognize that the law encompasses more than just creating challenges for government officials in their jobs. It will foster more excellent proximity between individuals, which is a timely imperative. Suppose the Act accomplishes its fundamental goals of promoting transparency and accountability in government operations through knowledge-based initiatives, in that case, it will benefit all individuals in the nation, including those involved in the supply side.

Starting the NED support-led project Advancing Accountability and Transparency through the Right to Information in 2018, RIB has been implementing initiatives to promote and enhance RTI, utilizing funding from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Under the same project title, from 2018 to 2023, RIB completed three projects 2018-1089, 2020 - 0079, and 2021-11762. The implementation of the fourth project, with the identification number 2023-0570, commenced in August 2023, according to RIB and is scheduled to conclude in July 2024. An essential part of the abovementioned current project is to "Evaluate the previous projects and formulate impact analysis based on data collection and analyse them to compile a Cumulative Assessment Report.

In a society that values openness, responsibility, and citizen involvement as fundamental aspects of efficient governance, the Right to Information (RTI) symbolizes empowerment, allowing individuals to obtain vital information held by government entities. The project "Advancing Accountability and Transparency through the Right to Information," carried out by Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB), and funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), represents the commitment to these principles. These projects aimed to enhance the impact of the Right to Information (RTI) in promoting transparency, accountability, and good governance in seven districts of Bangladesh: Dhaka, Gazipur, Dinajpur, Nilphamari, Rangpur, Bogura, Rajshahi, and Moulvibazar. This evaluation report thoroughly analyses the projects progress, assessing its accomplishments, advantages, difficulties, and the diverse influence it has had on citizens, governance, and society. This report thoroughly evaluates the projects impact on promoting accountability and transparency in Bangladesh. It achieves this through an extensive examination of various case studies, methodologies, and insights obtained from key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews. As we explore, the following sections of this report reveal the project's significant impact on empowering marginalized communities, uncovering corruption, promoting environmental sustainability, and improving government service delivery.

The case studies showcased in this document illustrate how the right to information has been employed to stimulate beneficial transformations, from local community initiatives to governmental administrative actions. Simultaneously, this report examines the difficulties encountered during the execution of the project. The highlighted challenges, ranging from stakeholders' lack of awareness and knowledge to bureaucratic obstacles and the intricate complexities of online hearings, emphasize the need for strategic interventions to strengthen the RTI framework. As we assess the projects progress, we suggest recommendations

to improve future RTI initiatives' effectiveness. These recommendations encompass a range of actions, including increasing awareness and improving implementation, enhancing the abilities of those involved, and promoting a culture of ongoing learning and advancement. In essence, this evaluation report serves as evidence of the importance of the project "Advancing Accountability and Transparency through the Right to Information." The statement highlights the crucial importance of RTI in the development of a governance system that is transparent, accountable, and participatory. It also serves as a guiding principle for future efforts to empower citizens and promote a fair and equitable society.

The objectives in this regard are focused on:

1. To assess the projects from the perspective of the objectives they set out to achieve in the three projects mentioned above and analyze the achievements, strengths, successes, and challenges. To have a comprehensive understanding of the level of impact following the intervention of the above NED-supported projects in the working districts and the structural causes of any non-fulfillment of the objectives.
2. To make suggestions on how to take the lessons forward in future programming.

The Cumulative Assessment Report's findings and recommendations will be used for more excellent advocacy works in the future and for better project management and improvement to create a lasting impact on communities that are important stakeholders.

Methodologies and Methods:

The project's evaluation utilizes a blend of qualitative research methods to collect comprehensive insights on the project's impact, effectiveness, and challenges. The following components were meticulously used to gather and analyze the data, ensuring a thorough and reliable evaluation: Key Informant Interviews (KIs) collect information by conducting structured interviews with individuals with specialized knowledge or experience in a particular area. In our work, we recognize the immense value of people's expertise and experience, so we carried out five Key Informant Interviews (KIs) to obtain insights relevant to the project's goals. The KIs were thoughtfully distributed among different locations to ensure a rich diversity of perspectives, respecting the unique insights each location could offer. The allocation of interviews is as follows:

Table 1: Distribution of Key Informant Interviews (KIs) and Participants' Backgrounds

Location	Number of KIs	Gender Distribution	Participants' Backgrounds
Saidpur, Nilphamari	2	Male (1), Female (1)	Union Parishad Member and Journalist
Dinajpur Sadar	1	Male (1), Female (1)	Homemaker, Entrepreneur
Nawabganj, Dinajpur	2	Male (1), Female (1)	Teacher, Politicians

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):

Four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted at different locations to facilitate group interactions and collect collective opinions. These discussions aimed to gather various perspectives from various sectors of society. The Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) took place in the specified locations:

- Saidpur, Nilphamari: 1 discussion
- Dinajpur Sadar: 1 discussion
- Nawabganj, Dinajpur: 1 discussion
- A Zoom session was also held with RTI activists from Moulvibazar.

Note: As Nilphamari and Dinajpur were common location in three projects, hence for data collection that location was consciously selected and for other locations interviews mainly through phone calls were conducted and case studies were collected.

Literature Review: The evaluation was conducted on a variety of project documents, including project plans, progress reports, and financial statements, as well as secondary literature about the Right to Information (RTI). This involved thoroughly analyzing the materials related to the project's execution and surrounding circumstances. The document review process was designed to provide a comprehensive contextual background for the evaluation and inform the analysis.

Historical Analysis: The data gathered from Key Informant Interviews (KIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and document reviews underwent a comprehensive and rigorous analysis. This analysis meticulously scrutinizes the collected data to discern patterns, themes, achievements, difficulties, and crucial insights. The evaluation objectives directed the analysis process, guaranteeing that the findings would adequately tackle the project's impact, effectiveness, and future recommendations, instilling confidence in the validity of the findings.

Chapter 2: Understanding the Core Principle of RTI Act 2009 in Bangladesh

The right to information is a human right and a tool that empowers citizens to demand accountability from the government and fight corruption through knowledge. The RTI Act forms a crucial legal framework, guaranteeing the free flow of information and empowering individuals to access data held by public authorities. Article 39 of the Constitution of Bangladesh solidifies citizens' rights to freedom of speech, expression, and press, albeit subject to reasonable constraints. When viewed in conjunction with the preamble of the RTI Act, it underscores how seeking, receiving, and disseminating information is intrinsic to the broader concept of freedom of expression. Implemented to uphold transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement, the RTI Act extends its reach across public, autonomous, statutory, and private organizations funded by the government or foreign entities. Open and transparent governance hinges upon this fundamental principle, equipping citizens with the essential tools to stay informed about government activities, decisions, and policies. The RTI Act in Bangladesh stands as a formidable legal instrument, as underscored by its preamble, which articulates its overarching goals: to augment transparency, fortify accountability, combat corruption, and nurture the ethos of good governance. Notably, the Act incorporates a provision that elevates its legal importance, stipulating that any conflicting legislation must yield to the imperatives of the right to information enshrined within the RTI Act.

The fundamental principles outlined in the RTI Act in Bangladesh are as follows:

1. Ensuring maximum disclosure of information.
2. Implementing proactive disclosure practices.
3. Upholding transparency and accountability.
4. Restricting exemptions to information disclosure.
5. Facilitating easy access to information.
6. Offering information free of charge or at a reasonable cost.

Additionally, notable features of the RTI Act include:

1. **Information Accessibility:** The core principle of the Right to Information (RTI) grants citizens the right to request and receive information from government entities formally. This information encompasses government activities, policies, decisions, expenditures, and related matters, with certain exceptions. There are 20 exceptions outlined in the law, which can be broadly categorized as state security, international relations, commercial secrets, intellectual property rights, tax and budget details, law enforcement,

judicial activities, investigations, privacy, personal "secret information," individual safety, and other areas. RTI enables citizens to gain better access to information, empowering them to become more informed about their government's actions and operations.

2. **Transparency and Accountability:** Implementing the Right to Information (RTI) cultivates transparency and clarity in governmental processes. It ensures that public authorities' decision-making, policies, and actions are transparent and readily accessible to the populace. Transparency, in turn, instills confidence in the work of public servants, and providing easily accessible information online serves as an effective means of promoting transparency. Trust between the government and its citizens hinges on transparency and serves as a deterrent against corruption and unethical conduct. Moreover, RTI significantly contributes to fostering accountability among public officials. By enabling individuals to access government information, there is a greater likelihood that officials will make informed decisions and fulfill their duties. Moreover, citizens can hold public officials accountable for their actions and decisions by scrutinizing their activities closely.
3. **Empowerment:** Implementing the Right to Information (RTI) enables individuals to gain access to the necessary resources and knowledge for their active involvement in democratic procedures. Well-informed individuals can actively participate in government policies, express their worries, and contribute to public debates. This empowerment enhances the bond between the governing body and the governed individuals.

However, the RTI Act 2009 in Bangladesh excludes government agencies involved in national security and intelligence operations on behalf of the State from the Act's coverage. This encompasses law enforcement units involved in such operations. However, the remaining members of the police force are included in its scope, and as a result, RTI requests can be submitted to them. During the early stages of its implementation, citizens needed more time to utilize the RTI Act to request information from influential government agencies. However, there has been a noticeable shift in the past. Higher government authorities, including the Prime Minister's Office, receive a few RTI requests. Police officers are not exempt. In 2017, RIB decided to research the rulings of Bangladesh's Information Commission (IC) regarding the complaint cases it has adjudicated throughout the years to gather additional information.

RIB has discovered 25 instances of law enforcement. These requests encompassed various subjects, such as corruption, irregularities in tender processes, crime investigations, post-mortem reports, and video footage from CCTV cameras. The factual details of the cases depict a profoundly disheartening portrayal of the police's handling of the requests. In more than 90 percent of instances, the Designated Officers (DOs) should have provided more than justifications for their actions, as mandated by the law. Typically, they only agreed to give the information after being urged by the Information Commission (IC). In some instances, the receipt of the request was denied despite being sent via registered mail. What is even more concerning is that, in situations where there are severe accusations of wrongdoing, the police not only failed to fulfill their obligation to take action but also disregarded the IC's requests to attend complaint hearings.

The absence of certain complainants at the IC hearings or their subsequent retraction of complaints should also be a cause for concern. These concerns could be associated with potential coercion by the authorities or a lack of confidence in the procedure. These factors indicate a negative outlook for the future of RTI in Bangladesh, highlighting the urgent need for improved enforcement and accountability.

Now, let's examine two instances where the IC played a crucial role in achieving a positive outcome.

In 2011, a cohort of women in Saidpur, located in North Bangladesh, submitted a Right to Information (RTI) petition to the nearby police station. Their inquiry pertained to the number of reported instances of violence against women that were officially documented at the police station during the initial half of 2011. The Designated Officer initially declined to accept the request but yielded when presented with the written legislation the group had brought along. However, a reply still needs to be received regarding either the initial request or the subsequent appeal. The issue was escalated to the IC as a formal complaint. During the complaint hearing, the Officer-in-charge of the police station was summoned and reprimanded by the IC for intentionally ignoring the law. The IC then instructed the officer to provide the requested information within seven days. The IC's decision ensured the provision of the requested information and enhanced the police station's treatment of individuals, showcasing the positive outcomes that can be achieved through the IC's intervention.

We have seen this particular case on the website of Bangladesh Information Commission, in 2017, a woman made a formal request to the DIG of Police, Forensic Department, Malibag, Dhaka, for a duplicate of the authentic viscera report acquired by the police during their investigation into her husband's homicide. She desired to juxtapose the authentic document with a subsequent "counterfeit report" that she aimed to dispute. During an extensive investigation that spanned over four months and included multiple hearings, the IC conducted interviews with numerous experts involved in the process. The IC carefully considered their arguments for and against disclosure, analyzed them about the relevant legal provisions, and ultimately made a well-reasoned decision to support the complete release of the report. The IC's performance was praiseworthy. Although there are some slight positive indications, the RTI system in Bangladesh should be performing more effectively. Several deficiencies have been identified in these columns, both by previous researchers and others. All stakeholders, including citizens, public authorities, and the IC, must listen to them. It would be highly praiseworthy if police forces prioritize the RTI law more seriously. The regime would benefit significantly from the citizens' favorable reaction to their response to RTI requests. The IC should not hesitate to penalize significant offenders to encourage adherence. The government's support in this matter would be beneficial. Otherwise, the effectiveness of this exquisite law will be compromised.

Chapter 3:

Prescribed Process of the Right to Information Act

The RTI process is a crucial tool enabling citizens to obtain information held by public authorities. This occurs through a sequence of clearly defined steps, allowing individuals to access important information vital to their involvement in governance and civic affairs.

1. **Initiating the Application:** The procedure commences when individuals submit a Right to Information (RTI) application to the appropriate governmental entity. This application functions as a formal solicitation for precise information and represents the initial stage in gaining understanding and knowledge about important topics for the general public.
2. **Information Request:** When submitting an RTI application, individuals must clearly state the specific information they seek. The request should be concise and clearly defined, ensuring clarity in the intended scope of information. It is essential to express the request accurately to ensure that the following steps proceed smoothly.
3. **Time frame:** The requested information may be submitted to the designated officer of the relevant department within any government or private organization, the individual submits an application using the appropriate format known as 'ka-form'. Upon receipt, the designated officer must provide the requested information to the applicant within 20 working days (or 30 working days in exceptional circumstances). If the officer cannot furnish the information, they must inform the applicant within ten working days following the prescribed procedure. Should the applicant remain dissatisfied with the official's response, they can appeal to a higher authority within 30 days, adhering to the prescribed method. The appellate authority should resolve such appeals within 15 days. If, despite following these procedures, the applicant still needs to receive the sought-after information, they can complain directly to the Information Commission within 30 days. Typically, the Information Commission will take 45-75 days to address a complaint from receipt.

The RTI process is a powerful method for citizens to ensure their government is held responsible. It promotes a culture of openness and active participation by the public. By following these steps, individuals can obtain information that enlightens their choices, promotes public discussion, and drives beneficial societal transformation. When Bangladesh's Right to Information (RTI) Act was adopted in 2009, it was widely regarded as the most groundbreaking law in the country. However, after 14 years, no significant scandals have been discovered using RTI, and no groundbreaking investigative journalism has exposed

substantial corruption. The NGOs, journalists, and civil society members who initially praised the law's implementation now largely ignore it. The stated goal of the RTI Act to enhance transparency and accountability in public offices, reduce corruption, and establish effective governance has yet to be achieved. Active collaboration among citizen groups is crucial for the success of the RTI Act, which was enacted to empower these groups. These groups encompass all entities within civil society, such as RTI activists and enthusiasts, NGOs, journalists, academics, and relevant professional associations. They must come together urgently to confront the challenges and combat legal provisions' improper and excessive utilization. This can be achieved by resorting to judicial intervention when necessary. Additionally, they should assist the small group of dedicated users who need more essential resources and face numerous obstacles to maintain transparency. Now is the moment to invigorate the RTI forum and establish consistent engagement between civil society and the Information Commission to tackle significant barriers.

Chapter 4:

Key Achievements Advancing Accountability and Transparency through the Right to Information

As discussed earlier, the Right to Information (RTI) Act 2009 consists of interconnected components. Typically, our attention is directed toward two primary actors: citizens, whom the law was created to empower, and public authorities, who are obligated by the law to address valid information inquiries. An additional purpose of the law is to encourage the beneficial implementation of its provisions, ensuring that its goals of promoting the public good are accomplished and are supported by a limited understanding of its rules. Indeed, most observers perceive a distinct inclination of the law in favor of revealing the requested information unless it is explicitly exempted under the law or the request is fraudulent. The objective of the law can be undermined if suitable and qualified individuals are chosen.

To achieve this goal, it is essential for citizens to closely monitor the Information Commission's activities, decisions, and how it handles complaint hearings. Citizens should also assess the commission's ability to balance fulfilling legitimate information requests from the public and protecting the fundamental interests of public officials. Additionally, citizens should evaluate the commission's competence in correctly interpreting and applying the law and determine whether its actions impede progress. Understanding critical achievements in the RTI studies and projects in Bangladesh requires continual vigilance and assistance from all parties involved. From 2018 to 2023, NED's project period with RIB suggests looking into the key achievements from theoretical implementation and implication of the RTI Act to knowledge development to Individual RTI defenders to organizational social development to stakeholders' impacts.

The projects start took a lot of work. RIB wanted to unite eight multi-sector expert groups. Effective communication with state authorities, NGOs, and civil society organizations was needed to implement the proposed approach. The strategy's novelty and stakeholder opposition were obstacles. The 2018 Bangladeshi election delayed project start-up, making the last quarter especially difficult. RIB focused on finding legal professionals, women-led organizations, civil society members, university professors, theme-based local organization, robust journalists and RTI and social activists who would support and coordinate project activities according to the project objectives and principles. After gradually overcoming the challenges, the project achieved the following results:

A. Organization for Social Development:

Under the project in the first phase in 2018, RIB formed MOUs with BLAST (a legal aid organization), Safety & Rights (a workers' rights organization), SHAREE (a Dalit community organization), The Daily Star (leading daily newspaper), Dhaka University (National University), Independent University of Bangladesh (IUB), Barrister Abul Halim (RTI activist), and Biplob Karmakar. Each of these eight experts collected ten prospective RTI users motivated to become activists. In the subsequent two projects, the focus was more on local people living in marginalization and individuals selected from various professions and theme-based organizations. The project taught these social organizations and individuals about the RTI Act 2009. The project trained social mobilisers to encourage community members from their locality to participate in project activities, inform them about government programs, organize interest group initiatives, promote service provider links, and supervise RTI request submissions. Particular attention was given to ensuring that RTI requests from the projects would touch upon issues of transparency and accountability to contribute to systemic change in governance. As it is understood that ordinary citizens do not feel comfortable submitting RTI requests on high-profile issues encompassing corruption and transparency, such efforts must initially be left to professional, sound, and more conscious groups. The expected outcomes of the project were achieved because knowledge on RTI increased, which was evident from the submission of 4700 RTI applications in the very first phase of 2018 project, due to which interaction between demand and supply side increased, eventually leading to an increase in access to and transparency in public services but at a slow pace. In the 2nd phase in 2020, when organizations like BELA, SHUJON, BLAST and ALRD joined these efforts of RIB to popularize RTI in Bangladesh, ninety people and 21 regional organizations (ALRD's partners) have been directly motivated to evolve as RTI practitioners using the RTI law in their respective areas. In the 3rd phase of the project which started in 2021, focus was more building knowledge of local thematic CBOs hence several local platform and organizations working with focus on particular theme engaged themselves voluntarily with RIB's works. Together combining 3 phases of interventions generated nearly 13771 applications from 8 districts of Bangladesh.

B. Capacity building and knowledge development:

RIB provided technical assistance in filling RTI requests, extension and advisory services, and follow-up training and workshops for students, professionals, and individuals to involve RTI users in various initiatives. Many context-related knowledge-based awareness activities were done. RIB introduced Sustainable Development Goal-based RTI requests to promote effective RTI implementation. Sending RTI requests focusing on SDGs was thought to encourage users to use the law without fear of offending authorities and help public authorities track SDG implementation in the country. This initiative aimed to increase the role of young people, promote RTI user participation in public and personal interests and develop knowledge-based resources to help the government identify grey areas that hinder

development goals. The deepening of RTI applications on knowledge-based issues must be continued. Our findings show that developing a conscious citizenry that can act as watchdogs through RTI is possible and has excellent potential for good governance. Education and exposure to the public domain are essential for demand-driven RTI's success. It has been seen that addressing RTI at the high school and college levels has helped broaden an RTI-friendly constituency. Continuation of service-related knowledge-based resources and accountability issues are also necessary as an organic link between the underserved and socially excluded needs and an inclusive regime of local governance can be developed. Some of the direct quotes we came across during literature review of project documents confirm the above statement. *"In my Union, many people are not aware of the RTI Act; there is a need to educate people, especially the marginalized, about the proper use of this law, so that they claim their entitlements"* - The UP Chairman during awareness raising program. Similarly, one of the RTI activists from Dinajpur observed that *"some government officers, due to receiving numerous applications from RTI activists, have become more aware of the RTI law, which has made the work of activists much easier. This has also improved the relationship between service providers and receivers."*

C. Government Agency Links:

These projects changed public officials' responses to RTI requests. During the project, many law-averse officials became more accommodating. In some cases, information-providing officers have shown genuine interest in advancing the law by sending their replies within the prescribed timeframe or guiding applicants for proper submission to the assigned authority. However, progress could be faster because many service providers and receivers view RTI law restrictively. More excellent advocacy through dialogues, information fairs and advocacy workshops have helped create positive relationships with government officers while educating them on citizens' RTI Act rights. The fact that RIB introduced the government's commitment to achieve Sustainable Development Goals and the government's 7th Five Year Plan as a reference point for asking questions to the authorities by selecting a few goals like End Poverty, Education, Health, Gender Equality and Goal 16, corresponding it with government's 5 Year plans to submit RTI requests have helped government employees interacting better with the applications because latter then no longer was viewed as threat or source of harassment. These topics appear harmless while creating a habit amongst public officials and citizens to use the RTI Act and raise demand for RTI use in the country. Questions on these topics shall look like dissemination of knowledge while also contributing to building a relationship between the system and the citizens, ultimately leading to greater transparency, accountability and the emergence of good governance to some extent. Some of the observations that can be quoted here are: *"Citizens are the owners of a democratic state, through effective implementation of RTI Act, citizens can exercise their rights and ownership- Deputy Commissioner during dialogue event."*

"We support and commend everyone like RTI activists, Sanak, and other private organizations working in favor of raising awareness and for effective implementation of the RTI Act, but we request everyone not to seek information from us that is exempted under sec 7. ADC (General) during information fair event."

D. Yearly Project Accomplishments:

Through obtaining their legal rights from public authorities, certain groups have developed a sense of citizenship, ownership, and responsibility. Some people better understood the law's institutional mechanisms from their perspective and needs. Mainstream groups gained legal awareness. Only a few RTI interventions increased public service access and transparency. Google Drive documents experiences, public office reactions, the RTI application process, expert and activist enthusiasm, commitment, creativity, and government compliance and responsiveness. Some activists have been motivated adequately through capacity-building to keep the process alive by filling private and public interest requests and completing all procedures. However, dialogue sessions with public officials have empowered participants.

The NED-supported projects in many working districts empowered citizens and enhanced governmental transparency, setting a precedent for similar future initiatives. The lessons learned, and the impacts achieved make room for the importance of continued efforts in this domain. The stakeholders filed 13771 RTI requests under the projects, which increased citizen engagement and interaction in local governance and helped institutionalize transparency practices within targeted districts. The projects employed a grassroots approach as well as a mid-level approach. They linked grassroots and districts by organizing workshops, awareness programs and training sessions for community members and RTI activists. This helped build a strong network that adheres to the interventions' sustainability. RIB's project team assisted in drafting and submitting RTI applications, followed by systematic tracking of responses. It was noticed that a sense of citizenship and responsibility had been established among 80% of selected RTI activists, and knowledge and importance of RTI have been engrained in their minds. Besides, regular publications of the results of such interventions in the national and local dailies served as good advocacy tools and helped raise awareness. Some cases show rural communities (PAR groups) used RTI to uncover misuse of funds intended for infrastructure development, leading to corrective action and improved accountability. It can be said that continuous support and follow-up are crucial for sustaining momentum.

Projects Performance

A. Relevance:

RIB differentiated its work with different groups. Identifying the need for significance in the work of organizations and individuals associated with this project as experts and gathering them in interest groups to generate more RTI activities was pragmatic. The project was relevant due to the experts used in project design and proper sequencing. The chosen organizations applied RTI knowledge to their work most effectively. They linked RTI to their work, increasing expertise and demand. While including different types of stakeholders as experts was justified in light of project objectives, selecting some individuals increased the complexity of implementation, supervision, and monitoring. From documents review, it was seen that few experts and individuals could not relate to the project's core objective due to their hardcore and restrictive mentality. Lack of cooperation delays implementation and activities. Throughout the projects, RIB found that few people are still unwilling to follow the core goal of RTI law and its potential benefits to society. They believe that RTI can be used to pressure the government or harass officials. RIB saw them as activists during project design, but since they are not social activists, they may not see RTI as a tool for systemic and social change in the country. However, many populations in the project districts have been able to comprehend the true objective of RTI law meaningfully through various awareness-raising programs like information fairs, courtyard meetings, etc. To some extent, people have realized the potentiality of RTI, and through claiming rightful entitlements from public authorities, they have built a good relationship and communication with public offices, which was not possible earlier. This can be particularly said for the people in the tea garden area of Moulvibazar and people living in remote villages in other working districts.

In some cases, analyzing institutional mechanisms of the law in practice from a people's perspective and needs was achieved. The project's objectives, i.e., to enhance citizens' participation by increased interaction with public officials and to promote open governance, were completed to some extent; however, making RTI popular among the educated and conscious population remains a far cry. The increase in submission of several RTIs and active participation in meetings involving both sides citizens and government officials have created a space for enhancing citizens' participation and increased interaction; similarly, in some of the working districts, we have noticed that a culture of open governance in some sectors have been promoted especially in industries involving social safety net, agriculture, safety and security, forest resources and so on.

In Dinajpur district, one elected local representative expressed dissatisfaction over how the local election was handled; therefore, he filed an RTI request to resolve the issue. So far, after the enactment of the RTI law, we have seen that its use has primarily remained in the citizen's domain. Still, it's encouraging that elected representatives also use RTI for issues that bother them. There is a need to continue this process.

B. Efficiency:

A few project experts performed well. Before the project, these experts on people's rights were unaware of RTI's potential to empower, access government development policies, and understand how government works for its citizens. RIB created SDG-related questions to demonstrate that citizens can build a sustainable relationship with their government and improve their knowledge. Although project actions to promote RTI use are effective at the individual level, they have not yet caused macro-level changes. Significant progress was made in contextualizing transparency and accountability, but a large segment of the urban population remains unwilling to explore the vast opportunity this RTI law offers citizens. Given the project's goals, a major knowledge-sharing initiative is needed to promote future development policies and RTI demand.

In a few cases, through RTI intervention, increased access to and transparency in public services was ensured to some extent. For example, in Rajshahi and Dinajpur districts, government officers, while deciding on the list of beneficiaries for a government service, call upon activists and moderators to seek names of people who are genuinely entitled to such services, which was not the case earlier. This might be termed a shift in ensuring and making institutions transparent and accountable, but a more extensive picture still needs to be added. Systematic documentation through the creation of Google Drive has been done to record experiences, reactions of public offices, and the process of filing RTI applications, including enthusiasm, commitment, and creativity among experts and activists, as well as compliance and responsiveness by government authorities, which is a good initiative. It will help produce data for future use and more excellent advocacy works if adequately maintained. The fact that some activists under the group have kept on filling requests on matters of private and public interest as well as kept pursuing till completion of procedures are indicative that they have been motivated systematically through capacity building to keep the process alive, and there is potentiality for exploration of vast opportunity of RTI law by citizens.

C. Stakeholder Impact:

The project's impact on selected stakeholders was positive. Most importantly, the project significantly motivated RTI Experts who worked for organizations that empowered and built community self-esteem among women, workers, and youth. This was due to increased RTI requests on sensitive matters affecting life and liberty, government fund spending and allocations, police actions, atrocities committed by law enforcement agencies, and university groups that joined RIB's effort to create demand for RTI through this project. Despite this motivation, RTI requests were slow. Due to study pressure, student groups could not give much time, and associated organizations also fell short of their RTI request submission goal. This demonstrates how motivated people are to use RTI but how their other obligations make them feel overburdened when given a goal. When designing the next project, we may have to set a more realistic goal of submitting RTI requests to achieve the desired result.

However, we have noticed that these RTI interventions have served well for organizations working on thematic areas, like BLAST, which have used RTI knowledge to collect evidence for fruitful advocacy campaigns as well for effective Public Interest Litigation (PIL); similar is the case with BELA and ALRD, who have used RTI an excellent deal for furtherance of their works in a more effective and meaningful way. We have seen that the RTI activists' team in Dinajpur has worked as a pressure group and has taken up several issues of public or national interest. It can be well argued that where RTI has worked successfully for group/organizational initiatives, the use of RTI to derive the desired results still needs to find momentum with applications submitted individually.

The effectiveness of any Right to Information (RTI) legislation depends on three crucial actors: someone who is required to submit information requests, governmental entities who are responsible for handling these requests appropriately, and the Information Commission (IC), which plays a pivotal role in impartially resolving conflicts between the two parties. Annually, an average of 10,000 individuals in Bangladesh utilizes RTI requests to obtain information from public offices. Although the numbers may be small compared to our population, they are still significant, considering the nature of the law. The majority of the requests pertain to personal interests and mundane matters such as government rules and regulations, which do not require the use of RTI. But, they need to be more relevant to the issues of transparency or accountability. The annual reports of the Information Commission demonstrate that more than 95 percent of Right to Information (RTI) applications in the country are met with favorable responses. Except in a few instances, the law has yet to be utilized to investigate the government's readiness to reveal confidential information on significant matters of national importance.

Furthermore, it has yet to be effectively utilized to achieve substantial transformation in governance. Citizens are hesitant to use it for significant accountability matters, possibly due to concerns about potential consequences from authorities or simply because many citizens still need to be made aware of the vast potential of the law. However, the Information Commission's role as a neutral mediator should reassure citizens of the fairness of the process.

RTI Application data breakdown

Sector-wise cumulative RTI application details for the period covering October 2, 18 – July 2, 23

Total RTI requests	Governance, Administration & Legal sector	Social safety Net (SSNP)	UNESCO Template to assess RTI status	Development (Infrastructure, Road, project funds, etc.)	Health	SDG, Gender, HR (violations & Misc.)	Education	Environment & Climate issue	Land Issues	Covid package
13771	3220 (23.4%)	2014 (15%)	1818 (13%)	1403 (10.1%)	1290 (9.4%)	1292 (9.4%)	1089 (7.9%)	702 (5%)	689 (5%)	254 (1.8%)

The applications covered three stages/tiers. (a) community-level issues, (b) regional/zonal matters, (c) national issues, and all three stages had three application categories: (1) those seeking primary information (service or benefits), (2) institutional accountability, and (3) transparency. The grant created RTI activists to increase demand for RTI in project districts and empower them to learn to upgrade their information needs from asking basic primary service-related questions to addressing and engaging public authorities on accountability and transparency issues.

Under the total grant from October 2018 to July 2023, 13771 general RTI applications were submitted in months, with 7987 receiving full and partial responses. The response rate was 58%. Since DOs respond faster to first-category information, like information on ordinary or mundane issues or services, than transparency and accountability information, it has been possible to deepen and scale up the RTI Act's implementation at grass root level as well as among mainstream community groups by generating more applications on local accountability and transparency. The appeal rate was low with 1981 appeal filed but encouraging. Appeal applications were highest on transparency issues, which authorities responded to most minor during the application stage. A more considerable public interest supported most appeals, strengthening RTI activists' resolve to advance it.

The RTI appeal process puts more pressure on higher-level administration than on lower-level administration, which may explain the higher response rate. This is especially true if the subject is sensitive, as a non-response at the Appeal level could prompt the applicant to file a complaint and expose the service providers to an Information Commission hearing. However, Commission hearings were scarce. A total of 225 complaints were filed. During the hearing stage, complainants face many challenges, which can deter them from going to the appeal and complaint stages.

Application form questions often focused on services, the government's responsibility to provide better services, the linkage between government and citizens, development agenda and their fulfillments, primarily based on stakeholder discussions and the government's commitment to achieving Sustainable Development Goals and Five-year Plan as a reference point for asking questions to authorities. End Poverty, Education, Health, Gender Equality, Goal 16 (Strengthening Institutions and Access to Justice), and corresponding goals from the government's 5-year plan were used to file RTI requests to concerned government offices. RIB helped group members form questions on these topics to spread knowledge and build relationships between the system and citizens, which leads to greater transparency, accountability, and good governance.

These questions mainly concerned essential services like safety nets, government incentives like the Covid crisis and stimulus packages, and sometimes corruption, such as issuing licenses to store hazardous chemicals without due process or taking bribes to allow small vehicles on highways, indicating systemic malpractices in local governance.

Other questions were more focused on the political or social context of high-profile cases of corruption or misconduct or national interest issues. Mainstream communities asked about safety net services, land distribution, registration, and infrastructure repairs like ditches and roads. In contrast, semi-urban group members asked about the accountability and transparency of institutions like schools, courts, hospitals, training, narcotics control departments, social development fund disbursement, road management systems, and implementation status.

The inclusion and engagement of mainstreams formed as RTI Activists, who are more exposed to public life than rural-based groups and can overcome the hesitancy to deal with public officials, and the enhanced skills of facilitators or field-level RTI expertise allowed the deepening and scaling up of the RTI implementation process. We have seen that (a) the intensive "hands-on" participatory processes that taught RTI activists to understand and apply the RTI Act to their own experiences. (b) Constant discussion and strategizing of field findings to adopt different approaches when needed. These factors must be considered together because none is solely responsible.

Chapter 5:

Using Case Studies to Highlight RIB's Achievements

The report presents a collection of seven unique case studies from different project periods, each meticulously selected to focus on specific themes and relevant issues. These case studies exemplify a story of empowerment, demonstrating how individuals, communities, and society have utilized the principles of RTI to bring about significant and beneficial changes. These case studies illustrate the project's commitment to promoting openness, transparency, and citizen participation by uncovering corruption, addressing environmental issues, advocating for marginalized communities, and exposing mismanagement. By examining the complexities of each case study, readers are provided with concrete, real-world illustrations of RTI in practice. This unveiling highlights the significant capacity of RTI to not only break down obstacles and question the existing state of affairs but also to achieve results that improve responsibility and amplify societal advancement.

Case Study 1:

Ensuring Accountability in the Delivery of Public Services

Geographical Location: **Dinajpur Sadar**

Problem: Substandard Quality of Public Healthcare Services. Citizens in Dinajpur Sadar were dissatisfied with the quality of public healthcare services offered by local facilities. Reports regarding insufficient medical supplies, lack of cleanliness, and inadequate staffing were widespread. The lack of transparency regarding healthcare budgets and service standards worsened the community's concerns.

Request for Information (RTI): Inquiring about healthcare budgets and service standards. Implementing to address these challenges, an engaged citizen opted to employ the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2009. She submitted a Right to Information (RTI) application to the appropriate government authorities, requesting details regarding the assigned healthcare budgets, expenses, and the established quality benchmarks for healthcare facilities in Dinajpur Sadar—the RTI application aimed to clarify the financial allocations and guidelines for delivering healthcare services.

Effect: Enhancement of Healthcare Services and Facilities. The RTI application significantly influenced the quality of healthcare services in Dinajpur Sadar. Upon receiving the RTI

request, the public authorities were compelled to reassess their healthcare budgets and service standards. This review resulted in heightened transparency and accountability in the allocation and management of resources. The data acquired via the RTI application revealed deficiencies and inefficiencies in the healthcare system, prompting the implementation of corrective actions.

Due to the heightened examination and consciousness facilitated by the RTI application, the calibre of healthcare services and facilities was noticeably enhanced. Medical supplies were restocked, emphasis was placed on cleanliness and hygiene, and measures were taken to ensure that staffing levels met the established standards. The RTI application's ability to generate public pressure was instrumental in advocating these enhancements.

Lesson: The Implementation of RTI Can Lead to Enhancements in Public Service Delivery. This case study exemplifies the efficacy of the Right to Information (RTI) in ensuring that public authorities are held responsible for providing their services. By utilizing the Right to Information (RTI), individuals could expose inadequacies within the healthcare system, prompting remedial measures and enhancements. The case highlights the efficacy of RTI in promoting transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement in governance. The main takeaway from this case is that RTI can act as a catalyst for fostering beneficial improvements in the delivery of public services. When individuals are given the power to obtain information, they can actively participate in addressing deficiencies and advocating for essential changes. This case study exemplifies how individual actions, bolstered by RTI, can improve public services and amenities to the community's advantage.

Case Study 2:

The Influence of Media in Advancing Good Governance

Geographical coordinates: Saidpur, Nilphamari

Problem: Inefficient handling of taxpayer money Concerns have emerged in Saidpur, a town in Nilphamari, regarding the mishandling of public funds designated for the Ashrayan-2 development project. The local community noticed anomalies and suspected corruption in implementing the project to benefit the residents. This situation's lack of transparency and accountability gradually undermines the public's confidence in the governance system.

Request for Information Application: Acquired Ashrayan Project-related documents. To reveal the truth regarding these accusations and expose the mishandling of public funds, an investigative journalist opted to utilize the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2009. He submitted a Right to Information (RTI) request to acquire pertinent documents and information about the Ashrayan Project 2, a governmental endeavor designed to offer housing and assistance to disadvantaged families.

Impact: The data acquired via the RTI application enabled the investigative journalist to examine Ashrayan Project 2 comprehensively. He exposed corruption, mismanagement, and inefficiencies in distributing and utilizing public funds through investigative journalism. The revelation of these issues sparked a surge in public consciousness and apprehension. The Right to Information (RTI) Act's data, which supported the journalistic investigation, sparked a discussion among the general public about the subject. The disclosures received extensive coverage from multiple media platforms, prompting deliberations among citizens, civil society groups, and government authorities. The media coverage and the public's growing awareness generated significant pressure, compelling government agencies to take corrective action and address the raised issues.

Lesson Learned: The Role of RTI in Enabling Media to Function as Guardians of Transparency and Accountability. This case study underscores the immense power of the media in promoting good governance through the effective use of the Right to Information (RTI). The investigative journalist, armed with the Right to Information (RTI), was able to unearth the truth, exposing misconduct and ensuring that those in power are held accountable. The Right to Information's (RTI's) transparency enabled the media to serve as watchdogs and bring to light issues that might have otherwise remained hidden. The key takeaway from this case study is that RTI(Right to Information) can be a potent instrument for the media to effectively carry out their responsibility as guardians of society by promoting transparency, accountability, and good governance. By harnessing the power of the Right to Information (RTI), investigative journalism has the potential to act as a catalyst for positive change. It can stimulate public discussions, prompt necessary actions to rectify issues, and ultimately foster greater transparency and accountability in matters concerning the public.

Case Study 3:

Enhancing Environmental Responsibility

Geographical coordinates: **Dinajpur Sadar.**

Problem: Deforestation for Infrastructure Development Concerns has arisen in Dinajpur Sadar regarding a development project that entails the deforestation of a specific area. The project aimed to enhance the infrastructure; however, the felling of trees caused concern among the local communities and environmental advocates. The potential ecological ramifications of such activities were a source of apprehension, as they could result in the clearance of forests and disturbance of habitats.

RTI Application: The RTI application requested information regarding documents related to the project. To tackle the problem and collect information about the development project, a collective of engaged citizens and environmental advocates resorted to utilizing the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2009. The individuals filed a Right to Information (RTI) application

with the appropriate authorities, requesting project-related documents, plans, and assessments. The objective was to reveal the specifics of the project's environmental impact assessment and management strategies.

Impact: RTI Activists Contest the Project's Potential Ecological Detriment. The data acquired via the RTI application enabled the activists to comprehensively examine the project-related documents and evaluate the potential ecological consequences. Equipped with this knowledge, they made a deliberate and coordinated attempt to increase awareness regarding the possible damage to the nearby ecosystem. The RTI activists used the data to question the project's feasibility, highlighting the importance of ecological sustainability and accountable progress.

Lesson Learned: The Role of RTI in Environmental Activism and Ecosystem Protection. This case study demonstrates the capacity of the Right to Information (RTI) to bolster environmental activism and enhance ecosystem protection. Concerned citizens and environmental activists obtained valuable information about the potential ecological consequences of the development project by using RTI to access project-related documents. This knowledge enabled them to support responsible environmental practices and participate in well-informed public discussions. It is worth noting that while RTI can offer information to bolster advocacy endeavors, its effectiveness may differ depending on the reaction of authorities and stakeholders. Despite the endeavors of RTI activists to increase consciousness regarding the possible ecological damage, the authorities failed to intervene and halt the project activities. The key takeaway from this case study is that RTI (Right to Information) can serve as a valuable instrument for environmental activists to collect data, enhance public consciousness, and participate in substantial dialogues regarding ecological responsibility. This statement highlights the significance of employing the method of RTI to advance sustainable development and safeguard ecosystems, ensuring the well-being of both current and future generations.

Case Study 4:

Implementing High Court Mandate: RTI for Public Interest

Geographical Location: **Dinajpur.**

reach of High Court Mandate Regarding Road Construction. Concerns have emerged in Dinajpur regarding the breach of a High Court directive about road construction. The High Court issued a directive to ensure that road construction practices comply with safety standards, quality requirements, and environmental considerations. Nevertheless, reports have indicated that the directive needs to be adequately enforced, which could undermine the quality of roads and endanger public safety.

Request for Information Application: Submitted a Right to Information (RTI) application. Citizens were curious about the implementation of enforcement measures. To tackle the problem and generate public engagement, a conscientious individual employed the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2009. He submitted a Right to Information (RTI) application to the Executive Engineer's Office, inquiring about the actions undertaken to implement the road construction guidelines mandated by the High Court. The goal was to ascertain the actions taken by the appropriate authorities to comply with the court's orders.

Impact: Swift Response Guaranteed implementation of the High Court's order. The RTI application had an instant effect. The Office of the Executive Engineer promptly provided comprehensive information regarding the measures being implemented to ensure compliance with the High Court's instructions on road construction. Through the assurance of road safety and quality, the transparency made possible by the RTI request ensured compliance with the directive, thereby promoting public interest.

Lesson Learned: The Role of RTI in Enabling Citizens to Ensure Authorities Comply with Court Orders and Promote the Well-being of the Public. This case study highlights the importance of the Right to Information (RTI) in advancing public interest and ensuring that authorities are held responsible for not complying with court orders. Through utilizing the Right to Information (RTI), the conscientious citizen successfully acquired data that verified the implementation of the High Court's instructions regarding road development. This information served as a potent instrument to guarantee public welfare and safety prioritization. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that although the initial response to the Right to Information (RTI) application resulted in the implementation of the directive, the case also emphasizes the ongoing need for vigilance. The subsequent non-enforcement of the directive highlights the necessity for continuous monitoring and engagement to guarantee consistent adherence to court directives. The key takeaway from this case study is that RTI (Right to Information) can enable citizens to actively participate in maintaining the rule of law, advancing public interest, and ensuring accountability. By utilizing the Right to Information (RTI) mechanism, individuals can actively oversee the authorities' actions, ensuring their adherence to responsibilities and making them accountable. This engagement also enables individuals to contribute valuable contributions to improving their communities and society.

Case Study 5:

Requesting Information regarding Irregularities and Mismanagement of Sonali Bank

Geographical Location: **Phulbari Upazila of Dinajpur district.**

Within that particular framework, on December 26, 2021, Shyamali Rani and Iftekhar Ripon, who reside in Phulbari Upazila of Dinajpur district, submitted an information request to the designated officer at Phulbari Sonali Bank. In addition, DO penned a letter articulating his incapacity to divulge information within this application. Subsequently, the applicant appealed and submitted a complaint to the Information Commission but still needs to receive the requested information. The Commission instructed to furnish the information about the judgment of the complaint hearing and make it publicly available on its website. Subsequently, the bank manager contacted Abdullah Akhtaruzzaman, the president of Fulbari Upazila RTI Group, and informed him, "I have received information suggesting your involvement in this matter, brother." Subsequently, the president inquired, "Why do you exhibit such apprehension in providing information? Is it because you have engaged in corrupt activities?" He responded that an event had occurred. There will no longer be any. Subsequently, the president expressed that it would be preferable to refrain. On September 28, 2022, during World Information Rights Day, the Phulbari Upazila Executive Officer emphasized this matter and stated that banks are being harassed through information requests. The Phulbari Upazila Information Rights Implementation Group responded that they may have made an error, but the Information Commission is not expected to make mistakes. This is because the Commission did not simply request the information to be provided after the hearing but ordered explicitly for the information to be published on the bank's website.

Case Study 6:

Application for information on the use of polythene in election posters

Geographical Location: **Nilphamari.**

Election Candidates employ polybag-wrapped and laminated posters for electoral campaigns—the non-biodegradable nature of these posters results in their persistence over an extended period. Consequently, during elections, the accumulation of millions of polythene posters poses a significant environmental hazard. Ruhul Alam, who sought information from Syedpur, submitted multiple requests to the appropriate Directorate of Environment and Election Commission officer. He appealed and is awaiting a response from the Election Commission and the Department of Environment in Rangpur regarding his application. After the appeal, the Department of Environment issued a response to him, stating that measures were being implemented to halt the activity. The Department of Environment has already dispatched correspondence to multiple departments regarding this matter. The Department of Environment has implemented measures to mitigate the significant environmental degradation resulting from the activities of information workers.

Case Study 7:

An information plea brought the ACC to account and set a precedent.

Geographical position: **Saidpur, Nilphamari.**

An information plea prompted the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) to hold the responsible party accountable, establishing a precedent. Ruhul Alam, an information applicant from Saidpur, filed a complaint with the ACC regarding an industrialist's unlawful occupation of land valued at Rs. The ACC investigated his complaint and dismissed the case due to the absence of any irregularities. Subsequently, Ruhul Alam became involved in the Right to Information initiative and submitted an information request to the Railway Lands Department in Rajshahi. Upon receipt of the application, the Land Department in Rajshahi notified Ruhul Alam that no regulations allow the construction of multi-storied buildings on the railway site.

Furthermore, it was revealed that a particular local resident being a business person in Syedpur, has been granted a lease for a portion of the land but has yet to make any payments. This person, who is a locally known business person, is now under scrutiny for his involvement in the corruption. Regarding the four-page document, they stated that the individual owes Bangladesh Railway a total of 4,14,89,750 taka. Ruhul Alam has appended these factual details and promptly requested the necessary information from the ACC once more. He is inquiring whether the response from Bangladesh Railway indicates that the investigation conducted by ACC needs to be revised.

Additionally, he seeks clarification regarding the methodology employed by the ACC in conducting the investigation and producing the report, as well as the involvement of certain officials in the process. Following this application, ACC faced a difficult situation. Subsequently, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) contacted Ruhul Alam twice and urgently requested him to report the complaint to the ACC Chairman. They emphasized that decisive action will be taken against the wrong doers this time. Transparency advocates are optimistic that this petition for access to information will ensure that institutions such as the ACC are held responsible and bolstered in their organizational structure. Additionally, they expect the ACC to recognize its responsibility to the general public.

Case Study 8:

Cleaning up the Environment - RTI to Tackle Acid Misuse

Geographical Location: **Bogura.**

Issue: Rampant Misuse of Nitric Acid and Acid-Related Crimes In Bogura, a district in Bangladesh, the rampant misuse of nitric acid and acid-related substances had become a concerning issue. These substances were being exploited for illegal purposes, including acid attacks and other criminal activities. The lack of proper regulation and oversight had allowed these illegal operations to persist, posing significant threats to public safety and the environment.

RTI Application: Seeking Information on Entities Licensed to Use Nitric Acid and Related Chemicals

To address this issue, a concerned citizen decided to leverage the power of the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2009. He submitted an RTI application to the relevant authorities, seeking information about the entities that were officially licensed to use nitric acid and other related chemicals in Bogura. The goal was to shed light on the regulatory framework surrounding the use of these substances and to identify any unauthorized or illegal operations.

Impact: Swift Action and Improved Regulation

The information obtained through the RTI application proved to be a catalyst for change. Once the local administration received the request, they realized the gravity of the situation and the need for immediate action. Armed with the information provided by the RTI applicant, the local authorities swiftly organized raids on workshops and businesses suspected of engaging in illegal activities involving nitric acid.

The outcome of these raids was significant. Illegal operations were shut down, and entities involved in acid-related businesses were compelled to seek proper licensing. The RTI application had not only exposed the extent of the problem but had also triggered a response that led to improved regulation and enforcement in the region.

Lesson: RTI Can Be a Potent Tool to Tackle Environmental Issues and Combat Illegal Practices

This case study serves as a compelling example of how the Right to Information (RTI) can be harnessed to tackle pressing environmental and societal issues. By seeking information through RTI, the concerned citizen played a pivotal role in highlighting the misuse of dangerous substances and the lack of proper oversight. The information obtained through the RTI application not only prompted immediate action but also led to long-term improvements in regulatory measures.

The lesson from this case study is that RTI can serve as a potent tool to empower citizens to hold authorities accountable, combat illegal practices, and drive positive changes in their communities. When used effectively, RTI can bring attention to issues that might otherwise remain hidden and catalyze interventions that enhance public safety, environmental protection, and the overall well-being of society.

The above case studies suggest that the Right to Information (RTI) is extensive and revolutionary. Implementing the Right to Information (RTI) fosters transparency and accountability within the government, mitigates corrupt practices, improves the quality of public services, empowers individuals, and significantly promotes social justice and overall progress instead of development. At the same time, implementing the Right to Information (RTI) promotes democracy, allows individuals, and cultivates a fair and responsible society by guaranteeing transparency and openness in governance.

Chapter 6: Challenges Faced in the Implementation of the RTI Processes and Projects

Although the Right to Information (RTI) framework can bring about significant change, its implementation is open to difficulties. These obstacles frequently arise from different origins, such as insufficient understanding among officials and the public regarding the principles and procedures of RTI. Delays in responding to requests made under the Right to Information (RTI) can cause applicants to lose motivation and the mechanism's efficiency. The excessive utilization of exceptions, apprehensions regarding the security of whistleblowers, and bureaucratic hindrances also pose challenges to the seamless functioning of the Right to Information (RTI) system. In addition, the complexities are further compounded by the non-compliance of public officials, political interference, and the excessive financial burden associated with filing applications. In addition, while convenient, the shift to online platforms for hearings has faced obstacles that must be addressed. Ensuring the continued progress of RTI initiatives and guaranteeing their lasting influence also present challenges in terms of sustainability. However, there are obstacles which can be divided into three phases. The obstacles phase is primarily split into three phrased-prior, during and post stages of the RTI application, and it is crucial to overcome them to protect the principles of transparency, accountability, and active citizen participation that RTI aims to maintain.

Challenges in the Prior Stages of the RTI Application:

- Due to the lengthy process, more time is spent acquiring permission from NGOAB, which hinders the initiation of cost-intensive activities funded by the grant. Therefore, an extension is necessary.
- The level of awareness regarding the RTI law has increased among those who demand information and those who provide it, but the rate of increase has been prolonged. Many Duty Officers (DOs) still need to respond to requests made under the Right to Information (RTI) Act. Both the demand and supply sides would greatly benefit from increased awareness and advocacy programs focused on the applicability and utilization of the Right to Information (RTI) law. Although there has been an increase in awareness of the law, conscientious citizens still need to be more interested in utilizing it. Ensuring that well-informed and educated citizens effectively utilize the RTI law to the maximum advantage remains a significant challenge. Journalists still need to be encouraged to utilize it.

- The team encountered various constraints during the initial phase of their work. Several organizations initially expressed interest in participating in the program but later withdrew for different reasons, wasting significant time at the start. Another obstacle the team encountered was the need for more cooperation from specific experts who were more inclined to be aggressive or hostile towards public officials rather than foster a collaborative relationship. The project began with the primary goal of creating a community of aware individuals ready to advance the law by submitting many RTI requests into the system. This would foster a positive interaction and collaborative relationship between public officials and citizens. Several experts who had initially expressed interest in supporting this approach gradually disengaged.
- RTI defenders or Whistle-blowers who bravely submit RTI applications or expose sensitive information often face security risks, particularly in cases involving corruption or unethical practices. The absence of safeguards for these courageous individuals who disclose misconduct can encourage others to use the Right to Information (RTI) to uncover illicit activities.
- For example, the Union Parishad Chairman issued a threat to physically assault the applicant who had filed a Right to Information (RTI) request. The case originated from a Right to Information (RTI) application that was filed with the Designated Officer (DO) for RTI of a Union Parishad (UP) in Nawabganj Upazila, Dinajpur District, on February 6, 2022. Harunor Rashid, a journalist from the area, requested the following details: the total count of succession certificates issued by the UP in 2021, the exact fee charged for obtaining these certificates, and the specific government account where the collected funds are deposited. While awaiting a response, the applicant coincidentally visited the UP office for unrelated matters on February 17, 2022. The Secretary of the University, who also holds the position of Department Officer, noticed Harunor and notified the Chairman. As reported by local media, the Chairman openly criticized him for his boldness in requesting such information. He employed highly offensive language, made threats of physical violence, and forcibly ejected him from the office. This behaviour is likely to intimidate potential users of the law.
- Our investigations also uncovered that applicants encounter a range of responses from disgruntled officials who feel uneasy about handling RTI requests. For instance, DOs may contact individuals and request that they retract their applications or face severe repercussions. They may also employ various strategies to withdraw the requests, such as inviting them to their office and behaving rudely. Additionally, they may assert that the requested information falls under the jurisdiction of other units or is classified as exempt. All of these measures are taken to evade providing a written response. Simultaneously, we encountered a few instances where DOs exhibited a favorable disposition towards applicants. Occasionally, the DOs requested additional information from the applicants to investigate wrongdoing or to receive guidance on finding the

necessary information. Sometimes, DOs would contact the applicants to inform them that the data had been sent. Applicants who utilize the law to enhance governance may receive commendation from some individuals. It is undeniably a combination of positive and negative elements. While the negative experiences are more numerous, the positive ones provide a sense of hope for the future. Hence, it is crucial to identify and objectively rectify the negative aspects. The Information Commission (IC) is typically responsible for handling such matters. However, regrettably, our investigations also uncovered numerous grievances lodged against the IC itself. This highlights the importance of establishing a solid mechanism for interaction between the IC (Information Commission) and civil society to promote the country's Right to Information (RTI) law. Given the evident neglect of responsibilities by numerous public officials, the Cabinet Division of the Prime Minister's Office, which has the primary authority to oversee public organizations, could be utilized to improve their performance.

- A persistent conflict arises regarding using RTI for personal gain versus the nation's or the public's greater interest.
- The significant financial burden of submitting applications: Fees are substantial factors within the RTI scheme. In some instances, it is reasonable to expect applicants to bear the considerable expenses incurred by the government in fulfilling individual document requests. Charges also contribute to the equilibrium of demand by directing attention to the extent of requests and controlling those that are intricate or extensive and difficult to handle. However, implementing full cost recovery would not align with the goals of the RTI Act and would unjustly single out significant segments of the community. In certain instances, the expenses related to filing an RTI application, including application fees and photocopying charges, can pose a hindrance, especially for marginalized individuals who may lack the financial resources to afford these costs.
- Identifying the names of Designated Officials (DOs) has been a persistent challenge throughout the project. Student groups and organizations that must comply more with the Right to Information (RTI) regulations have faced this issue the most.
- There has been an increase in RTI requests during the project period, but many participants still need to be more hesitant to apply for issues about transparency and accountability. Another persistent problem is that most of the project's experts and activists want to avoid dealing with the appeals and complaints process because they find it too tedious. AA's year-long project may not alleviate the fear and build confidence among RTI users. There needs to be a concerted, long-term effort to replace the long-standing practice of official secrecy with a culture of transparency. This task is crucial and can only be achieved with the active involvement of our esteemed stakeholders. However, the team initially needed help getting government officials and regular citizens to sit together during the dialogue meetings. However, the team's

persistence paid off, and the issue was successfully resolved. The dialogue with relevant authorities and representatives from public institutions was a pivotal part of our advocacy efforts. This platform allowed service providers and recipients to understand each other's perspectives better. The lack of appointments for DOs, particularly in courts and police stations, discouraged the applicants.

Challenges During the RTI Application:

- **Sluggish Response Times:** Delays in responding to RTI requests may demoralize applicants. Extended delays in obtaining information can discourage individuals from exercising their right to access information and impede the efficacy of the crucial Right to Information (RTI) Act to promote transparency and accountability. One of the main obstacles in implementing the Right to Information (RTI) is the need for more awareness and knowledge among government officials and the general public. Many individuals need more awareness regarding their entitlement to access information, and government officials may need sufficient training to proficiently handle requests made under the Right to Information (RTI) Act.
- We have often noticed that the RTI Act's preamble has been undermined. The preamble emphasises two distinct objectives of the legislation. The first objective is to solidify the core principle of our constitution, which grants all authority to the citizens. The second objective is to enable citizens to actively promote transparency and accountability in all public institutions, enhance governance, and mitigate corruption. Public officials may exhibit non-compliance by refusing to provide information, which can be attributed to their lack of knowledge, unwillingness, or apprehension of exposure. The lack of adherence by public officials undermines the efficacy of the Right to Information (RTI) as a mechanism for promoting transparency and accountability. Political interference can impede the unrestricted dissemination of information through the Right to Information (RTI) process. Government officials may be apprehensive about facing negative consequences or retaliation for revealing information that could be politically delicate or potentially embarrassing to those in positions of authority.
- Bureaucratic obstacles and public offices' constrained capacity to handle RTI requests effectively can result in delays and frustrations. Government offices may need more infrastructure and resources to handle many requests effectively, leading to a faster and more efficient process. At the same time, the FGD participants share their experiences with the public officials; on many occasions, they have the following questions: "Why do you prioritize the promotion of RTI (Right to Information) over other pressing matters such as healthcare initiatives, water and sanitation programs, and similar tasks?" RTI is a cerebral activity that intellectuals should engage in. How would an individual who is marginalized benefit from being aware of this law? The deputy commissioner of a northern district of Bangladesh posed these hostile inquiries to an RTI worker. A different

high-ranking official inquired of an individual submitting a request under the Right to Information Act: "What is your intended purpose for the obtained information?" What is your motivation for desiring it? By whom were you inspired to display such audacious behavior? You will encounter significant consequences if you persist in seeking information from government officers. These comments are prevalent among RTI applicants, activists, and promoters in the participants of the three FGDs. Except for a few instances of support that facilitate the progress of the RTI law, there is a prevailing lack of comprehension among numerous public officials regarding the fundamental goals of the law, thus hindering its implementation.

- There needs to be more interaction between the entities responsible for supplying and demanding compliance with the RTI law. The only way to remove this is by injecting larger RTI applications into the system. Applications that focus on transparency or accountability often fail to elicit the desired responses.

Challenges Faced in the Post RTI Application Stages:

- **Sustainability:** Ensuring the continued success and viability of RTI initiatives over the long term can be difficult. Changes in political leadership or shifts in policy priorities may compromise the effectiveness and consistency of the information access process in RTI mechanisms.
- **Excessive utilization of exceptions:** Despite the inclusion of provisions in RTI laws to safeguard sensitive information, there is a potential danger of excessively employing these exceptions to withhold information that ought to be accessible to the public. The excessive use of exceptions can erode the fundamental principles of transparency and accountability.
- Certain groups and civil society organizations initially expressed willingness to participate with RIB in the project but later backed out because they were not too eager to file RTI.
- With the existing Experts, sometimes coordination becomes problematic because, to date, even a more extensive section of educated people has the mindset that RTI cannot effectively bring systemic change in the country's governance system. It took us a considerable amount of time to convince a few experts of the effectiveness of the RTI law.
- The misuse of the RTI Act is primarily attributed to the absence of the locus-standi rule and the exemption from providing reasons for requesting information, allowing numerous petitioners to exploit the Act. This gives abundant opportunity to individuals who are not genuinely seeking information to exploit it for their gain rather than for the benefit of the public in terms of transparency. Furthermore, this time diversion hampers public servants' productivity and hurts their work. The general public often needs a comprehensive understanding of the purpose behind the RTI Act. Thus, the questions they ask usually fail to effectively address the goal of achieving a lasting systemic

transformation that would improve accountability and transparency in public offices. It reduces the overall quality of applications that can be submitted.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged approach, including raising awareness about RTI rights, training government officials, strengthening whistleblower protection, streamlining administrative processes, and ensuring consistent political support for transparency and accountability initiatives. Despite these challenges, the potential benefits of RTI in promoting transparency, accountability, and good governance make overcoming these obstacles essential for the continued progress of democratic societies.

Chapter 7:

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

To address the difficulties associated with implementing RTI, a set of recommendations has been developed to improve the efficiency and influence of this vital mechanism. Enhancing public knowledge and understanding of the Right to Information (RTI) through educational campaigns and programs is crucial for promoting a culture of openness and accountability. To enhance the implementation process, it is necessary to guarantee prompt and effective responses to RTI requests and provide thorough training to public officials so they can navigate the system's complexities skillfully. Capacity-implementing building workshops for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and activists will enhance their ability to effectively utilize the Right to Information (RTI). Additionally, promoting proactive information dissemination by public authorities will further expand the scope and impact of RTI. An effective monitoring and evaluation system should be established to monitor the implementation of RTI and evaluate its outcomes. Partnerships with civil society organizations can promote advocacy and stimulate public involvement in the process of Right to Information (RTI). By addressing issues such as sluggish response times and exceptional cases and simultaneously strengthening the autonomy of the Information Commission, we can reinforce the fundamental principles of the Right to Information (RTI). Adopting a culture of ongoing learning and improvement is crucial for maintaining the success of RTI initiatives and promoting transparent, accountable, and participatory governance. Conduct informative campaigns to educate citizens about entitlements under the Right to Information (RTI) Act. These campaigns can utilize diverse channels—radio, television, social media, and community events—to design educational initiatives to introduce Response to Intervention (RTI) principles in schools and communities. Integrating RTI into academic curricula and textbooks can facilitate the development of RTI literacy among young learners.

Strengthening Implementation:

Ensure public authorities promptly and efficiently respond to applications made under the Right to Information (RTI) Act. Implement explicit deadlines for responding to avoid any potential delays. Offer extensive training to public officials on effectively managing RTI requests, encompassing guidance on handling sensitive or confidential information.

Capacity building:

Conduct capacity-building workshops for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), activists, and community leaders to improve their comprehension of the Right to Information (RTI) and equip them with the necessary abilities to use RTI efficiently. Enable individuals by organizing workshops instructing them on composing and submitting applications under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, comprehending the information obtained, and utilizing it to advocate for their entitlements.

Proactive Information Dissemination: Promote the practice of public authorities voluntarily sharing information on their websites, ensuring that significant government data and documents are readily available to the public without the need for a formal request under the Right to Information (RTI) Act. Develop intuitive platforms and portals that enable citizens to access government information and data online conveniently. Implement a robust monitoring and evaluation system to track the progress of RTI implementation. Standard evaluations should gauge RTI's influence on governmental transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement. Utilize input from citizens, civil society, and other stakeholders to consistently enhance the Right to Information (RTI) process.

Engage Civil Society:

Establish collaborations with civil society organizations to promote the successful execution of RTI and oversee its implementation. Encourage civil society's active participation in promoting awareness of the Right to Information (RTI) and ensuring that public authorities are held accountable for their transparency obligations.

Addressing Challenges:

Tackle prevalent obstacles encountered in the RTI process, such as sluggish response times and excessive reliance on exceptions. Enact measures that simplify processes and reduce avoidable delays. Regularly evaluate the implementation of RTI to identify and resolve any specific challenges encountered. Enhance the capabilities of the Information Commission:

- Ensure the Information Commission's autonomy and efficacy, which is crucial in supervising the implementation of the Right to Information (RTI).
- Ensure the Commission is adequately equipped with the necessary resources, training, and support to resolve disputes and effectively promote transparency. By implementing these suggestions, governments and stakeholders can improve the influence and efficiency of RTI initiatives, foster transparency and accountability, and empower citizens to engage actively in democratic processes and governance.

However, the projects have alleviated rural populations' prevailing fear over their ability to access information. As individuals are increasingly interested in utilizing Real-Time Information Access (RTIA), government departments and union parishads have also seen the

necessity to enhance their information supply system. Nevertheless, our review reveals that more than implementing the project was needed to reach the broader rural community with RTI, despite the initiative's accomplishments with RIB's beneficiaries. Facilitating the efficient exchange of information on RTIA amongst different RIB projects would have been beneficial in reaching a more significant population residing in rural areas. Simultaneously, while it would have been helpful to have more theatrical acts addressing RTI concerns to raise awareness among beneficiaries, the limited money and staff prevented increased tragedies. Overall, the RTI initiative has demonstrated significant efficacy in –

- The objective is to enhance the confidence of rural beneficiaries in requesting and obtaining public information and
- Raise awareness among UP and Upazila government staff about the information requirements of rural people.

In terms of the project's learning and achievement, the following conclusions can be drawn:

Developing a community-based mechanism to access information has been cost-efficient by utilizing a cadre of infomediaries and leveraging the existing structures of RIB. Although it may be premature to establish a "RIB's ground model" for the rural poor to benefit from RTI legislation as a direct outcome of the project, the social communication approaches employed in the project will be valuable in creating and implementing a bottom-up model to enhance the demand for and accessibility of information.

The assessment examined the project's qualitative accomplishments. Hence, while the number of successful RTI applications is significant from a project implementation perspective, it is equally crucial to consider the level of information awareness and willingness of individuals to utilize the RTI law to enhance their circumstances. The actions taken by individuals and groups to implement the Right to Information Act (RTIA) in the project areas have had a notable impact on the responsiveness of the suppliers.

For the project to achieve its long-term goals, RIB must continue its support for an extended period. This is to establish a sustainable system for sharing information based on needs between the authorities and community members. Both targeted training and capacity building will be necessary to ensure the efficient operation of the RTI Infomediaries. However, utilizing pre-existing RIB structures and forums to guarantee lasting project results has proven beneficial.

The RIB platform has proven effective in disseminating information and raising awareness about RTIA among impoverished rural communities. Nevertheless, this organization could be utilized more effectively in specific project areas. Popular theatre dramas were commonly SSSregarded as a primary way of obtaining RTI information.

Based on the evaluation, this communication strategy seems highly efficient in advocating and disseminating information regarding the public's right to access information in rural areas. However, specific and verifiable indicators will be necessary in the future to assess the outcomes of the RTI Clinic and Dialogue.

The RTIA Handbook has proven extremely useful for members of UP and Upazila government officers. Infomediaries also found the helpful handbook. However, they proposed a simplified and condensed version of it. Some individuals proposed incorporating simplified illustrations. The overall awareness campaign should prioritize increasing the visibility of informational media work.

To establish 'Infomediary' as a catalyst for RTI change, future project design should provide more significant opportunities for them to contribute to public awareness campaigns and educate local policy implementers. Appointing specific information officers at the Upazila level regarding the supply side is challenging. A comprehensive service for submitting an RTI application has yet to be developed. They also need a delegated officer or officer in charge.

Recommendations for additional enhancement of skills and knowledge:

- The RTIA project staff needs additional training on the technical aspects of the law. They need a comprehensive understanding of RTIA, amendments, and business rules.
- The infomediaries should undergo additional training on RTIA, focusing on local and area-specific concerns and the technical aspects of the law.

Recommendations for Future Campaigns:

- Announcements made through a microphone can be beneficial in rural areas. You'll need a campaign tailored to specific areas. In..., individuals know that applications can be submitted using white paper, whereas in..., there appears to be a lack of awareness. Posters should be prominently exhibited in locations where large congregations occur, such as markets and fairs.
- RTI messages in Bengali script can be distributed via mobile phones. Using voice calls instead of SMS can be advantageous, as some individuals may need more reading proficiency. Additionally, employing a distinctive ringtone featuring RTI themes can also prove beneficial. The RTIA campaign could collaborate with the government's mobile film unit from the Department of Mass Communication.
- RTIA Union Information Centre orientation classes could be incorporated into the RTI campaign in schools and colleges. The government/community school textbook may contain a chapter or information regarding the Right to Information Act (RTIA) and the function of information media. As part of nationwide advocacy, it is recommended that this be proposed to the government authorities.
- RTI videos can be displayed using a multimedia projector during meetings between opinion leaders, UP members, and the community.

Recommendations for Enhancing Communication Materials:

- An abbreviated edition of the RTIA Handbook featuring visual aids would be beneficial.
- There could be cartoon strips or films similar to the Meena cartoon.
- Billboards can be utilized on a local scale.
- Popular theatre dramas can be distributed on RTI via video.
- Regional cable providers can broadcast the video. Popular theatrical dramas can also be distributed through multimedia projectors in Hat-Bazars.

Recommendations for Future Local Advocacy:

- It would be best for RIB to maintain the monthly RIB meeting and ensure that Upazila's information officer attends it.
- Regular discussions should be scheduled with the chairperson, members, and prominent individuals of UP. Ward-level meetings on RTIA can be conducted with journalists, educators, religious leaders, and theologians, among others.
- Government officials should receive training on the Right to Information (RTI).

We were delighted not because there was an increase in the number of citizens using the law or becoming more skilled in obtaining relevant information from public authorities, nor because the authorities had become more responsive to people's information requests. The Information Commission needed to become more diligent in addressing the obstacles that citizens encounter when applying the law, nor had it become more inclined to reprimand public officials for disregarding its regulations. We were especially pleased by the impressive increase in citizens' comprehension of the law's importance in overseeing public authorities' activities and highlighting their attention to people's concerns. They had started to comprehend the immense and influential capacity of the law. Frequently, readers ask about the Right to Information (RTI) Act in Bangladesh. Is it possible for public officials, accustomed to a deeply ingrained culture of official secrecy, to adopt transparency in their work and genuinely feel responsible to the citizens? Are there sufficient citizens with a comprehensive understanding of the law and the bravery to utilize it to pursue confidential information or reveal any possible wrongdoing? To answer the question asked at the outset of this article, we do indeed see a sense of optimism regarding the efficacy of the RTI Act in our nation. However, several conditions need to be met:

- If civil society devotes more focused attention,
- If the government holds disobedient officials accountable,
- If the Information Commission improves its reputation as an unbiased protector of the law,

Under these circumstances, all three primary stakeholders of the legislation have the potential to achieve success. Alarming, even after more than ten years since its implementation, they still need a clearer understanding of the law's objective. They need to comprehend that requesting information from public institutions is not just a method but a powerful tool to achieve a broader objective: improved governance. The law aims to actively involve citizens in overseeing the activities of public offices. Therefore, searching for information is a privilege granted to individuals and a citizen's obligation towards their community. As citizens, public officials, and a nation, we must acknowledge the RTI Act's significant importance in promoting democracy and good governance. To fully benefit from it, we must thoroughly comprehend its goals, as explicitly outlined in the law's intention and wording. As the country advances in different aspects of national development, it is crucial to guarantee the effective execution of the RTI Act. The fundamental principles of this act have been officially acknowledged in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which Bangladesh has fully supported.

