

Research Report

Special Conference I

Establishing procedures for increased access to information specifically in LEDCs



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Forum	Special Conference 1
Issue:	Establishing procedures for increased access to information specifically in LEDCs
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Introduction

Access to information is a fundamental right in today's society. It enables citizens to be informed and to inform others. It is a necessary condition to develop the accountability and transparency of each government. It is a basic human right that all human beings should have access to. Each nation has a different legislation regarding this right. However depending on the way the country is ruled the legislations are usually quite similar.

Access to information sometimes helps citizens understand the government's choices regarding their respective countries. Everyone in the world has the right to have access to information however it is not the case, especially in Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDC). Here is a famous quote from the former US President which describes a little more what access to information consists of. *"Access to information is a basic human right. Freedom of information is particularly critical for vulnerable and marginalized persons, including women."* (Abraham Lincoln)

Definition of Key Terms

Freedom of press

Freedom of press is when the press is allowed to publish anything they wish without any governmental restrictions or censorship. It is quite important because if the press is censored then the information that will be communicated to the citizens could be misunderstood, false or come from unreliable sources.

Propaganda

It is when information the information given is used to manipulate people or to publicize a certain politic or opinion. Propaganda usually comes from corrupted Governments.



General Overview

Access to information (ATI) is a basic human right. It is considered as a way to enable the citizens to obtain specific information in the possession of the state. In order for the citizen to have a proper informed opinion and not to be confused with the government's possible propaganda, the information given needs to be true, useful and practical.

Access to information is considered as an essential concept in all democratic governance. In order to have a proper ATI there are a few conditions such as political stability, communications infrastructure, telecommunication, independent judiciary, library and information services. All these factors have a great impact on increasing the access to information specifically in LEDCs. In short, to have a good ATI good governance is needed.

In the African continent for example there is a lack ATI due to the low literacy rate, the weak institutions, limited Internet access, government propaganda, corruption etc. All these negative factors have an immediate impact on this issue. Hence new procedures must be established in order to have a better access to information in LEDCs.

In Europe the ATI is something that every citizen has access to due to the Aarhus convention. This European convention mainly focuses on the interactions between the public authorities and the public. It is also the 10th article of the European convention of Human rights .

In North America in nations such as the United State the Freedom of Information Act that was signed in 1966 guarantees all citizens a proper access to information.

Another act that is currently ratified by 12 nations is the Access to Information Act. It was created by the Canadians in 1982 .

In LEDCs all around the world the access to information seems to be diminished due to their respective economical situation and the way their governments function. Some governments have decided to block the access to information because they want to limit their transparency. These governments are usually corrupted and use techniques such propaganda to pretend to give ATI to their citizens.

The main issue with corrupted government is that citizens sometimes become suspicious about the way their government pretends to run their country, which then leads to different types of rebellion. Ban Ki-moon the secretary general of the UN once said : *“When the flow of information is hindered – whether for political or technological reasons – our capacity to function is stunted.”* Recent events in North Africa confirm this quote.

Access to information is often related to the television, the press and the radio as a lot of information is communicated throughout these types of media. Therefore a free press plays an important role in order to have a proper access to information in each country. Another important point is that in order to be free, it is primordial for the media to have reliable sources otherwise what they will communicate to the citizens will be false information. During elections the access to proper information becomes even more imperative in order for the citizens to vote for the most suitable candidate. This is why in communist nations it is usually complicated to give access to information to the citizens because their human rights are



limited.

If the media is censored or simply has no freedom of press the information communicated will turn out being subjective. This will then lead to wrong or different information than the initial one that should have been given.

This issue is still prominent in Asia, Africa and South America. It is mainly due to the way these regions are governed.

Major Parties Involved

United Nation Development Programme (UNDP)

UNDP is quite involved regarding the ATI in LEDCs because their main aim is to help undeveloped countries become developed. In other words attempting to provide ATI to LEDCs is taking a step forward towards helping those impoverished regions. They also attempt to prove that democratic governance is the most suitable governance to have a proper ATI or even to have access to human rights which not all LEDCs have.

World Bank Institute (WBI)

WBI works worldwide and attempt to give ATI to every citizen. More specifically in South Asia and Africa. They are also in a partnership with the Carter Center, which holds conferences regarding this issue. WBI also helps funding if necessary in order to give ATI to citizens in impoverished areas. WBI also attempts to prove that a good governance with transparency is the key to have a good and developed ATI.

United Nations Group on the Information Society (UNGIS)

This UN body works closely with UNDP and its main goal is to establish regular interactions with other organisation working on this issue and to raise awareness about the right to access information. They also organise conferences for example in Rio (Brazil) regarding sustainable development.

Timeline of Key Events

- 1948 Section 1 of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is adopted by the United Nation regarding access to information
- The Promotion of Access to Information Act 2 of 2000 (PAIA)
- 1998 The Aarhus convention was created and ratified in Denmark
- 2002 Access to information Act is passed in Jamaica.
- 2008 The Carter Center's International Conference on the Right to Public Information gathered more than 40 member states to examine the situation of ATI worldwide.



Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

There have been previous attempts to solve this issue more specifically under the form of acts such as the Promotion to Access to Information Act (PAIA), which mainly aimed at creating regulations, and framework that would allow citizens to access the actions and records held by the government on their behalf. It was also meant to educate the public to understand better their right to access to information. However this act was created 11 year ago and doesn't seem to be working in most LEDCs.

In 2008, the Carter Center held an international Conference on the Right to Public Information. Their main goals were to reflect on the worldwide situation and actions in order to implement ATI in LEDCs. Three years have passed now and the ATI in LEDCs still has improved a little however it is a very slow process. This is because there needs to be less bureaucracy and more actions taken.

Possible Solution

A solution to this issue would be to first of all ensure a strong proper education system in order to decrease the illiteracy rates in LEDC as it is very difficult to have access to information if there is a high rate of illiteracy because the easiest way to receive information is by reading.

Another solution would be to ensure the freedom of press in all nations, with no censorship or propaganda. Increasing the public's participation in national decision making could also be quite a good solution.

Raising awareness amongst the people about ATI and what exactly it consists of with all its benefits could be another step towards tackling such an issue.

Appendix/Appendices

http://www.cartercenter.org/news/features/p/access_to_information/conference.html

<http://wbi.worldbank.org/wbi/stories/access-information-helping-citizens-bangladesh-exercise-their-rights>

<http://www.article19.org/data/files/pdfs/publications/foi-as-an-international-right.pdf>

http://www.jis.gov.jm/special_sections/ATI/

http://www.priv.gc.ca/media/nr-c/2010/res_100901_e.cfm

(This link leads you to the resolution written in 2010 by Canada regarding access to information)



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"Developing Countries Must Invest in Access to Information for Health Improvements." Web. 25 Aug. 2011. <<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1550551/>>.

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"GSDRC: Access to Information – and Its Constraints." *GSDRC: Governance and Social Development Resource Centre*. Web. 25 Aug. 2011. <<http://www.gsdrc.org/go/topic-guides/communications-and-governance/access-to-information--and-its-constraints>>.

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