Right to information: Making the difference
Information Disclosures Lead to Empowerment

With people beginning to enjoy their right to information, they feel more empowered now than ever before. The enactment of RTI Act, voluntarily adoption of disclosure policies by more and more organizations and growing practices of people filling RTI applications asking for information - all these developments eventually are leading us to a society where people are better empowered. Series of intellectual brainstorming, trainings and exchanges, in fact, further sharpen the concept of freedom of information among the people and made them aware about exercising their rights.
Little did Husne Ara Joly anticipate that the conversation she picked up with her colleagues in the office would spur such a debate. They did not like the idea she had tossed. They rather wondered what went wrong with their boss (Joly) who had steered the non-government organization (NGO) they all were working for to a formidable success thenceforth.

It didn’t immediately occur to her. But then Joly realized that it was she who alone had converted, not all she worked with. So she took it upon her to make the colleagues understand the value of her newfound concept.

It was sometime early 2012. Husne Ara Joly, Executive Director of an NGO called Program for Women Development (PWD), was actually sharing her idea with colleagues at the organization’s cozy office in northern township of Sirajganj about introducing an information disclosure policy.

As she informed them that once such a policy is in place their NGO would share its programme and organizational information with the beneficiaries, in particular, and members of the public, in general, her colleagues at PWD demanded to know the rationale. One of them asked her “Why do we need to disclose our information to others?”

In her own words, as Joly recollects, she says, “There were initial hiccups. I became aware of Right to Information (RTI) Act and also about the obligation of charting out an information disclosure policy after participating in training on the issue. But my colleagues in the organization had no idea whatsoever. They raised the question why should we share our information with wider community.”

Courtesy USAID Bangladesh's Promoting Governance, Accountability, Transparency and Integrity- PROGATI Program, the Management and Resources Development Initiative (MRDI) imparted training on RTI and disclosure policy to many NGO executives like Joly. It not only helped Joly and likes to convert to ‘openness’ from the orthodoxy of ‘secrecy’ but also bestowed upon them the responsibility of converting many of their peers in the non-government and civil society fraternity and barefoot development activists in the grassroots.

Today Joly’s PWD is not the only one having an information disclosure policy in effect rather there are 38 other NGOs, if not more, which have successfully pursued the policy in compliance with the RTI Act that Bangladesh enacted back in 2009.

Thirty nine NGOs on April 21 announced to have voluntarily formulated their respective information disclosure policy in line with the RTI Act to make more information available to the public.

Of these NGOs, which monitor service delivery of the government agencies at local level across the country, 30 had, by then, already given approval to their policies. The
proud group of 39 NGOs made the announcement at a workshop held in the capital's Brac Inn Centre.

To demonstrate the potential of proactive disclosures, the NGOs, the enlightened ones have already started the groundwork. Joly says, “The government functionaries that we deal with now know that we’re (PWD) RTI-compliant. This gave us an image boost-up. Others are expressing intents to follow the suit. It’s now spreading to all – our group members, families, relatives, friends and stakeholders – that we’re following an information disclosure policy.”

“We’ve adopted the disclosure policy on March 15, 2012. We’ve spelled out the categories beyond ambiguities that which are the information we would be disclosing voluntarily, which we would on requests and which are the ones that we would mark as ‘classified’. Thanks to MRDI imparted training that we could formulate our disclosure policy,” says Joly.

Ferdousi Begum, Executive Director of Bogra-based NGO, Grameen Alo, can not agree more. Begum’s NGO is also RTI-compliant and successfully introduced a disclosure policy. “We drafted our policy during the MRDI-imparted training and later we finalized it after necessary scrutiny.”

Asked to describe a few salient features of the policy that her NGO is pursuing, Begum says, “Under the disclosure policy we’ve set up an information help desk and posted a designated official within our NGO to cater to the information needs of the people. We now encourage people to follow RTI in gaining information from us and we also will follow the RTI in seeking information from government offices.”

She sees a positive change in her surroundings after the new wave of disclosure policy made a difference. “Now as far as I know another Bogra-based NGO, Lighthouse, is drafting a disclosure policy and hints at seeking our assistance if need be. Besides, Bogra-based NGO, Obolombon Nari Sangho, and Barisal-based NGO, AHEAD, showed interests in adopting disclosure policies as we first declared ours one at a district-level meeting of NGOs.”

Akhtarun Nahar Saki is Executive Director of a Panchagarh-based NGO called Paraspor. Saki acknowledges candidly that they were not much aware about RTI and its compliance issues till they got the training opportunity. Now she boasts her NGO having a disclosure policy that two government offices in her district have taken copies from them to get educated about the RTI and its compliances.

Saki, whose NGO has activities in a wide range of areas including women rights, education, youth development, climate change and anti-graft awareness building, is now a strong believer of information-power. Saki replies in the negative when asked whether life would become difficult if one has to share all the information with others.

“Information shouldn’t be kept hostage to a few. Information should be widely shared. If everyone applies the disclosure policy in its true spirit there would be no room for graft practices in the society.”
Naresh Madhu heads Pabna-based NGO *Satsanga Pallikallyan Samity*. He also partook MRDI provided training. He values the training to such an extent that his NGO now contemplates to organize training for other NGOs so that those can also become aware of RTI and disclosure policy.

Own Village Advancement (OVA) is an NGO operating from the northern tip of Bangladesh – otherwise under developed Lalmonirhat. Its Executive Director Suzit Kumar Gosh has got quite a lot exposure to right to information.

He had the privilege of taking part in some seminars, workshops related to people’s right to know and right to information even before the government enacted the RTI Act in 2009. He also took part in a right to information fair last year.

But it was not until, says Gosh, he was enrolled into the MRDI training that the inspiration came for formulating a disclosure policy for OVA.

He now boasts having a disclosure policy and also deputing an official of his NGO particularly to cater to the information requirements of the people.

Gosh says OVA’s Accounts Manager Reajul Haq Sarkar has been designated as information disclosure official but when asked whether Sarkar had any formal training on how to face the public queries on various organizational, financial information, Gosh replies in the negative.

Promptly he adds, “He (Sarkar) has got no training on RTI or disclosure policy issues but learnt the basics from us. He has read the relevant documents and laws and made himself aware of the developments.”

However it is not something unique applicable to OVA only rather Pallabi Hore of *Satsanga Pallikallyan Samity*, Aminun Nahar of *Paraspor*, SM Selim Ahmed of *Grameen Alo*, Shahnaj Parvin of PWD - all the designated information officials in their respective NGOs – have no formal training whatsoever on the task they are asked to perform. This is commonplace.

The top executives of all these NGOs acknowledge the importance of the training for their designated information officials. But say in unison, in good spirit, that things are not bogged down from being advancing just because they could not arrange such training so far.

They say with whatever little RTI understandings they themselves have gathered they try to instill and pass on the knowledge to their NGO colleagues, in general, and the designated ones, in particular.

Many of these 39 NGOs that are pathfinders in the road that had not been traversed by their predecessors ever before believe it strongly that if they continue to adhere to the path of ‘openness’ and leave the ‘culture of secrecy’ behind, they’re going to get the same treatment as they approach the government establishments.

What they preach they must practice first – this is one message transpired well to these small but vibrant and enlightened group of NGO-fraternity. They now know it
for sure that they’re the ones who need to guide the people in the communities that they operate in gaining benefits out of RTI.

People living in the communities are either their (NGOs) group members, family members, beneficiaries or the ones living in their command areas. So they have a sense of responsibility to do things that would one way or the other help emancipate the community, uplift the livelihood standards, graduate the ultra-poor to a better social strata.

Some of the NGO bosses say they know that people in their command areas are not necessarily poor in human capital or in want of various resources and development tools but also they are information-poor. That means if they are provided with the proper information about what the administration, NGOs or for that matter, the private sector, are doing for them, they would have been in a better position to judge whether, in reality, they are getting those assistances or services or not.

Charity begins at home – as the saying goes. The NGOs in question are now very much on track in putting things into order in their respective home ground. Once they’ll be known in the community as NGOs that never shy away when approached by people for information, then they would have much better public profile and standings in the society as eligible candidates for fighting the right causes of the people.

To make the peers and community at large aware about the developments, these NGOs not only adopted the disclosure policies but also made it public by different means. They seized the opportunities of district-level NGO-coordination meetings, backyard meetings held in the community neighborhoods to disseminate the information on their adopting disclosure policies.

They also made sure that the relevant government offices that they've working relationships and partnerships with, are also aware about the developments. Because these are the grassroots government agencies where public, in general, and the beneficiaries of these NGOs, in particular, have various engagements in many tiers.

By making them aware the NGOs also need to encourage the local level government offices and functionaries to imbue with the culture of openness leaving behind the culture of secrecy. NGOs know it better that they can go closer with their bonds with the community if they can also promote their causes for getting right information in right time from different government offices.

Many of these 39 NGOs who’ve their own disclosure policies in place are now also in the practice of applying RTI to get information from different government organizations. These are the information that they know would be of great importance not to them (NGOs) only but also to the people they work with, work for in the community.

Some of them say unless they (NGOs) themselves fully comply with the RTI Act they know they would never enjoy the confidence in gaining information from government organizations.
Story-2

Push is on to create new space

Scandinavian welfare state Sweden introduced freedom of information act back in 1766. It was one of the earliest known examples of practicing information rights. Thanks to British colonial legacy, we had, in contrast, an official secrecy act that prohibited officials from divulging information to members of the public.

Starting with Sweden and Finland, the principle of the freedom of information has been approved as part of legislation throughout the world in over 90 countries today, representing nearly five billion people. Bangladesh joined the RTI club only in 2009.

From that legacy of secrecy, which was in force since 1923, to the enactment of Right to Information (RTI) Act in 2009, Bangladesh traversed a long journey of ups and downs. Over the period the balance in favour of protecting state’s interests over people’s interests has been reversed.

Laws changed so did the organizational structures within our government and non-government institutions. In compliance to the RTI Act many organizations have adopted information disclosure policies; many others are in the process of doing so, many assigned designated officials to look after the RTI issues, many others are following suits.

Against this backdrop, people on both sides of the divide – those seek information and those provide or are supposed to provide the same – are now passing a phase that can be best described as a ‘learning session.’ This also has got lot to do with changing mindset.

With every ‘push’ of a new RTI application being filed, new ‘space’ is being created within the government bureaucracy that has long been imbued with the spirit of ‘maintaining secrecy.’

A basic principle behind most right to information legislation is that the burden of proof falls on the body asked for information, not the person asking for it. The requester does not usually have to give an explanation for their request, but if the information is not disclosed a valid reason has to be given.

As this is a paradigm shift from culture of secrecy to culture of openness, the struggle is on for people at large, journalists, NGO workers and intellectuals, in particular, as well as for the RTI activists and pro-active officials to carry forward the journey.

The newsmen and general members of the public who have had some experiences of filling RTI applications seeking a piece of information or two from different government establishments over the last couple of years or so consider itself a success that there are designated desks, officials there to entertain their queries.

They say it is already a departure from the past that officials, at least, try to provide them with information though not hundred percent and not always.
On the other hand, some of the officials in charge of entertaining public queries feel the urgency of reorienting the whole bunch of functionaries and not just one or two designated officials in each offices so that “all start appreciating the value and needs of openness instead of following the old school of secrecy.”

Himel Chakma, a vernacular daily’s correspondent in a hill district, filed RTI applications seeking to know information on number of legally operating brick kilns in his district, Rangamati, and statistics of foodgrains distributed among the poor.

Chakma got some information, for some more he was in the process of filing an appeal while for some other information he required to re-file his application by correctly following the procedures.

His experience shows – the applicant, the authorities in hold of information and officials concerned – all have got something to learn from their respective exercises.

“As we’re practicing it new, we’re learning by making some errors. As the officials are also receiving such applications seeking information for the first time, they’re also learning from such exercises that how to deal with the RTI issues,” comments Himel, who has the privilege to attend a number of MRDI-administered trainings where RTI procedures were taught practically.

Rashed Mehedi, a Dhaka-based reporter of a daily, who has filed several RTI applications for information in past two years, expresses his firm resolve, “I am hopeful that through further exercises we'll be able to make better use of RTI applications in the future and come up with good pieces of reporting.”

Sometimes formal introductions and face-to-face interactions between journalists and government officials also yield positive results in terms of journalists getting the right kinds of information that would serve his reporting purpose and at the same time it would no way put any dent to the image of the officials or the offices concerned.

Thanks to MRDI-initiated programmes in divisional township of Rajshahi, a regional correspondent of an English daily Anwar Ali had the opportunity to interact with government audit officials.

Though Ali had previously filed formal applications seeking some information, he was not much pushy in getting the information. But once he caught up with the audit officials in his own city, Ali’s interests on audit issues grew. The officials were also helpful resulting in greater inroads for Ali to poke his nose for news in the important area of government’s audit sector.

Institutions like USAID Bangladesh's Promoting Governance, Accountability, Transparency and Integrity (PROGATI) Program, the Management and Resources Development Initiative (MRDI), who championed the causes of right to information, played role of catalysts here in creating an environment where all the RTI actors can thrive and get a fair chance to be exposed to RTI knowledge, training and good practices.
In tandem with all these developments, the Information Commission is also trying to do its part. The Commission’s interactions with as many as 48 government secretaries, the top bureaucrats, 51 out of 64 district administrations, media, and civil society organizations yielded positive outcome as far as spreading the message of information rights down to the grassroots. Besides, government is all set to introduce RTI knowledge into the syllabus of 9th to 12th grade education from 2013.

Information Commission sent out over 870 millions of text messages through mobile telephones to the people to raise awareness about RTI.
Story-3
Arunendu, Iqbal - Two RTI Torchbearers

People like Arunendu Tripura and Khademul Karim Iqbal are few and far between. They belong to a select group of government functionaries who not only believe in the power of information sharing but also try to practice what they preach in support of information dissemination.

After the enactment of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in Bangladesh in 2009 many organizations have assigned officials to deliver the task of designated information official in compliance of the act. But many are yet to follow the suit.

Arunendu and Iqbal are such two designated officials who have been assigned by their respective institutions to cater to the needs of the people's right to information. The Information Commission statistics show till mid-May 2012 as many as 9,147 officials have been assigned as designated information officials in different government offices while 2,011 in the offices of various non-government organizations.

Still hundreds of other organizations need to designate such officials so that they become fully compliant to RTI Act.

Unlike many others, who might have chosen to take the new task as 'business as usual' Arunendu and Iqbal took the mission with a passion. They are not looking at the job as just another mundane daily routine imposed on them from the high-ups. Rather, they took it as a challenge.

Both of them are proactively pursuing the causes of people's right to know, right to information. They are trying to create space within the government bureaucracy so that people have a greater access to public information.

They are ready to go extra miles to quench the information thirsts of the people provided they are backed up by organizational supports and necessary training. Training not for them only but for all the functionaries relevant, on whom, at times, they (the designated officials) have to depend for getting information and deliver to the members of the public, who file RTI applications seeking the information.

They feel that if the organizations they work for adopt information disclosure policies they would be better poised to cater the information needs of the people at the same time best serving the interests of the organizations.

Obtaining a masters degree in History from the Chittagong University, Arunendu Tripura joined Rangamati Hill District Council as its public relations officer (PRO) in 1991. Through his dedication in work and commitment to public service, he earned a reputation over the years.

His office has made him ICT Focal Person and also made him the Council's designated official to address RTI issues. In playing his role as designated official Arunendu received three RTI applications from journalists and two more from public over the last one year.
“Here people get information whenever they so require. That’s why usually they don’t require filling up RTI form to get information,” says Arunendu.

Upon receipt of forms seeking information, he moves file to his higher authorities seeking directives on getting information from other relevant departments to prepare the replies.

"As hill council has to deal with many government departments here. In preparing replies to people's RTI applications we need to seek information from several other places. Officials concerned in many other departments sometimes say there are objections from their authorities on sharing information," says Arunendu while explaining some of the practical constraints.

"Then I caution them (non-cooperating officials) that if I don’t get the information from them and cannot satisfy the people who've asked for the information, they (the officials) would be in trouble too, not only me."

Arunendu then tries to make the non-complying officials understand that if they don't cooperate by providing information under the RTI Act, people seeking the information have got all the right to go for appeal and even can take lawful actions through the Information Commission that has got quasi-judicial power.

He says he considers himself as a member of the public and expects certain services from government offices like the one he is serving now. "So I like to create an environment here (Rangamati Hill District Council) where people can get access to all the information they require."

"We’ve our own website launched, citizen charter in place," declares Arunendu. But, says he, yet not drafted an information disclosure policy. He feels strongly about the need of an information inventory, presence of which would better equip officials like him in easily catering to the information needs of the people.

It would be good if training can be organized for the designated information officials of different organizations. There are peculiarities in nature of work patterns in different organizations as according to their structures. So training can make their understanding about the mandated job more clear, notes Arunendu.

“Sometime as people seek information from me I need to collect the same from different departments and in the process if time lapses then the information seekers can always go for appeal.”

So, Arunendu feels it would be good if every organization have a disclosure policy and they abide by the policy in divulging, sharing and disseminating the information under their disposal.

Ministry-wise training can be arranged and then each of the ministries can train the people in their respective subordinate departments, he suggests.
As there were no provision for people to seek information through formal written procedure before, culture of providing information has not developed, notes Arunendu adding that “now with the provisions of RTI application filing, and subsequent appeal procedures in place one can seek legal redress if s/he is not furnished with information. So for obvious reasons officials in hold of information are now bound to change their mindset and share information with the people.”

There were no conscious efforts before to follow the quota-system as a government rule in case of recruitment in public jobs. There were many instances of job quota violation. “Not anymore,” says Arunendu adding that “Now there is RTI fear. Officials in charge of recruitment now afford refusing to entertain undue lobbying from high-ups in favour of the candidates of their choices. They can easily refer to people’s empowerment through RTI and danger side of not following quota strictly.”

Thanks to his previous career stint as a journalist, none other than Md Khademul Karim Iqbal would have been a better pick for the information job in the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (OCAG).

Iqbal is an OCAG Deputy Director (MIS), who was given the charge of manning the information desk where people would come and seek information by filing RTI applications.

At OCAG things were further formalized with President Md Zillur Rahman launching a media and communication cell at its headquarters on May 11, 2011. Iqbal heads the cell.

“We’ve been putting in our best efforts to comply RTI since the Act’s enactment in 2009. If others don’t go by books, we ring alarm bell in audit objections. So very consciously we try to follow all the government rules meticulously including RTI,” says Iqbal.

Courtesy USAID Bangladesh's Promoting Governance, Accountability, Transparency and Integrity (PROGATI) Program, the Management and Resources Development Initiative (MRDI) organized numerous RTI-awareness and capacity building trainings, seminars.

Iqbal has the privilege to take part in some of those programmes including the one organized to streamline OCAG’s media outreach.

Thanks to his academic background in communication, work experience in the field of journalism and wide exposures to various RTI related training and workshops in recent months, Iqbal now proactively work for promoting the causes of people’s greater access to information.

“We’ve assigned designated information officials in all of our subordinate offices including 10 audit directorates. We uploaded RTI-related all information in our website. And now work is underway to draft a disclosure policy,” says an enthusiastic Iqbal.
He notes, “People have tendency to get information from us informally, verbally. However, one organization and 8 journalists sought information from us through RTI applications over the last one year. Not a single case of appeal was registered against us as we furnished them with their required information on time.”

Besides, he adds, “We’ve pro-actively posted many of our reports on our website for members of the public to have easy access.”