

‘Combating Corruption in Rajasthan State, India, by Applying RTI Act as a Tool’

Brief Report of the State Level Project Launch Meeting held on April 18, 2007

I. Background:

1.1 CUTS Centre for Consumer Action, Research & Training (CUTS-CART) organised the State Level Launch cum Brainstorming Workshop of the project ‘Combating Corruption in Rajasthan State, India, by Applying RTI Act as a Tool’ on April 18, 2007 at Conference Hall, Patel Bhawan, HCM-RIPA, Jaipur.

1.2 The project was conceptualised and is implementing by CUTS CART in partnership with the Partnership for Transparency Fund (PTF), an international NGO based in Washington DC, USA dedicated to helping civil society to play an effective role in the design, implementation and monitoring of national anti-corruption programs.

1.3 The project is being implemented in two administrative districts of Rajasthan state viz., Bhilwara and Tonk with a rural community based approach. Its overall objective is awareness generation, provoking /encouraging the common citizens towards application of RTI Act; empowering the CSOs and the vulnerable sections at the grassroots supporting in improving functioning of the existing accountability mechanisms; and advocate with the policy makers for effective implementation of RTI Act for ensuring good governance and accountability.

II. Participants:

2.1 The dignitaries participated in the event were Shri. Wajahat Habibullah, Central Chief Information Commissioner, New Delhi, Shri C.D. Arah, Chief Information Commissioner Andhra Pradesh, Shri J.V.R. Murty, The World Bank, Mumbai and Ms. Sonal Thacker, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), Gujarat.

2.2 The event witnessed an active participation of around hundred relevant stakeholders representing various CSOs, Government Officials of concerned department, media persons and other individuals working/interested on the RTI issue.

III. Proceedings:

3.1 Inaugural Session:

3.1.1 The Workshop commenced with welcome and introductory remarks by Shri George Cheriyan, Associate Director, CUTS-CART. Shri Cheriyan stated that the event to launch the Project is very important, since it is coinciding with the First Anniversary of the constitution of Rajasthan Information Commission. Speaking on the importance and relevance of the RTI Act, Shri Cheriyan opined that RTI is one of the most empowering legislations passed in the post Independent India. In contrast to the official secretaries act of 1923, the right to information act alleviates the common man to the status of an informed partner in the matter of governance of the State. He said the act is having a big potential in ensuring the transparency and accountability.

3.1.2 Shri R.K. Sharma, CUTS-CART made a power point presentation on the various aspects of the project covering the background, the objectives, major activities, expected outcomes etc.

3.1.3 Shri C.D. Arah, Chief Information Commissioner, Andhra Pradesh, who was the Guest of Honour in the event, while delivering the special address spoke about different clauses of Right to Information Act. He pointed out the need to build capacity of general public regarding the usage of Right to Information Act. According to him, selection of mode/method to impart/disseminate knowledge and information regarding Right to Information Act is critical. In a state like Rajasthan, remoteness and backwardness is a challenge to disseminate the awareness about Right to Information Act, opined Shri Arah.

3.1.4 Shri Wajahat Habibullah, Central Chief Information Commissioner, who was the Chief Guest in the meeting, formally launched the project and delivered the inaugural address. While delivering the inaugural address, Shri Habibullah said “Right to Information Act is a tool no a weapon”. He opined that RTI Act should be used in a cordial manner that could address corruption up to some extent and ensure transparency and accountability. Further, he added that there is ardent necessity to orient public as well as public servants about RTI Act so that it can be collectively used for the development of the country. He highlighted that combined force of Consumer Protection Act and Right to Information Act in hands of common men could prove to be a big tool to combat corruption. He also expressed that there is a need to develop ‘Information Technology’ in government departments to facilitate the process of information dissemination under Right to Information Act. Ensuring use of modern methods of communications such as e-mails etc. could provide a breakthrough and unlock new dimensions to transparency and accountability in Public Sector.

3.1.5 Mr. Habibullah responded to a number of questions raised by participants after his inaugural address. Mr. R.K. Sharma had done the combairing of the inaugural session and proposed the vote of thanks to the dignitaries at the end of the session

3.2 Technical Session:

3.2.1 Mr. R.K. Sharma introduced the Technical Session on ‘RTI Act (2005) and its Potential being a tool to ensure transparency and accountability in the government system’ to the participants. Mr. Murty moderated the session.

3.2.2 While facilitating the technical session, Ms. Sonal Thacker from CHRI, Gujarat introduced various aspects and clauses of Right to Information Act and its implications. She also presented various success as well as failure stories, related to the use of RTI Act.

3.2.3 Mr. J.V.R. Murty, The World Bank, Mumbai made a brief presentation on “A Framework of Accountability Relationships”.

3.2.4 The presentation was followed by an interactive session. Mr. Murty and Ms. Sonal responded to various questions raised by the participants. Simultaneously, the participants also provided very useful suggestions that will help in the implementation of various activities under the project.

3.3.2 At the end of the session, Ms. Ritu Agarwal proposed the vote of thanks and the workshop concluded with lunch.

IV. Outputs:

4.1 The presence of the Chief Information Commissioner of India and other dignitaries in the launch meeting helped in attracting the attention of the Government, media and the general public in to the design of the project and initiated a public debate regarding the potential of the act in combating corruption.

4.2 The event provided an adequate forum to propagate projects' aims and objectives among relevant stakeholders and also discussing related issues.

4.3 This meeting provided an opportunity to build a synergy between different stakeholders, representatives of target groups from the grassroots of the respective districts and to discuss collectively on the issues related to the effective implementation of Right to Information Act.

4.4 The meeting also provided an opportunity to the representatives of CSOs, Government Officials of concerned departments and other individuals to get acquainted with various technical aspects and clauses of Right to Information Act.

4.5 The event witnessed a very good participation of both electronic and print media and resulted in wider coverage.