



Case study – India

Right to information success inspires a community

Challenge



Corruption and lack of accountability in governance has always been a big problem in India. Now many civil society organizations and activists are lobbying for official bodies to be more transparent in the way they run the services that people need.

The Right to Information (RTI) movement campaigns for the fair implementation of the Right to Information Law passed in 2005. The law grants citizens the right to request information from government bodies (excluding defence and national security) within 30 days, or within 48 hours in cases of information concerning a person's life or liberty. Despite this law being in place many citizens are still being denied this right because of what campaigners say are corrupt practices. This is fuelled by a lack of knowledge of the law by civil society and authorities alike.

Catalyst

The RTI coalition is a group of organizations and activists who are spearheading the Right to Information movement in the Indian state of Orissa and Jharkhand. VSO India supports the coalition by offering training and guidance in information management, good practices and sensitisation. VSO have also provided funding and international volunteers to the coalition.

Individual examples demonstrating the lack of implementation of the RTI Act abound all over the country. One example began back in 2007, when two volunteer teachers at a school in Jharkhand, east India, filed a Right to Information application to gain access to the spending records for their school. The two teachers, Naresh and Binidya, were concerned about the dangerous state of precariousness of some of the school buildings, and the poor quality and regularity of lunches provided to the students.

Their first attempt went unanswered, whilst their second, two months later, received a misleading response with incorrect information about the school's spending. Upon filing their third RTI application in an effort to get the information they were legally entitled to, they were taken to court by the Village Education Committee, who were supposed to be providing them with the information. They were wrongfully accused of a crime they did not commit, and suffered persecution until the case was dropped due to lack of evidence.

Results

The two volunteer teachers spoke publicly about their case and the way in which they had been denied their right to information. They implemented the training they had been given about RTI, and the response from the authorities was to suspend the chairman, vice-chair and secretary of the Village Education Committee, who were replaced by the two volunteer teachers who had brought the case to the attention of the government.

The RTI coalition provides training on how to make best use of the RTI Act, which has the potential to bring about a major change in the accountability of official authorities, and the way in which civil society interacts with the government. VSO continues to support the coalition and other organizations working to make the most of India's beneficial laws.

As a result of their persistency, the school in Jharkhand has now been rebuilt. Ample, nutritious lunches are now being provided to the students every day, and members of the community were empowered to file their own RTI applications. Naresh says "RTI is not only a powerful weapon to fight against corruption, but also an effective tool for every Indian citizen to acquire information from the public authorities so that there is no secret under the sun in the public domain".

For more information on the Right to Information Act, visit the website:
<http://www.righttoinformation.gov.in/>