

## **Welcome Speech**

### **RTI Conference 21-22 June 2009**

Respected Chair, Honorable Chief Guest, Matia Chowdhury, Minister for Agriculture, Honorable Special Guest, Abul Kalam Azad, Minister for Information and Cultural Affairs, Key Note Paper Presenter Iftekharuzzaman, Distinguished Guests, Excellencies, my Friends and Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen. On behalf of the RTI Forum, I bid you a very warm welcome to the International Conference on Right to Information: Law, Institution and Citizens.

We are especially grateful to the Minister for Agriculture, Begum Matia Chowdhury who has honored us by representing the honorable Prime Minister who has not be able to be present due to unavoidable reasons. However, the Honorable Prime Minister has sent a message, extending her support to the conference and to the implementation of the RTI Law which will be read out shortly.

The objective of the two day Conference is to learn and share knowledge among us and with those having experience of implementing the RTI in their countries. We have among us some of the most eminent and important person who have campaigned for the enactment of the law, are monitoring implementation and are arbitrators to defend peoples right to information in their countries. We thank them for honoring us with their presence.

As we all know, the present government passed in Parliament the RTI Law on March 29, 2009. We congratulate the government for taking this historic step, paving the way for people to get information from public authority as a right and joining 75 countries of the world.

The UN General Assembly in 1948 declared Freedom of information as a fundamental human right and the touchstone for all rights to which the United Nations is consecrated. Right to Information enables citizens to seek information from duty bearers and holds them responsible to disseminate important information proactively even if it is not asked for. Although our Constitution does not make a specific reference to Right to Information, Article 39 refers to Freedom of thought, speech and freedom of press, which we know can not be fully exercised without Right to Information

### **Distinguished Guests**

After the general election and installation of an elected government, Bangladesh stands at the threshold of great possibilities to strengthen democracy and establish an open and

transparent system of governance. We believe the RTI law will assist the present government to fulfill their election pledge of a corruption free Bangladesh. On the other hand, it will give people more opportunity to participate in public affairs and hold duty bearers accountable for their actions. It will also promote transparency, a culture of openness and create opportunities for dialogue and discussions on critical issues between the general people and policy makers. It will also help people gain confidence in the system which will create a sense of responsibility among them. I would go so far as to say that it will give people the right to exercise their citizenship.

Unfortunately, a culture of secrecy prevents sharing of information. Certain archaic laws and policies are still in practice that prevents government officials to make information public. In fact the culture is such that even those information that are supposed to be made public by law are deliberately withheld. There is little sharing of information within or between government departments. However, we know that Information if properly given or received reduces chances of misuse of resources and lessens corruption thereby promoting accountability and transparency in public and private institutions

### **Honorable Guests**

The most important reasons why we from the development sector got involved in the campaign on right to Information is because we felt that the general population who are mostly poor and vulnerable lack much needed information so important for their livelihoods. Our experiences and work at grass roots levels tell us that denial of information has further marginalized them. We think people will benefit from the RTI in the following ways.

General population will be able to demand information as a right and hold local functionaries accountable for their actions. They will feel empowered and participation in public affairs will increase.

Poor and vulnerable people will demand information on matters critical to their lives and livelihood. When denied information they will now be able to make a complaint.

With more openness, people will begin to have more confidence in the system, prompting them to behave and act in responsible ways.

Government functionaries will be able to get information from different departments, ministries etc.

MP's, politicians will be more accountable and compelled to address and fulfill their elections pledges.

The Right to Information Act has now been passed in 75 countries. India passed the law in 2005 and Nepal two years ago. Pakistan passed it through an ordinance in 2002. In most of these countries the enactment of the Act was seen as the first step in establishing democratic open and transparent governance. The impetus for enactment of such a law usually came from the civil society demand for more openness and transparency in governance. However, Implementation of the law is a major challenge in most of these countries. The first challenge lies in changing mind sets and attitude of people who use information as power and are extremely reluctant to part with it. There are also issues of capacity and putting in place systems and infrastructures that will make it possible to provide as well as access information. .

There is a fear that government officials will get over whelmed by the demand for information resulting in inefficiency and back lash against such an Act. That is why clear guidelines needs to be built into the Act which will guard against all such abuses. We have already presented a draft of the rules to the Information Ministry for their consideration.

We all know that NGOs is a huge and important sector in Bangladesh and deal with large amount of funds meant for public good. The sector has been brought under the ambit of the Law. As organizations and individuals playing a watch dog role, we should be under that same scrutiny of accountability and transparency as public authority.

We strongly believe that with enactment of the RTI Law, a strong foundation for institutionalizing a democratic and corruption free society has been built. Realizing that it is the government that will take the lead in its implementation, we stand ready to provide any assistance that may be required such as capacity building of government functionaries, bringing in best practices from other countries, cross visits for learning how it is functioning in other parts of the world etc.

The media continues to play their role in making information available to public and have been partners with civil society to create demand for this law. At present the media and a number of organizations are working at grass root level to create mass awareness on peoples right to get information, the need and use for such a law. We want the movement to get stronger and widespread so that every individual understands and know that we now have a Right to Information law that will enable them to access information as a right.

**I would now like to place the following points for consideration by our Chief Guest and Special Guest:**

- *Publicize names of designated officers sent by different GOB agencies and ministries, these may be posted in Ministry of Information website.*
- *Establishing a network of all designated officers including GOB and NGOs for the purpose of creating a platform for capacity development and sharing experiences.*
- *On behalf of CSO groups, MJF has submitted a draft rules of the RTI Law 2009, to the Information Ministry, this should be reviewed and considered while finalizing the rules and regulations for the Law.*
- *Most importantly, we want the formation within the specified time a strong and independent Information Commission to which all necessary support is provided so that they are able to play an effective role to protect people's right to information.*

**I also want to inform all present that we have given in the folders the following material:**

- ✚ *Easy version of the RTI Law 2009 in Bangla*
- ✚ *Flyer with chronology of events leading to the enactment of the RTI Law 2009*
- ✚ *Comparative Assessment of the many drafts of RTI till the final law.*
- ✚ *Key note paper by Iftekharuzzaman, Executive Director TIB*
- ✚ *Welcome Speech by Shaheen Anam, Convener, RTI Forum*
- ✚ *Confronting common challenges of RTI implementation*
- ✚ *RTI Forum members list and contact details.*

I once again on behalf of the RTI Forum I thank the honorable Chief Guest, the honorable special Guest for accepting our invitation and coming to this event. I also thank all the distinguished guests present, DFID, RNE, who continue to support us. Most importantly, I thank the World Bank Institute for supporting us to organize this important conference.