



Policy Dialogue and Civic Engagement using Right To Information Laws in Rajasthan, India

CSO:	CUTS Centre for Consumer Action, Research & Training (CUTS CART)
Years:	2009 - 2011
Country:	Rajasthan, India
Amount:	\$30,000 USD
Sector:	1) Controlling Corruption in Delivery of Social Services: Social Safety Nets 2) Right to Information

Corruption Problem:	Massive corruption and lack of transparency in government entitlement schemes
Tools employed:	Advocacy, RTI, Survey, Capacity Building, Coalition Building, Community Mobilization, Information Center

Corruption and a lack of transparency in government administered service delivery schemes have led a local CSO, the CUTS Centre for Consumer Action, Research & Training (CUTS CART), to mobilize and educate citizens and citizen organizations to engage in coalition-building and hold the government to a higher standard of accountability. CUTS CART has built the initiative on the success of prior project and has been able to kick-start a process of empowerment which appears to be sustainable and self-reinforcing beyond the completion date of the original project.

Corruption Problem Addressed

Citizens experienced massive corruption and a lack of transparency and accountability in government administered welfare services in Rajasthan, India. CUTS CART targeted this corruption problem in its project: “Reforming the Processes in the Rural Development Department through Policy Dialogue and Civic Engagement based on RTI Act (2005) in Rajasthan, India.” The project identified the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and the Rural Development Department as responsible counterparts in the Government of Rajasthan, delivering the National Rural Employment

Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) and two other welfare schemes.

A survey revealed that – although entitled in theory – every beneficiary of the schemes had to bribe officials to actually receive services. CUTS CART identified a lack of awareness and knowledge in the community regarding the scope and use of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, established in 2005, which could help citizens demand greater transparency and enhance administration accountability. Citizens and community-based organizations (CBOs) lacked empowerment and coordination among themselves to strategically advocate, create watchdog groups and ultimately succeed in obtaining corruption-free services.

Actions Taken by CUTS CART

CUTS CART initiated forming a consortium of 17 Groups for Combating Corruption (CGCCs) in 17 districts of Rajasthan as well as organizing a network of CGCCs, civil society organizations (CSOs) and interested individuals to work together on the issues of transparency and accountability making use of RTI tools. CUTS CART conducted surveys on the reality of RTI usage and corruption vulnerability at the beginning and at end of the project. The

results of these surveys were widely disseminated through village meetings. CUTS CART and the consortium raised awareness and empowered citizens to correctly file RTI petitions. Furthermore, two Model RTI Gram Panchayats (local self-government units) were established. An RTI Advisory and Information Centre (RAIC) was started to advise and educate citizens about the RTI Act and how to use best make use of it in order to obtain corruption-free service. As an immediate output, more than 450 RTI applications were filed and 288 were resolved successfully. The information demanded in most of the RTI applications was related to suspected acts of corruption. A 10-member delegation of the RAIC visited Kerala to study best practices using RTI.

At least 30 dialogue and peer learning events were conducted over the course of the project. These events mobilized stakeholders against corrupt processes, allowed them to share their experiences as victims of corruption, and educated them in using the RTI Act to fight corruption. At least 85 case studies document how empowering citizens has contributed to demanding corruption-free services.

Two advocacy meetings were organized at the state level for policy makers and the media. These meetings were extremely useful in terms of informing policy makers about the findings of the corruption survey and the reality on the ground. The project also created a set of recommendations for simplified and transparent service delivery. Newsletters were distributed among project stakeholders, CGCCs, policy makers and service providers to share project activities, findings and experiences with the community and the government. An RTI tool kit was produced to allow for the replication of best practices.

The attitudes of policy makers and bureaucrats towards the anti-corruption initiative undertaken

by CUTS CART and the consortium were not encouraging at first. Most of the service providers either avoided public discussions or addressed comments noncommittally. The frequent transfer of bureaucrats and service providers interrupted the anticipated rhythm of project progress envisioned, however did provide opportunities to replicate the model with new officials transferred. In most of these cases the project team had to start from scratch orienting the new officials toward the project objectives, working toward buy-in and constructive engagement anew. Some officials were however cooperative.



GCC Participants in a technical session with CUTS CART learning about the use of RTIs

Advocacy with the government regarding the reform of identified systematic corrupt practices in the delivery of services proved to be very difficult. Building on the identification of issues at the grass-roots level, subsequently complemented by an additional top-down advocacy approach through the cooperation of the Rajasthan Rural Development Minister and the Directors of two of the government programs, motivated lower level officials to join the effort and resulted in greater responsibility and less corrupt service delivery: All Gram Panchayats and Block Development Offices were instructed to maintain a complaint/suggestion box. The media, CBOs and NGOs were very supportive of the initiatives taken and jointly pushed the agenda.

Impact and Results Achieved

Assessing corruption levels through the surveys conducted, provided strong and convincing evidence to high level officials on the extent of corruption observed. This led to a number of office orders relating to enhanced transparency and greater accountability. The surveys furthermore helped raising awareness at citizen level on the importance of local governance and people's participation. It also built the capacity of the CGCC members administering the questionnaires and provided support to community members facing corruption. The popularity of RTIs and relevant knowledge on how to best use RTIs has increased significantly. People now recognize how they can leverage the law to hold the government to a higher standard of accountability ensuring access to corruption-free services. However, the overall awareness level remains low in rural areas.

The study tour in Kerala inspired participants to adapt some of the best practices observed to their own context in Rajasthan. Government officials gained awareness about the RTI provisions and their anticipated responses. The post-project survey showed a change in official's attitude towards the role of transparency in service delivery. Yet, they are still not fully familiar with the procedures and their own responsibilities, casting a shadow over the successes achieved.

While the post-project survey showed reductions in the size and frequency of bribes paid, mostly due to increased awareness on the demand side, challenges remain: the scale of the corruption problem is huge and opportunities for new forms of corruption make preventive action difficult as they need to be adapted continuously. It will take more than one project phase to tackle the deeply ingrained practices of corruption as they are considered normal. The momentum created by the

project activities, trained CGCCs and proactive citizens suggest however that the impact will deepen and widen over time and on its own.

Documentation

Project completion reports (PCRs) and Project completion assessments (PCAs) can be accessed at www.ptfund.org under the "Where-we-work" tab.

The Project Completion Report (PCR), including data points on results achieved is available at http://www.cuts-international.org/cart/pdf/CAC-Phase-II_Project_Completion_Report.pdf

Survey results can be accessed at http://www.cuts-international.org/CART/pdf/Pre_and_Post_RTI_Ground_Realities_Survey_Report.pdf

The RTI Toolkit "Model Framework for Replication: Usages of RTI in Rural Rajasthan, India: Enhancing Transparency and Reforming the Processes" is available at <http://www.cuts-international.org/CART/pdf/RTI-Toolkit.pdf>

CUTS CART newsletters are available at http://www.cuts-international.org/CART/pdf/RTI_in_Action01-09.pdf
http://www.cuts-international.org/CART/pdf/RTI_in_Action02-09.pdf
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Prepared by: Madhu Sudan, CUTS CART; Warren Van Wicklin,
PTF; Johannes Tonn, PTF