

RTI - Role of CSOs For Inclusive and Sustainable Development

Lakshmi Narayana N.*

ABSTRACT

Access to information Acts as a power to reach and get the services and supports with equality and dignity - This has to be seen as two sides of the same coin having Government on one side and People on the other side, who need to work with better connectivity and coordination. In view of poor access and mismatched service delivery systems, RTI came out as a weapon in the hands of People as well as Government for moving towards the development with better sustainability and quality. A SWOT analysis of RTI reflects that it has got some limitations and mostly confined to asking for information by the people that is time taking, unhealthy and unfriendly. At the same time RTI insists for proactive disclosure of information which is better in all aspects, but not followed by many. Resources like Water, Land, Minerals and others have got better access for investors who do business for business purpose leaving people and environment as the victims. Under these circumstances, the CSOs who work very near to the people have got several opportunities for the effective utilization of provisions of RTI. The initiatives made with selected CSOs have resulted for significant impact and the targeted groups could get the benefit of resources as an empowerment. The initiatives are simple, flexible, replicable, scalable and sustainable matching to the dynamics of the given environment.

Key Words: *Information, Access, Accountable, Transparent, Sustainability, Development, Quality of Life.*

Statement of the Problem: Lack of awareness and access for information results underutilization of the resources and thus marginalization of larger groups of people with vulnerabilities.

Objectives: The objectives of the study are very specific to empower the people with the information as a weapon which includes:

* The author is Director, Geo Rehabilitation Centre, Hyderabad. email Id: grcnln@gmail.com

1. To understand the concept and need of RTI Act;
2. To explain the SWOT of the RTI Act;
3. To understand the role of CSOs;
4. To know the opportunities for the CSOs; and
5. To make initiatives of RTI Act with CSOs.

Introduction:

Information is the key weapon in the hands of the Government, Policy Makers, Professionals, Implementers, People and other Stakeholders. It is a fact that India has got the required recourses to cater the needs of the people. Lack of information and access to it are main barriers for the people to get the required resources. Information may be about the product, nutrition, machinery, project, services, delivery system and others which directly or indirectly supports or affects the health of the people and environment. Lack of information about required resources at right time through right ways lead for poor access, ineffective utilization and finally spoiling or damaging the same. For example even within the family, lack of information and its sharing affects the harmony of the members which finally leads for mistrust, underdevelopment and isolation. In continuation, it may be the Society, Institute or any other organization that gets affected when the information is not open for all the people both inside and outside the environment. When it is extended to the Nation, in spite of having resources, the needy targeted groups are not getting the same. Some of the key resources and their present status are discussed below:

1. **Water:** It is the most precious life saving natural resource and people have got the right to get the same. Mismanagement and exploitation of water bodies / resources,

both surface and groundwater in general and commercial oriented activities in particular have resulted for the present water crises. It has become a business opportunity for the investors that is not people oriented.

2. **Land:** It is a fact that Land will not increase like the explosion in the population but is in fact decreasing in terms of both quantitatively and qualitatively. Various manmade and natural activities lead for several hazards and disasters. There is lack of information about the availability of land for various purposes and its allocation for several man made activities like mining, infrastructural development, power generation, construction of dams, housing, and other developmental purposes, that are mostly shifted from people oriented (POD) to business oriented (BOD). After allocation, lack of monitoring and evaluation of the allocated land has resulted in illegal encroachment, violence, corruption, crime and other unhealthy practices.
3. **Minerals:** After Agriculture, Minerals are the important wealth and back bone to the nation's development and the country is blessed with several minerals. Lack of information about mineral wealth regarding its mapping, processing, interpretation, assessment, feasibility, quality, quantity & depth, documentation, detailed project reports (DPRs), allocation, monitoring, evaluation and other associated causes and consequences have resulted in poor accountability, corruption, and transparency (ACT). Exploitation of minerals is affecting health and wealth of the people, land and environment, which are sometimes irreversible.

4. **Others:** Poor coordination among the government, people’s representatives, policy makers, professionals, institutes, departments, civil society organizations (CSOs) covering the model of design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (DIME) has resulted for the present crisis This has created several barriers by affecting health and wealth of the people and environment. Many time lack of information limits the reach to the targeted groups and thus confines to the hands of smaller groups further widening the gap between the rich / urban and poor / rural with unhealthy living environment.

In view of the challenges which are unhealthy and unpleasant to all, the need of the hour is to accept the situation as an opportunity to work for need based solution with innovation and creativity. One such attempt is to improve the access for information as a right so that people know about what are the resources available, what are the processes to get the same, what are the required ways to improve the health and wealth of the People as well as the Nation.

RTI Act and Objectives:

Right to Information (RTI) Act has been enacted by the Government of India in 2005, with specific objectives. The ‘information’ is defined as “any material in any form, including records, documents, memos, e-mails, opinion, advices, press releases, circulars, orders, logbooks, contracts, reports, papers, samples, models, data material held in any electronic form and information relating to any private body which

can be accessed by a public authority under any other law for the time being in force” and ‘record’ as “any document, manuscript and file; any microfilm, microfiche and facsimile copy of a document; any reproduction of image or images embodied in such microfilm (whether enlarged or not); and any other material produced by a computer or any other device”.

The RTI Act has been defined as “right to information accessible under the Right to Information Act 2005 which is held by or under the control of any public authority and includes the right to: (i) inspection of work, documents, records; (ii) taking notes, extracts or certified copies of documents or records; (iii) taking certified samples of material; (iv) obtaining information in the form of diskettes, floppies, tapes, video cassettes or in any other electronic mode or through printouts where such information is stored in a computer or in any other device. The broad objectives of RTI Act are shown in Fig. 1.



Fig. 1: RTI and its Objectives.

Certainly RTI Act is a powerful tool in the hands of people. it is expected to improve the participation, responsibility, accountability and transparency (PRAT) so that healthy systems with innovation and creativity tuning to DIME can be made to reach the people with need and right based solutions. Like any other Act, RTI Act has got some limitations and even after 10 years of its enactment, it has not been fully either understood nor utilized expect some cases here and there.

SWOT of RTI Act:

Before moving forward with the exceptions and ground realities of RTI, understanding the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities (SWOT) of RTI Act helps to prepare an action plan by transforming the challenges and threats as opportunities. The SWOT of RTI Act has been shown in Fig. 2. RTI Act helps to access information which can be obtained in two

ways i.e. one by asking for it and the other making it available. Under section 4 (1) a, c & d, the department should work for proactive declaration of the information and under section 6 (1) & (3), the seeker should ask for the information.

The Access to information by asking is limited by poor awareness, mismatched format accessibility, victimization of the seeker, time consuming, uncertainty in getting the required details, wastage of money & energy and their consequences. On the other side, making information available will have several advantages like better awareness, improved accessible formats, better harmony between the seekers & givers, time saving, certainty, saving of money & energy and their positive consequences. In view of the realities listed in Fig. 2, the process of asking for information is unpleasant, whereas availability of information will be pleasant both for the seeker and giver. To conclude, lack of information is the major barrier which limits the mapping, assessment, excavation, utilization, monitoring and evaluation of all the resources including natural resources. These further result in the loss of revenue to the Nation by affecting the health and wealth of the people and environment. This situation is more severe in the rural areas leading to marginalization, isolation and migration which finally affect the dynamics of the Family, Community, State and Nation in respect of inclusiveness, development, growth, quality of life, equality, dignity, image, brand value and other value added indicators. Availability of information certainly improves the participation, responsibility, accountability and transparency (PRAT) with effective service delivery system (SDS) to reach the

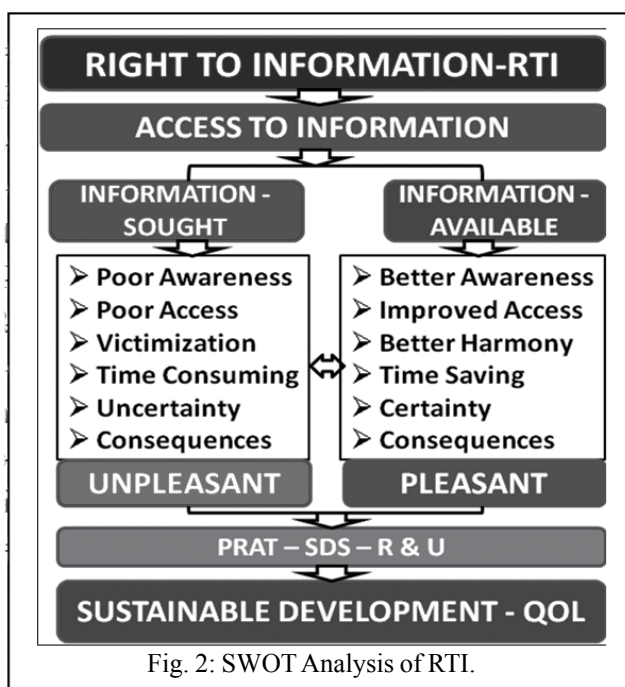


Fig. 2: SWOT Analysis of RTI.

targeted groups with better utilization. This finally leads for sustainable development with improved quality of life (QOL). To come out of this unpleasant and unhealthy situation, every effort should be made to keep the right information available with better accessibility to all, including the persons with special needs.

Then the search moves on to identify the right group and it ends at Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) who are very near to the people, for the people and with the people and communities, who can bridge the gap for better flow of information and resources.

Role of CSOs:

It is a fact well established that government is having several limitations/barriers in catering the needs of the people. In general, availability of resources is not the problem but failure with its service delivery systems (SDSs) which are mostly based on top down approaches (TDAs) and works away from understanding the realities of the people at grass roots. The SWOT Analyses of the mechanism of service delivery systems clearly indicates that an alternative way is required which will stay near to the people / communities and work with them for them.

The Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) who are staying near to the people / communities can represent the needs of the targeted groups with better understanding. The CSOs broadly works with bottom up approaches (BUAs) tuning to the model of design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (DIME) with better coordination with government departments and people. Such measures and approaches certainly improve the reach to the people / communities both quantitatively and qualitatively as an

empowerment that finally lead for their sustainable development in an inclusive environment with improved quality of life (QOL). This is one of the key reasons that government supports the CSOs working on various issues like: water, sanitation, health, disability, environment, pollution, housing, education, skill development, employment, livelihoods, income generation activities, agriculture, organic farming, connectivity (physical and technological), hazards, disasters, earth quakes, cyclones, a forestation, energies, flora and fauna, natural resources, and other needs / issues / challenges of the people / communities. The role of CSOs has been well accepted by the Government, Private, Corporate, Industries, Funding Agencies both National and International, Professionals and other Stakeholders. The need of the hour is to develop need based strategies / interventions / solutions as an opportunity so that Government and CSOs can work on partnership basis with better coordination matching to the model of DIME. This whole process of need and role of CSOs along with Government is shown in Fig 3.



Fig. 3: Role of CSOs.

Methodologies:

The methodologies adopted during this study are need based covering: awareness creation, motivation, orientation, discussion, presentation, assessment, trainings, workshops, development of systems / documents, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and dissemination to the targeted groups & stakeholders through effective channels. The information documents developed have been presented at various forums of Government and CSOs and are recorded as suggestions made. All the methodologies have been adopted with some selected CSOs working on various issues of the people / communities covering parts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The mode of displaying the information and its dissemination are many, covering: annual reports, audit reports, organizational profile, policies both HR and financial, brochure, banners, news letter, souvenirs, booklets, website, blogs, e-forms, and other need & demand based documents.

Opportunities for CSOs:

In the whole process of making information available with better access, CSOs have got several opportunities and are shown in Fig 4. A brief on the opportunities has been presented below as:

- a) **Creation of Awareness cum Advocacy:** Has been done for the targeted groups and other stakeholders so that they can represent their views / needs as a self advocate through RTI Act.
- b) **Conducting Trainings, Workshops & Seminars:** Need based programmes have been conducted through CSOs and reached the groups both quantitatively

and qualitatively so as to use RTI Act as a tool for accessing information and further resources.

- c) **Translation, Documentation and Dissemination:** Need and evidence based documents have been developed in English and local language and disseminated to all the supporting departments / agencies and other stakeholders.
- d) **Use of Media both Print & Electronic:** At the stages of study, media both print and electronic has been used effectively to deliver the information about the acts, polices, services, supports, schemes,



Fig. 4: Opportunities for CSOs.

benefits, service providers, facilitation centres, prevention, care givers, care seekers, do's & don'ts and other need based from time to time to the targeted groups as well as other stakeholders both quantitatively and qualitatively with innovation & creativity.

- e) **Facilitation for Voluntary disclosure:** Stressed the need to follow the section 4(1) b, c, & d for making proactive declaration of information, developed the required documents and made accessible for all the concerned groups from time to time with better connectivity in general and particularly for the persons with special needs.
- f) **Orienting Students as Volunteers:** As CSOs do have limited human resources, selected students from schools and colleges have been trained and oriented to act as a RTI activist and able to reach the larger groups in a short span of time. This has minimized the cost of process on one side and orienting the students on other side.
- g) **Making Formats Accessible for All:** Keeping the dynamics of the needs of the people in general and people having special needs, formats of information have been made accordingly so that everyone can conveniently access it.
- h) **Creating Healthy & Pleasant Environment:** Keeping in view of the unpleasanties related in the process of asking for information (Fig 2), necessary steps have been developed to create a healthy & pleasant environment both

for seekers and givers as well.

- i) **Sharing with Innovation & Creativity:** Information gathered and developed on need based documents have been shared and disseminated to the stakeholders and others by way of e-forums and e-technologies with better connectivity and transparency, so that everyone knows about the services of CSOs and its requirements. This further helped to connect the information / service seekers and givers on virtual basis with the use of e-technologies.
- j) **Effective Monitoring and Evaluation:** After the development and dissemination of the required information, mechanism has been developed with the CSOs for effective monitoring and evaluation on periodical basis like weekly, monthly, quarterly and annually. The team has been developed to monitor the situation and to suggest measures at the right time through need based service delivery channels. Use of e-technologies has helped to improve the accountability and transparency with better inclusiveness.
- k) **Dynamic Connectivity:** Knowing the fact that information is dynamic, connectivity has been maintained particularly through e-technologies for updating the information and to reach the targeted groups so that RTI Act provisions can be followed effectively with better utilization of their rights for services and supports both quantitatively and qualitatively.

In addition, the CSOs have taken the additional responsibility of creating awareness and need of following the provisions of RTI with the surrounding institutes, organizations and other public oriented service departments. During the study, the CSOs have utilized the opportunities (Fig. 4) for self and other surrounding institutes and organizations and an attempt has been made to create a healthy and pleasant environment both for information seekers as well as information givers.

The author having more than three decades of service with Government and CSOs, is well versed with the systems of mapping, processing, assessment, feasibility, documentation, dissemination, publications, monitoring and evaluation in respect of natural resources on one side (with Government). On the other hand availability of resources, needs & demands of the people / communities, screening, assessment, documentation, project proposals, need based service delivery system, training, skill development, employment, livelihoods, publications, use of e-forums and other need based strategies & interventions with innovation & creativity (with CSOs). The developed solutions are need based as an empowerment on life cycle both socially and economically and disseminated for others to follow matching to the dynamics of the given environment.

Conclusions:

The study made on the need of RTI Act and role of CSOs has resulted in several conclusions and some of them include:

1. Lack of information about the acts or policies or product or systems or

resources or rules & regulations or any other targeted area, keeps the people both seekers and givers in dark;

2. It leads for non-utilization of resources and the people at grass roots continued to struggle even for human critical needs;
3. It encourages for poor transparency, accountability, participation, violation, violence, crimes, scams and further ends at unhealthy and unpleasant environment;
4. It affects the health and wealth of the people and environment with poor sustainability and lowered quality of life (QOL);
5. This causes for marginalization, isolation and migration of the people by affecting the dynamics of the family, community and at other levels;
6. This unhealthy circumstances have lead for the introduction of RTI Act in the year 2005;
7. RTI secures access for information to all; improves participation, responsibility, accountability, transparency (PRAT) which ends with effective reach and utilization;
8. Getting information by asking is unpleasant for both seekers and givers and involves victimization, marginalization and isolation in general and more severe in rural areas;
9. On the other side, keeping information available as per the guidelines will be more pleasant and saves lot of time, money and energy;
10. Availability of resources may not be problem but its service delivery systems limits the accessibility and affordability;

11. Government which works mostly by way of top down approaches (TDAs) will have limited access to reach the people / communities; and it will have limited participation of the receivers even lowering their development and quality of life;
 12. Civil Society Originations (CSOs) who work very near to the groups, mostly follow the bottom up approaches (BUAs) which will help the people to receive the benefits as a subject rather than object;
 13. The Government and CSOs can work with the combination of TDAs and BUAs matching to the dynamics of the given environment;
 14. The CSOs are connected with its targeted groups on life cycle basis - with the model of design, implementation, monitoring and evolution (DIME) that gives better connectivity with the sources, agencies and people;
 15. The CSOs have got several opportunities for: creating awareness, keeping the information, and for asking the information either directly or facilitation of the individuals or groups or both;
 16. The CSOs also inspires the environment in which it is working for others both as seekers or givers or both to follow;
 17. All such opportunities help CSOs to improve the participation, responsibility, accountability (PRAT), service delivery systems (SDSs) and further to enhance the reach both quantitatively and qualitatively with effective utilization;
 18. In some cases, CSOs helped to improve the harmony by minimizing the violation, violence, crime, victimization and other such unpleasanties;
 19. This further helped to improve the sustainability of the development and quality of life with inclusive environment; and
 20. The strategies and interventions followed in the study are flexible, scalable replicable and sustainable.
- To conclude, the CSOs can play a key role in disseminating and utilization of the provisions made in the RTI Act for improving the participation, responsibility, accountability, and transparency (PRAT) so that resources can be effectively accessed by all through innovative service delivery systems which finally enhances the sustainability of the development and quality of life of the people.

Recommendations:

Keeping the outcomes of the study and dynamic needs of the people / communities, recommendations emerged include:

1. To conduct more and more trainings, workshops, and seminars to all the groups;
2. To make RTI Act document accessible to all in the local languages;
3. To encourage students to act as volunteers, and to take up project / research works;
4. To make all the institutes to abide by the guidelines of RTI Act for proactive declaration of information; and
5. To give suitable opportunities for CSOs to make RTI Act more meaningful as a powerful tool of empowerment with better sustainability.

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