

India Field Trip 2009: Introduction.

In March/April 2009 SAHA's Project Manager, Freedom of Information Programme (FOIP) travelled to India in order to meet with a number of different people involved in the freedom of information movement and the implementation of the Right to Information (RTI) Act.

India has had its RTI Act since 2005, five years less than South Africa, and yet research has shown significant achievements where South Africa continues to struggle. Amongst these achievements has been the ability of activists and organizations to mobilize large numbers of people living in poverty to engage with the Act in order to access other rights and to fight against corruption. Prior to arriving in India I found numerous examples where ordinary citizens have achieved extraordinary outcomes as a result of engaging with RTI. Engagement with the Act has not merely been by way of requesting an experienced non-government organization to act on their behalf; citizens with limited resources and no experience with litigation have used RTI to ask questions to power.

India has a population of 1,028 million of which 532.1 million are males and 496.4 million are females. The average life expectancy is 63.9 years for men and 66.9 years for women. There are twenty two official languages with 844 different practiced in various parts of the country. According to the 2001 census, the literacy rate in India is 64.84 per cent; 72.26% for males and 53.67% for women¹. India has a strong civil society with activists successfully campaigning to bring about change. Most notably has been the *Drive against Bribe* campaign which succeeded in motivating a large part of the population to refuse to pay bribes to government officials. According to Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perception Index², India's CPI score is 3.4, where zero indicates a country that is highly corrupt and ten a country that is highly clean.



Figure 1 Street scene, Old Delhi, India

By comparison, South Africa's population of 48.7 million has a life expectancy of 50 years, eleven official languages, and an official literacy rate³ of 74%⁴. According to Transparency International's CPI South Africa is considered to be less corrupt than India with a CPI score of 4.9. Nonetheless, a CPI score of 4.9 reveals that South Africa is a country suffering from

¹Information sourced from the official Government of India website:

http://india.gov.in/knowindia/india_at_a_glance.php

² The CPI ranks 180 countries in terms of the degree to which corruption is perceived to exist among public officials and politicians as determined by expert assessments and opinion surveys. Countries are rated on a scale from zero (highly corrupt) to ten (highly clean). The survey is available at

http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2008

³ Percentage of persons aged 15 and over who can read and write.

⁴ <http://www.info.gov.za/aboutsa/education.htm>

high levels of corruption. Those who suffer most from such corruption are people living in poverty. A number of individuals and organizations have worked hard over the past eight years to address South Africa's problem of corruption including effecting the implementation of the Promotion of Access to Information Act 2 of 2000 (PAIA). PAIA has proven useful for academics and NGOs wishing to secure access to records that have proven invaluable for research and advocacy campaigns. PAIA has also been demonstrated to secure the disclosure of important documents which hold public bodies, in particular, accountable for service delivery and policy implementation. And, yet, the awareness and usage of PAIA amongst South Africa's citizens remains very low. A 2007 survey found that more than one in ten people felt they did not have the right to ask the government for information. Of those who do believe they have a right to ask for information and who are aware of the existence of PAIA, they are most likely to be: white and male, speak English or Afrikaans, to be educated to matric or tertiary level and in the highest income bracket.⁵ Despite efforts by a handful of NGOs focusing on promoting the right of access to information in South Africa there are few examples of ordinary citizens with limited resources engaging with PAIA in order to secure access to other human rights.

South Africa and India have a shared history and the realities facing people living in poverty are the same. The culture of secrecy surrounding government decision making and implementation of important policies to alleviate poverty has left millions of citizens stranded. Without access to information citizens are powerless; both RTI and PAIA offer the opportunity to shift these power dynamics. They demand that government officials acknowledge and respond to requesters irrespective of their socio-economic or any other demographic circumstances. They refer specifically to what information must be provided to citizens. With greater access to information citizens are empowered to participate in improved levels of accountability; in effect PAIA and RTI offer citizens the opportunity to play a very real role in the improved development of their country.

SAHA's FOIP Project Manager, Charlotte Young, travelled to five different states to meet with activists, organizations, government officials, information commissioners, and citizens who have used RTI to improve their circumstances. The objectives of this trip, the itinerary, as well as a summary of field trips, interviews and a short film are available to download from SAHA's website. Select the relevant link from the list on the right hand side of this page to view the relevant document. For further information please contact Charlotte Young at foip@saha.org.za.

⁵ Whistle Blowing, the Protected Disclosure Act, Accessing Information and the Promotion of Access to Information Act: Views of South Africans, Open Democracy Advice Centre (ODAC), 2007.

