

World Bank Workshop: 'Freedom of Information in Pakistan: Drawing on International Experience'

The World Bank Country Office in Pakistan is holding a workshop on 'Freedom of Information (FOI) in Pakistan: Drawing on International Experience' in Islamabad on Thursday 19 June 2008.

Background:

It is now widely acknowledged that good governance is an essential prerequisite for development. Definitions of 'good governance' vary but most include transparency, accountability, predictability and rule of law, and participation. These elements help curb corruption and maladministration, promote better planning and efficiency, and lead to improved service delivery, access to justice and other benefits. The end result is an environment conducive to growth and poverty reduction.

FOI is a core principle of good governance. FOI enables citizens to understand and participate in public affairs, to hold those in office accountable, to demand their rights and entitlements, and to ensure that policy-making and implementation are geared towards bringing about equitable development. The growing global movement to pass and implement FOI legislation is testimony to its importance. Countries as diverse as the UK, India, Jamaica and Honduras are among the many who have taken initiatives to promote FOI in recent years.

The Pakistan experience highlights both the necessity for FOI and the challenges in realizing this. Human development indicators in Pakistan are consistently poor. It lags behind even comparable South Asian countries such as Sri Lanka. Economic growth has been correspondingly weak. While the reasons for this disappointing record are complex, lack of good governance (transparency, accountability, etc) has been identified as a key causal factor.

In 1999 the Musharraf government embarked on an ambitious program of governance reform in order to address the underlying causes of poor growth and development. The reform agenda, encompassing devolution, justice sector and gender reforms (among others), was warmly received and supported by the donor community. International assistance to Pakistan also focused on promoting good governance.

FOI was one of the elements of good governance that post-1999 administrations sought to bring about. In 2002 the Freedom of Information Ordinance was promulgated in Pakistan. While it marked a considerable step forward in the drive to achieve FOI in the country, some potential weaknesses were identified in the Ordinance, namely its restrictive application (many public bodies were exempted) as well as some of the procedures stipulated in it to actually access information. There have also been major issues with implementation arrangements (e.g. many public sector institutions still have very poor record keeping systems) and enforcement mechanisms. The end result is that, six years on, little 'on ground' progress has been made in delivering freedom of information for Pakistani citizens.

Following elections in February 2008 a new government led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) assumed power. The PPP government is planning to introduce revised FOI legislation in the summer to address the problems with the 2002 Ordinance.

The World Bank supports the goal of achieving an effective FOI regime in Pakistan. One of the accepted prerequisites for effective FOI legislation and implementation is wide stakeholder consultation to ensure consensus for FOI measures. Many of the challenges being faced with regard to achieving FOI in Pakistan have/are being experienced by other countries. The World Bank is therefore partnering to support a workshop on 'FOI in Pakistan: Drawing from International Experience'.

The main objective of the workshop is to apply lessons from international experience and best practice with regard to FOI legislation, implementation and enforcement to the Pakistan context and help achieve effective FOI there. The workshop also aims to raise awareness of the importance of FOI and provide stakeholder input to Government on the issue of FOI. It is hoped the workshop will lay the groundwork for a wider and on-going process of stakeholder consultation. As well as a number of international experts with diverse experience of dealing with FOI issues, 50-60 local participants will be invited to attend drawn from government, civil society groups, academia, the media, the legal profession and the business community.

The agenda for the one-day workshop is being finalized (awaiting speaker confirmations) but will broadly have sessions on the following themes:

- a) Importance of FOI for good governance and development, and the global movement to promote FOI of which Pakistan is a part;
- b) Legislation for FOI – basic generic principles for effective FOI legislation and how lessons from international practice can be applied to new FOI legislation in Pakistan;
- c) Implementation and Enforcement – measures needed to ‘make the law work’, again drawing on the experience of other countries;
- d) Next Steps – how to promote stakeholder participation in Pakistan’s FOI initiatives and specific plan of action.

Each session will feature 2-3 presentations of 15-20 minutes each, 3-4 panel contributions of 5 minutes each, followed by a 30 minute open discussion. The methodology is being designed to ensure maximum participation by those attending.

One of the main outputs of the workshop will be an action plan for stakeholder participation and agreement on a number of defined activities to be carried out in the short-term.

International Speakers:

Several international speakers are being invited to participate in the FOI in Pakistan workshop. It is hoped they can provide input on ‘generic’ principles/requirements for FOI legislation, implementation and enforcement and detail lessons applicable to Pakistan from the experience of specific countries such as India, South Africa, Mexico, and the UK. This international perspective is important:

- a) to highlight the global movement towards promotion of FOI;
- b) to help identify solutions to the particular challenges faced in Pakistan based on the way other countries have handled similar challenges.