

REFORM Toolkit

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Expanding Access to Information

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If knowledge is power, then expanding access to information can empower people. Making the right information available to the right people helps them to lead change. This toolkit identifies core objectives and approaches in the field of access to information to guide the design of information programs. Based on CIPE's experience, the toolkit shares key practices and lessons to improve the performance of these programs.

*For more information on access to information efforts,
visit www.cipe.org/programs/access-to-information.*



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The Center for International Private Enterprise strengthens democracy around the globe through private enterprise and market-oriented reform. CIPE is one of the four core institutes of the National Endowment for Democracy and an affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Since 1983, CIPE has worked with business leaders, policymakers, and journalists to build the civic institutions vital to a democratic society. CIPE's key program areas include anticorruption, advocacy, business associations, corporate governance, democratic governance, access to information, the informal sector and property rights, and women and youth.



The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is a private, nonprofit foundation dedicated to the growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world. Each year, NED makes more than 1,000 grants to support the projects of non-governmental groups abroad who are working for democratic goals in more than 90 countries.

Since its founding in 1983, the Endowment has remained on the leading edge of democratic struggles everywhere, while evolving into a multifaceted institution that is a hub of activity, resources and intellectual exchange for activists, practitioners and scholars of democracy the world over.

Introduction

Free and open access to information is vital to a well functioning democracy and a market economy. Whether in markets or policy debates, transparency levels the playing field: equal access to information equalizes access to opportunity.¹

In a democracy, citizens' ability to participate effectively in the democratic process hinges on their ability to make informed choices. Similarly, citizens' ability to hold government accountable hinges on transparent and open access to information. Transparency is a key weapon in the fight against corruption and strengthens governance in both public and private sectors. In fact, democratic governance is built on systems of information flow that involve voice, feedback, and learning.

In transitional or newly emerging economies, where knowledge can be scarce or tightly controlled, people need information on markets and economic opportunities. Even more so, they need familiarity with market frameworks and opportunities to learn about how their economy works. With this knowledge, they can devise their own solutions to developmental challenges.

Summary of Objectives

The overarching effort to improve access to information encompasses multiple dimensions of creating, channeling, interpreting, and applying content or knowledge. Efforts to increase access to information can focus on any of several basic objectives:

- Ensure freedom of information and transparency in government
- Strengthen alternative sources of information including media, think tanks, and civil society
- Raise public awareness of issues
- Increase understanding of democratic and market principles

CIPE's Role in Access to Information

- CIPE transfers reform concepts and techniques across regions of the world
- CIPE facilitates exchanges of knowledge among country stakeholders and international networks
- CIPE provides technical expertise on governance, markets and capacity of civic organizations
- CIPE promotes understanding of democracy and an entrepreneurial culture

Freedom of Information and Transparency in Government

Freedom of Information refers to the legal right of citizens to request information from public offices. Under freedom of information laws, the government operates on the principle of maximum disclosure and makes information that is gathered by public officers at public expense available for public access. By allowing public access, freedom of information laws make government more transparent, thereby aiding in the fight against corruption and enhancing governance. Any exceptions to the principle of disclosure, which may be based on national security or privacy considerations, should be legally circumscribed.²

In addition to adopting the legal framework for freedom of information, the government must take active steps to ensure the realization of this right. It must implement mechanisms to efficiently process citizens' requests. It should publish information on its activities, procedures, finances, and policies. Draft legislation, for instance, should be published to promote citizen awareness and public debate. Government should also open its deliberations to the public through hearings, comment periods, or dialogue.

Alternative Sources of Information

Civic organizations and other information brokers maintain the flow of information throughout society.

Freedom of Information in Egypt

In September 2011 an Egyptian human rights law firm, the United Group, introduced a draft law on Freedom of Information with support from CIPE. The draft law would establish freedom of information as the default mode of operation for government, identifies what information is to be made available and how citizens may access it, and would create an independent high commission on information with the power to mediate disputes over requests for information.

The draft law is the result of multi-year consultative efforts to promote freedom of information on the part of CIPE and the United Group. In 2009, CIPE produced a white paper, “Freedom of Information and Transparency in Egypt,” in a series on curbing corruption. CIPE also coordinated with the Federation of Economic Development Associations to hear recommendations from owners of small and medium-sized enterprises across 15 provinces. In a 2011 conference, the United Group and CIPE built consensus on the draft law among more than 350 constitutional lawyers, civil society actors, journalists, business people, officials, and others.

In a democratic society, the free media, think tanks, and civil society organizations all play important roles. These organizations act as watchdogs, analyze events, provide networks for dissemination, and generate pressure for accountability.

The Media

Free and independent media are key actors in an open, transparent society. Through quality reporting, the media help to expose corruption, hold public and private entities accountable, and air citizens’ opinions.

Economic reporting in particular needs attention in developing countries. Investors and entrepreneurs require reliable news sources to make business decisions.

Citizens depend on media to interpret economic events that affect their livelihoods, and to hold elected officials accountable for policies. Commonly, however, media provide insufficient coverage of business news or fail to present economic data with appropriate explanation and context.³

The quality of economic reporting is a product of multiple factors, beginning with journalists’ skills and grasp of economic principles, as well as their incentives and compensation. Editors, too, play a large role in deciding what stories get covered and how. At a higher level, the laws regulating the media, and any government influence on the media industry, set bounds on what can be published. Economic pressures on media are equally decisive, together with media business models and ownership structures.⁴

Journalist Training in Kyrgyzstan

CIPE worked with the Kyrgyzstan Stock Exchange Press Club to organize economics training for journalists in 2010. The seminars helped familiarize participants with concepts such as corporate governance, finance, and analysis of the state budget, as well as strategies for writing in a style accessible to ordinary citizens. Journalists who attended the seminars published 31 articles on related subjects during the project period. KSEPC regularly hosts “press sessions,” which combine education on a newsworthy topic with a press conference featuring a policymaker or official.⁵

Since 2012, the Development Policy Institute with CIPE continues press sessions for practicing journalists. The sessions focus on business-related legislation and the budget process. Following the sessions, journalists publish articles in their respective media outlets. DPI further organizes study tours for practicing journalists in regions outside Bishkek, and conducts classes on economics for prospective journalists at Bishkek Humanities University.

Think Tanks

By supplying credible, policy-relevant information, think tanks help policymakers to make better decisions, and civil society and the public to participate more effectively in the policy process. Each becomes less dependent on existing sources of information and better equipped to make policy choices based on evidence. Think tanks strengthen democratic governance by raising new issues, voicing alternative viewpoints, and expanding policy options.

Economic think tanks provide firms and policymakers with an accurate picture of business conditions.⁶ In developing countries, independent

Riinvest Institute, Kosovo

The Riinvest Institute for Development Research (Riinvest) was one of the few local, independent institutions to participate in developing Kosovo's reconstruction policy following the conflict of the 1990s. Riinvest filled gaps in democratic feedback mechanisms by polling the business community and channeling its opinions to policymakers. As early as 1997, CIPE cooperated with Riinvest on a landmark policy study, "Economic Activities and the Democratic Development of Kosovo," which was the first such analysis in eight years to detail economic trends in Kosovo.

From 2000 to 2002, CIPE raised the ability of Riinvest and civil society to participate in policymaking. CIPE assembled international experts in advocacy and organizational development to strengthen the think tank and local business associations. Riinvest initiated dialogue that increased local input into decision making and supported the newly established Kosovo Government and Parliament with adequate expertise on reform issues. Riinvest's continuing work has prompted the reshaping and privatization of the largest publicly owned enterprises (POEs).

think tanks are frequently among the few sources of reliable economic data. They can help level the playing field in markets and design viable institutional systems for market economies.

Business Associations

As a key part of civil society, business associations help enlighten and connect several constituencies. First, associations provide industry data and information on business operating conditions to policymakers, giving them valuable micro-level input on the economy. Second, they educate, train, and inform their members and the small business community on a host of matters, ranging from policy briefings to market research and management practices. Finally, they keep media posted on significant trends and respond to media requests.

Public Awareness

When the public actively engages in policy discourse, leaders have a higher stake in crafting acceptable, efficient solutions to problems. Efforts to raise awareness can jump start discussion of important topics and advance new perspectives on social challenges.

The first task of awareness raising is to increase the salience of an issue; that is, to move the issue higher on the public agenda. This entails identifying emerging or neglected issues and demonstrating the dimensions of the problem. Stimulating debate can be a good way to attract attention to an issue and engage stakeholders.

The second task is to frame the issue. A policy frame refers to the lens through which people understand and relate to an issue. Framing includes defining the problem and relating it to local custom and experience. This sets the stage for subsequent policy action. Effective framing finds ideas that resonate with the public and decision makers.

Another important dimension of awareness concerns citizens' knowledge of their rights and responsibilities within the law. Educating citizens on the law not only encourages law-abiding behavior, it

Institute of Economic Affairs, Ghana

In 2008, the Institute for Economic Affairs organized two national presidential debates, one vice-presidential debate, and eight parliamentary debates. Over 10 million people watched the presidential debates on live television and about 8 million listened over the radio. For the first time in Ghanaian history, presidential candidates from all major political parties took part. The four presidential candidates clearly stated their platforms and made a pledge for peace, a promise that they kept. The open and informative treatment of the campaign issues by candidates inspired citizens to organize their own local parliamentary debates as well. The debates contributed to issue-based, rather than personality-based, elections.

IEA also has a history of effectively fostering open discussions around its legislative advisory service, going back to 1992. IEA held meetings and roundtables with public and private sector leaders in order to raise awareness of its studies' findings and to encourage participation in shaping its recommendations. This was initially the only forum in Ghana's policy environment for individuals representing diverse opinions to engage in candid debates and influence legislation. In these gatherings, the main ideas behind IEA's reform recommendations were raised and debated, and compromises were forged.

gives them a layer of protection and helps keep officials in check. This awareness makes possible a defense against corruption. When small business owners, for example, are unaware of regulations regarding inspections, inspectors can conduct unauthorized assessments in order to exact "fees" from them. CIPE's work in the Philippines and Indonesia has shown that expanded awareness of regulations has increased the number of business owners who refuse to pay bribes, resulting in fewer officials soliciting them.⁷

Combating Corruption in Indonesia

To tackle the many problems associated with corruption in Indonesia, CIPE has partnered with Indonesia Business Links (IBL). With CIPE support, IBL has conducted many initiatives to inform small and medium sized enterprises and clear confusion about new anti-corruption laws as well as their responsibilities regarding business ethics. In addition to conducting workshops and seminars, IBL has also produced a television talk show on business ethics that reaches a potential audience of nearly 2 million viewers. These actions have resulted in an increased population of business owners who are able to distinguish whether an action is corrupt and how to discourage "facilitation" payments. In CIPE's work with IBL, it was discovered that exhibiting familiarity with anti-corruption legislation and refusing to pay bribes significantly reduced the occurrence of officials soliciting them in the future.

Understanding of Democratic and Market Principles

Many developing and transitional countries have little familiarity with law-based market systems and democratic institutions. While certain values of democracy and a market economy may be present, the functioning of these systems often is poorly understood or has not been rooted in local context. Misperceptions occur when these systems are associated with authoritarian legacies or conditions of weak governance. Thus, introducing concepts of participatory decision making, market access, and rule of law becomes a priority.

Educating government officials can better equip them to perform legislative roles. Without a grounding in democratic and market principles, even well-intentioned policymakers have difficulty implementing reforms. Many have never witnessed a market economy. They may benefit from instruction on the characteristics of a good business environment

Perspectiva Magazine and website, Latin America

To combat populism and restrictions on free expression in South America, CIPE and the Political Science Institute (ICP) of Colombia created the quarterly magazine *Perspectiva*. *Perspectiva* exposes policymakers, the private sector, and other political actors across the region to democratic and market-oriented themes. It also cooperates with and reinforces a regional network of market-oriented think tanks. The magazine's website, Revistaperspectiva.com, integrates social media in an effort to facilitate ongoing audience participation. CIPE and the Political Science Institute produce and distribute *Perspectiva* magazine in Spanish across eleven countries and organize roundtable discussions with students and young leaders.

and institutions that support it. They may also benefit from coaching on dialogue with constituents and the private sector.

Entrepreneurship Education in Afghanistan

CIPE's *Tashabos* course educates Afghan high school students in the basics of entrepreneurship. The curriculum covers fundamental concepts of business, economics, and citizenship and encourages students to develop their own business enterprises. With the support of the Afghan Ministry of Education, in 2010 CIPE extended the course to more than 33,000 students in grades 10-12 at 44 schools in Kabul, Bamiyan, Nangahar, and Parwan.

As of 2012, 1,362 *Tashabos* graduates have set up their own small business, 204 have revived a family business, and 350 have helped expand an existing family business. In all, the students have created 7,336 jobs in their communities. While not everyone enrolled in the program will eventually become an entrepreneur, the course prepares the students to live in a free market economy.

Educating youth on entrepreneurship, leadership, and civic responsibility can harness the energy of a pivotal demographic. Young people need to learn about the institutions that organize their society and how they can participate in or even change these systems. When diversity of youth is taken into account, youth programs open a path toward inclusion and expanded opportunity.

Steps in Expanding Access to Information

1. Assess information needs.

Assess demand. Who are users of information and who has access? What are their existing levels of knowledge? Before providing an information service, ensure that demand includes active buy-in from end users.

Assess the supply of information. Who provides information in which sectors and what are their interests? Evaluate the scope and quality of existing content, and the relative strengths of providers.

Examine the environment surrounding information flow, including the extent of freedom of speech, the legal framework, and any barriers to exchanging information. Identify key areas where greater transparency is needed.

2. Determine objectives.

First, ask whether promoting access to information is the right approach for the situation. Will access in itself generate change?

Clarify the anticipated outcomes of expanded access. Does the initiative aim to shape understanding, develop skills, change attitudes, or change behaviors? Who will apply information and to what end?

Can the activity be evaluated? Can one determine at reasonable cost who is receiving information and acting on it?

3. **Select tools.**

A wide range of activities are possible: seminars, publishing, broadcasting, electronic networking, and more. Match the tools to the objective, audience, and context. Some methods are better suited to reaching a mass audience while others foster deeper engagement and discussion. The right tools depend on which segment of the value chain is being targeted: production of information, dissemination, interpretation, or application.

4. **Identify content and channels.**

Create high-quality content that is credible, relevant, and grounded in fact. Adapt content to the audience's expectations, rather than pushing it to anyone who might listen.

Communication channels and audience preferences vary widely from place to place. Identify formats and media that audiences can access and appreciate. Pay special attention to opinion leaders and find appropriate spokespersons. Build the capacity of key intermediaries.

5. **Convert information into action.**

Information should motivate or facilitate changes in behavior and action. Even programs with wide outreach should be directed toward specific effects. Provide audiences with concrete, applied knowledge and help them to plan their next steps. Follow up as needed to reinforce learning and action.

Program Lessons

1. **Be attentive to incentives and interests that shape attitudes and behavior.**

People must have motivation and opportunity to put new information to good use. Try to align incentives for applying information with individuals' professional goals or everyday concerns. Recognize that

power relationships and collective action challenges affect the ability to act on information.

2. **The value of information depends on relationships and trust.**

Audiences are more receptive when they have a relationship with the source or intermediary. Relationships built on trust help audiences to accept and understand information in their own context. Relationships are two-way affairs, so be responsive to audience voices and tastes. Take time to listen and monitor audience engagement and feedback.

3. **Speak the language of the audience.**

Translation extends access beyond elites who are literate in English and professional terminology. The style of language should be clear and familiar to a wide range of people. Simplify and interpret legal language.

4. **Maximize resources by seeking multiplier effects.**

Education and publicity tend to be costly, so target resources carefully. One strategy is to achieve scale by working with opinion leaders and networks for maximum reach. Another strategy is to promote institutional change by focusing on key policies or lowering the transaction costs of accessing information.

5. **Link efforts to expand the flow of information to other strategic goals.**

Expanding access to information has greatest impact when it works in concert with improvements in governance and capacity of civil society. Look for ways to integrate expanded access with reform initiatives of coalitions, associations, and civic networks. Information provides value to civic groups and their members, while these groups in turn provide channels for dissemination and feedback. Connect awareness raising with focused advocacy efforts that convert ideas into policy impact.

6. Design the sustainability of access into each project.

Design programs with the goal of sustaining the supply of information past the term of a funded project. Develop strong local resources, organizations, and funding streams. Seek market solutions to information supply where possible.

Endnotes

¹ Center for International Private Enterprise, “Freedom of Information and Transparency in Egypt,” White Paper to Promote Transparency and Combat Corruption in Egypt (Washington, DC: CIPE, 2010).

² Article 19, “The Public’s Right to Know: Principles on Freedom of Information Legislation” (London, 1999).

³ Oscar Abello and James Liddell, “Improving the Quality of Economic Journalism,” *CIPE Economic Reform Feature Service* (August 15, 2011).

⁴ Roumeen Islam, “Into the Looking Glass: What the Media Tell and Why—An Overview,” in *The Right to Tell: The Role of Mass Media in Economic Development*, World Bank Institute Development Studies (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2002); Michelle J. Foster, “Matching the Market and the Model: The Business of Independent News Media” (Washington, DC: Center for International Media Assistance, August 22, 2011).

⁵ KSEPC won third place for its journalist education in CIPE’s 2011 Leading Practices Contest. <http://leading-practices.cipe.wikispaces.net/Kyrgyzstan+Stock+Exchange+Press+Club>

⁶ Kim Eric Bettcher, “The Roles of Economic Think Tanks in Democratic Policymaking and the Keys to Think Tank Success,” *CIPE Economic Reform Feature Service* (January 31, 2012).

⁷ Similarly, a survey commissioned by CIPE in Egypt found that “business owners who did not pay bribes were able to complete the process of registering a business in a time that is shorter than those who paid bribes.” CIPE, “Business Environment for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Egypt and SMEs’ Interaction with Government Agencies,” 2009 Survey on Corruption Final Report, funded by the United States Agency for International Development.