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POWER TOOLS



Accessing 'public' information

Purpose:

The purpose of this tool is to access information held by public agencies – to improve people's lives.

In India, NGOs and activists have used the approach to help poor people by:

- Collecting information on public works spending; government contracts; casual workers' wages; and food staples supplied to the poor.
- Using the information to improve governance through:
 - Participatory decision-making – people are involved in making decisions that affect them.
 - Transparency – people know what officials are doing.
 - Accountability – people can hold officials responsible for their actions.

The tool can be used in any situation where lack of information is a major constraint in achieving good governance. NGOs, activists, resident associations and community leaders working with poor and marginalised people will find it useful.

Activities:

- Identify the issue to address.
- Understand the law on people's right to information. Find out about others' experience in this area.
- Broaden awareness and interest among the target group. Use communication strategies such as street corner meetings, posters and songs.
- Build the capacity of the target group to understand and effectively use their rights to improve their lives. Use strategies such as training programmes and exposure trips.
- Identify the exact information needed.
- Identify the potential source(s) of the information and the procedure for obtaining it.
- Make a formal application.
- If you are denied the information, appeal to the designated official. Use the media and mass protests to put pressure on officials.
- If you still cannot get the information, file a court case wherever possible.
- Once you have the information, verify it by crosschecking with local people or on-site inspections.
- Analyse the information and discuss the findings with the people involved.
- Use the information to bring about the desired change. Use strategies such as public hearings to make officials accountable.

Keep in Mind

- ★ It is not necessary to have specific 'right to information' law to access information from public agencies. In the absence of a specific law, look for other ways of accessing information. You can use, for example, constitutional provisions, environment protection laws, labour laws and so on.
- ★ Before formally applying for information, first check if the information is already public – e.g. on a website.
- ★ Be specific about the information required. Vague information requests are not effective.
- ★ For maximum impact, adapt communication materials (posters, songs, etc.) to the local context.
- ★ Form networks with others to share experience and support each other.

Further information

Find full tool and other related tools and resources at: www.policy-powertools.org or contact: Sushil Saigal, sushil@winrockindia.org Other relevant information can be found at: www.winrockindia.org