



INDIA:

PUBLIC HEARINGS ARREST CORRUPTION IN RAJASTHAN

In a Nutshell

A small NGO, Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), led an initiative to challenge local government functionaries on disbursements of drought relief funds, and ended up carrying out one of the most energetic civil society campaigns in recent Indian history. It began with researchers sifting for information on projected disbursements as they appeared in government records. These were then corroborated by asking labourers and villagers how much they had actually received, or whether construction and other public works had actually taken place. The results were presented in public hearings, with government officials attending whenever possible so that organizers could ask them to return any missing funds.

The initiative regularly confronted difficulties in acquiring access to government records, an experience that later led to the National Right to Information campaign, which now systematically advocates on different levels for making public disbursements transparent.

The Story

A civil servant quit her job in the Indian Administrative Service to form MKSS and start a campaign across a block (an administrative unit) in rural Rajasthan, India's westernmost state. The local population had been demanding to know the details of budget allocations on public works – how much was allocated, how much spent, on what projects, etc. – from the district administration. To support this initiative, the campaign devised a methodology: villagers, particularly those working as labourers, suppliers and contractors, would come together to compare two sets of data. The first would derive from MKSS' research at local government offices about amounts sanctioned and actually spent (including wages paid to labour). Labourers, contractors and suppliers would then be asked to verify if the money shown on paper had actually ended up with them, and whether construction took place as claimed. Additionally, MKSS would do some investigations on

the ground. Discrepancies would be unveiled at a public hearing, and officials asked to return missing funds.

The playing out of this process, however, has been more intricate. Information on public works is hard to find, especially actual figures. Public officials – both elected functionaries and junior staff of the bureaucracy – are very reluctant to come to the hearings. At times, officials have tried to bring court stay orders against the divulging of public works information, although the courts have been quick to vacate these orders on being petitioned.

The law mandates that block-level data must be released within five days of a petition. But in one documented case, the actual information took a full year to arrive. In another, villagers had to organize a 40-day sit-in to get the figures they wanted – a long time for people barely scratching out a living on daily wages. The delays are largely due to the unwillingness of local officials to divulge information, as well as the poor quality of records in outlying government offices.

So far, the findings that have been gathered bolster the belief that corruption alone drains away a large portion of public expenditure. For example, between 1994 and 2000, of 98 projects done by the government in ten villages, evaluations could be done for only 31, due to incomplete records or late arrival of information. The outlay on these 31 projects amounted to rupees 65 lakhs (about \$135,000). The villagers and the NGO discovered that officials and bureaucrats had siphoned off around rupees 45 lakhs (a little under \$100,000)!

Since it began, the information initiative has become more institutionalized, with the community adopting a number of methods for public accountability. These include mounting posters demanding proper handling of funds and peoples' audits. While the functionaries directly in the line of fire have tried to stonewall at every step, a significant group of other actors, both in legislatures and the courts, has enthusiastically stood behind the project. It seems that while there will always be vested interests in the diversion of public funds, there is also always a counter force keen on good governance.

Results and Critical Factors

- The process started by MKSS has spread into broader public auditing within India, and is being watched with much interest elsewhere in development circles.
- A number of states in India have passed legislation, statutes and various administrative orders mandating disclosure of information on public works. The National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) is calling for this to become a constitutional right.
- The scope of the right to information has broadened, and the spotlight now encompasses a wide range of development issues as well as human

rights, judicial accountability, electoral processes, media ownership, nuclear and defence activities and even the functioning of NGOs themselves.

- MKSS has played a crucial role in sustaining the campaign for information and keeping people engaged. Even over time and interminable delays, it has kept the community focused on the mission. Most village hearings, for example, begin with a puppet show on corruption and development – this sparks initial interest, but more importantly explains development and corruption links in a simple manner easily grasped by the general populace.

Further information

Anne-Marie Goetz, and John Gaventa. 2001. “Bringing Citizen Voice and Client Focus into Service Delivery.” Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Working Paper No. 128. Brighton: IDS (www.ids.ac.uk/ids/govern/citizenvoice/annexcs.html).

Bela Bhatia, and Jean Dreze. 1998. “Freedom of Information Is Key to Anti-Corruption Campaign in Rural India.” A working paper presented in Berlin (www.transparency.org/working_papers/bhatia-dreze/bhatia-dreze.html).

Bunker Roy. 2000. “Villages as a Positive Force for Good Governance: The Right to Information and India’s Struggle against Grass-Roots Corruption.” In *UN Chronicle Online Edition*, 37. New York: United Nations (www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2000/issue1/o10op86.htm).

World Bank’s participation site (www.worldbank.org/participation/accountpoor.html).