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:

1. Identify the issue to address.

2. Understand the law on people’s right to information. Find out about others’ experience in this area.

3. Broaden awareness and interest among the target group. Use communication strategies such as street corner meetings, posters and songs.

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.
4 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.

5 Identify the exact information needed.

6 Identify the potential source(s) of the information and the procedure for obtaining it.

7 Make a formal application.

8 If you are denied the information, appeal to the designated official. Use the media and mass protests to put pressure on officials.

9 If you still cannot get the information, file a court case wherever possible.

10 Once you have the information, verify it by crosschecking with local people or on-site inspections.

11 Analyse the information and discuss the findings with the people involved.

12 Use the information to bring about the desired change. Use strategies such as public hearings to make officials accountable.

★ 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:
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Other relevant information can be found at:
www.winrockindia.org