

Opening Remarks
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The African Regional Conference on the Right of Access to Information
Organized by The Carter Center

The Transformative Power of Access to Information

Honor to be here

It is a tremendous honor to be here, with President Carter, who has been a great inspiration to me and to so many many others over the years, with Vice President Mahama, and such an esteemed assembly of leaders and experts from Africa and beyond. It is an honor to stand before you today.

WBG experience with access to information.

It is indeed with great humility that we approach this topic. This is because in recent years it became increasingly clear that the World Bank needed to significantly improve access to information on its own operations to enhance its effectiveness and accountability. Therefore I am very pleased to say that after a great deal of hard work and deliberations, less than two months ago on November 17, 2009, our Board, representing 186 countries including nationalities gathered here today I would expect, adopted a greatly expanded Access to Information policy. The new policy represents a fundamental shift that provides for disclosure of more information than ever before, and in a manner that is easily publicly accessible. We are now working on implementation, especially to ensure that there is a culture shift towards greater openness which is not always easy. I say this to share with you that we have gone through and will continue to go through our own learning, but we are determined to usher an era of much greater openness because the benefits far outweigh the costs.

Why is ATI fundamentally important to Good Governance?

Indeed, more broadly, the lessons of development experience tell us that greater transparency and access to information are vital for good governance. Good governance is basically about a government that works for its people, and therefore empowering citizens and stakeholders with

information enables stronger feedback and accountability that can improve government performance.

When we take a journey around the world, we see different types of benefits from access to information. First, India's experience shows that an effective ATI act can unleash a powerful movement of bottom-up accountability. In India ATI has enabled grassroots groups to obtain key information about government programs and demand their entitlements. Second, Chile's experience with the state modernization agenda shows that ATI can be an important driver for enabling government to itself strengthen its performance. Third, experience elsewhere suggests ATI can enhance the accountability of government institutions. For example, the findings of leakages in HIV/AIDS programs by Fundar, a Mexican NGO, prompted formal oversight institutions to take actions. In the UK, through informal requests and data-mining by news organizations, financial wrongdoing by Members of Parliament was discovered, which in turn prompted formal investigations and policy changes.

Addressing the Challenges in ATI Adoption & Implementation

So while there are these benefits, there are also formidable obstacles in both the adoption and implementation of ATI. Let me highlight a few key challenges, as well as mechanisms for addressing these.

First, a dominant challenge is that there are often ***powerful vested interests*** – entrenched networks of corruption between state and non-state actors – who benefit from lack of transparency and don't want greater openness. I don't know how many of you are familiar with the case of Montesinos who was the Chief Intelligence Officer to President Fujimori. In a series of sting operations, he was videotaped giving and taking bribes in a vast and intricate web of corruption that encompassed all branches of society, not just government but also parliament, military, private sector, media, civil society.

When confronted with such a web of vested interests against openness, strong leadership and coalitions of government and non-governmental reformers is needed. But this can be achieved. A great example comes from the Philippines where a procurement reform legislation which sought to significantly increase transparency and competition in public procurement succeeded amidst formidable odds because reformers from

government, parliament, civil society, private sector, contractor's association, youth groups, church groups, banded together. In this context, our principal approach in the World Bank Institute to support platforms to bring multiple stakeholders together in a coalition and build their capacity and shared commitment to overcome vested interests.

Beyond vested interests, another set of key challenges lie with implementation, where ATI is passed but implementation is dismal. Some of the key challenges are:

- First, there is lack of awareness among citizens about the ATI law or how to use it, and this aspect typically does not get sufficient emphasis. And even if the poor are aware, they may not be able to file requests. But there are very good experiences elsewhere to draw upon. For instance, in the poor Northeastern state of Bihar, a call center, Jaankari, has been set up where citizens can call in and are helped to prepare their requests.
- Second implementation challenge is that often ATI is approved but supporting systems to respond to data requests are missing and there is resistance from public officials towards greater openness. And there is no accountability of officials to ensure that they comply. To counter this, for instance, in Bihar, India, public information officers who don't furnish the requested information within 30 days are fined and the fines automatically deducted from their pay checks.

Phased Transparency Initiatives

But even with measures to ensure broader buy-in and attention to tackling implementation challenges, realistically the number of countries in Africa that are credibly adopting and implementing full-blown RTI are limited at present and may be so in the very short run. In this context, how can transparency be supported to pave the way for full-blown ATI? I would suggest three practical steps can be taken: sectoral transparency, proactive disclosure and direct empowerment of citizens through technological innovation. Let me take each very briefly in turn.

First **sectoral transparency** can be very promising entry points to generate development dividends in specific areas and pave the way for broader transparency reforms. In this regard, global multistakeholder transparency initiatives such as Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative or EITI, CoST (Construction Sector Transparency Initiative),

Medicine Transparency Alliance (MeTA) offer very important entry points. They help galvanize shared interests in disclosure around a specific set of problems. The question is: how can these sectoral initiatives which are prominent in the development agenda today support broader transparency reforms? What synergies exist between practitioners focused on these sectoral initiatives and ATI coalitions? These questions need to be answered in this forum.

Another set of high-impact reforms that can be implemented without waiting for the full-blown ATI concerns **proactive disclosure** on the status and beneficiaries of government programs. A powerful example comes from Uganda where in the early 1990s, facility level expenditure tracking surveys showed that 90 percent of the money was not reaching the schools. To tackle this, information on how much was allocated to schools was widely disseminated on community billboards, school notice boards and through radio. Parents then started demanding accountability, and in a few years, the leakage of 90% was reduced to 10%. Similarly in other countries that don't yet have a full-blown ATI, pilot programs and projects can implement proactive disclosure that can then be scaled up in a full-blown ATI legislation.

A third set of reforms that can be implemented without waiting for full-blown ATI and we view this as the cutting-edge frontier is to **directly empower citizens by harnessing the power of technological innovation**. To name just a few examples: in East Asia, we are partnering with civil society organization so they can enable ordinary citizens to directly provide feedback on delivery of public services, such as quality of road construction, through SMS on mobile phones. Elsewhere, Google has implemented innovative initiatives that have put a lot of voter information on the internet, including criminal records of candidates for political office; I understand that Google in Ghana is working with other partners on rolling out these innovations to African countries. In Latin America, we are now working on geo-referencing donor projects – in other words, showing on publicly accessible maps where donor projects are going, what are the key development indicators there and then empowering citizens to provide feedback through mobiles which can be directly uploaded on these maps to show how much they are actually benefiting. Such tools can directly and dramatically empower citizens.

Complementary Initiatives: Integrity with Transparency and Accountability

As we deliberate on mechanisms to increase transparency and accountability, it is also important to bear in mind a host of complementary reforms that are required for improving governance, without which ATI alone will not have impact. For instance, to reduce corruption, we need key complementary reforms on reducing discretion, and strengthening oversight institutions.

It is also important to have a focus not just on transparency and accountability, but also on strengthening the intrinsic commitment of public officials to public service and integrity. This requires complementary mechanisms such as positive role models among leaders, awards and recognition to provide positive incentives, and inspirational capacity building programs. It requires a conversation about values and ethics in public life, where in many instances corruption has become the norm and the ethos of public service is lost.

Here I am reminded of a keynote speech by a major global humanitarian at the International Anticorruption Conference in Korea. He recounted that there was a major earthquake in Gujarat some years ago with large scale devastation. When volunteers of his organization rushed for relief work, they found in the rubbles a woman who had just lost her entire family and home in the earthquake. As the volunteers proceeded with rehabilitation work, the widow approached them with a 100 rupee note, which is around \$2. She said take this as my contribution for the good work you are doing. They said, you are crazy we can't take that from you – this is probably virtually all of the money you have left. But she said, I have lost everything but this is my dharma, my duty, don't take this away from me. That is the poignant story of service – to give most of even a few dollars for service. Yet the original notion of public service was to give rather than take, and today, far too many are looking to take rather than give. President Carter symbolizes this high standard of integrity and public service – we need to recognize and emulate leaders like him. In the World Bank Institute we are partnering with other organizations on a complementary initiative to support such leaders of integrity in developing countries. This is an important complement to the necessary push for ATI.

Way forward: How Can We Help

So in conclusion, where do we go from here? The answers lie in your hands, in the hands of leaders from government, parliament, civil society, media, and the private sector gathered here, working together in countries to strengthen transparency, accountability and integrity. We stand ready to support you. To begin with you will be developing Country Action Plans in this conference; we can help share these Country Action Plans with other donors and with World Bank country teams to support implementation. But beyond this, we in the World Bank Institute can provide capacity building support where helpful, helping connect you to what is happening in other parts of the world, supporting the training or peer learning networks, including through our GDLN distance learning network that connects 130 countries for just-in-time knowledge exchanges even when you return to your countries. And we can support you in your efforts to build multi-stakeholder coalitions for reform. The World Bank Group is already facilitating sub-regional knowledge exchanges in Africa, and supporting country level initiatives in Ghana, Zambia and Sierra Leone. To keep the momentum going, we would like to see that countries that are serious about moving ahead meet periodically meet face-to-face or through GDLN video for peer learning and benchmarking of progress.

The time is right now for all of us to make individual and collective commitment to action. Above all, this agenda requires partnership and coalitions to overcome the formidable odds. We look forward to joining this partnership and collective endeavor with others gathered here. I would like to thank again the Carter Center and the Government of Ghana for providing this platform for partnership, and to President Carter again for his personal leadership and inspiration to all of us. This is a vastly important agenda for the citizens of Africa – we look forward to supporting you in your courageous endeavors to improve their lives.