



PRESS RELEASE

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UNDP DISCLOSURE POLICY GUTTED

ARTICLE 19 has sent a letter to the UNDP Public Information and Documentation Oversight Panel,¹ protesting against its refusal, in its first ever decision, to provide any of the information requested. The decision effectively renders the Policy a dead letter. ARTICLE 19 Law Programme Director, Toby Mendel, said:

“The UNDP is active in advocating for national openness and it should set a leading example itself. Instead, it has demonstrated an obsession with secrecy, refusing to provide even part of one document relating to the request, and relying on an entirely specious distinction between documents and information.”

On 21 June 2004, Alasdair Roberts, a US-based academic specialising in access to information, filed a request with the UNDP for documents relating to the development of the communications strategy for the 2004 Arab Human Development Report. That was refused and, on 25 August 2004, Roberts filed an appeal with the Public Information and Documentation Oversight Panel, apparently the first such appeal ever lodged. It took some time, and considerable pressure from civil society,² to set up the Panel and then to actually process the request.

Finally, on 9 October 2006, the Panel refused Roberts’ request, instead providing him with a 300-word outline of the procedure followed in developing the Report. They declined to provide him with even a single document, on the basis of a “distinction between disclosure of documents and disclosure of information”. The Panel also elected “not to grant disclosure of documents related to the development of the strategy, apart from what is already available to the public”.

This decision effectively robs the Policy of all relevance to requesters. Although it does specify that certain documents will be made public, the decision means that none of the considerable body of other information held by UNDP will be accessible. It is legitimate for some internal information to be withheld, for example where disclosure would inhibit the provision of free and frank advice in future. It is simply not possible, however, that all of the information in the wide range of documents requested by Roberts is covered by a legitimate reason for confidentiality.

In its letter to the Panel, ARTICLE 19 urged reconsideration of the decision or an overhaul of the policy.

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. The letter is available on the ARTICLE 19 website at: <http://www.article19.org/advocacy/lobbying/index.html>.
2. ARTICLE 19 wrote a letter protesting the delay on 6 February 2006. The Bank Information Center and the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative also wrote similar letters.
3. For more information, contact Toby Mendel, Law Programme Director, ARTICLE 19, tel: +1 902 431-3488, email: a19law@hfx.eastlink.ca. The documents relating to this case are available at: <http://foi.wikispaces.com/UNDP>.