

FACT SHEET

TRANSPARENCY, THE FREE FLOW OF INFORMATION AND THE MDGS

Development and the fight against poverty are largely dependent on the growth of an informed citizenry demanding public services and holding their leaders to account. Access to information promotes better governance, reduces corruption and facilitates citizen participation in development programs. Increased transparency in the allocation of aid and spending of money enables an informed citizenry to hold decision-makers to account, reducing corruption and inefficiency, and promoting better governance and wider participation. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) play a major role in this process.

As emphasised by the March 2010 report, *Keeping the promise: a forward-looking review to promote an agreed action agenda to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015*, the failure to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) so far is not because they are unreachable, or because time is too short, but because of unmet commitments, inadequate resources, and, crucially, a lack of focus and accountability. As noted by the UNDP in its report ‘The path to achieving the Millennium Development Goals: A synthesis of evidence from around the world’, the lack of access to information and transparency is seriously hindering progress in many countries. That review states:

In many countries, the mechanisms to hold institutions accountable for their own responsiveness and effectiveness are missing, particularly in relation to transparency. Policies and goals that are understood and known outside the institution, as well as the means to evaluate clearly an institution’s progress toward those goals, are strong tools for achieving results. (p 52)

The 2000 Millennium Declaration committed the signatories to: “ensure the freedom of the media to perform their essential role and the right of the public to have access to information.” (p 25) The Declaration also noted: “Success in meeting these objectives depends, inter alia, on good governance within each country. It also depends on good governance at the international level and on transparency in the financial, monetary and trading systems.” (p 13)

In the time since the Declaration was adopted, there has been substantial international recognition of the importance of transparency and access to information in promoting development. For instance, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has strongly emphasised the importance of access to information in relation to the rights to water, food, education, health, gender equality, intellectual property, work, non-discrimination and social security.

The Paris Declaration and particularly the more recent Accra Agenda for Action set aid transparency as a “major priority” and called for donors and recipient countries to publish details on aid flows and expenditures. Eighteen donors signed up to the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI). The Accra Agenda for Action also stresses the role of CSOs as important development actors in their own right. This means they should be transparent, and able to operate in an enabling environment, where they can initiate, collaborate and monitor anti-poverty measures, policies and programmes.

The 1992 Rio Summit adopted access to information and public participation as one of its key principles and the UN Environmental Program has recently approved guidelines on access to information and public participation to encourage all countries to incorporate them into national law.

The Atlanta Declaration and Plan of Action for the Advancement of the Right of Access to Information, which was supported by 125 leaders from 40 countries, states that “Passage and implementation of access to information laws should be prioritised as essential to reporting on progress toward and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.”

At the national level, over 90 countries have adopted comprehensive national policies on access to information which provide individuals with substantive rights to demand information from government bodies. In many key MDG countries such as China, India, and South Africa, these rights are routinely used by individuals to enforce their social and economic rights to food, water, a clean environment and public support.