

## THE IMPORTANCE OF RTI

The Preamble of the RIGHT TO INFORMATION ACT, No. 12 of 2016 states:

***“WHEREAS the Constitution guarantees the right of access to information in Article 14A thereof and there exists a need to foster a culture of transparency and accountability in public authorities by giving effect to the right of access to information and thereby promote a society in which the people of Sri Lanka would be able to more fully participate in public life through combating corruption and promoting accountability and good governance...”***

### What is the Right to Information?

At the core of the right to information is the principle of citizens' right to know government policies and decisions that impact their lives. This includes the right to know how public funds are allocated and spent.

The RTI Act is the instrument for institutionalizing open government where all information related to activities performed in the service of the public is made easily accessible to all citizens.

Information is provided **proactively** where all public information not specifically exempted by the law is routinely provided in an accessible manner without a request for information being made. Proactively disclosing such information demonstrates the government's sincere commitment to transparency, signifies citizen empowerment, and contributes to a reduction of corruption.

Information is also provided **reactively** in response to requests from any person or designated third party. Information Officers exist for all public authorities. All requests submitted in writing (oral requests are accepted where writing is not possible) to Information Officers trigger a process of assistance in securing the requested information. The provision of public information is an essential part of a functioning democratic system.

### Why is the Right To Information important?

Freedom of and access to information is mutually beneficial to both citizens and public service institutions. Citizens can help improve effectiveness of government services if they are aware of public service activities. For example, the government can inform citizens via SMS of the date and time of immunization services, which would increase participation in public health initiatives.

Citizen's involvement in public activities also improves the quality of public services. Routine sharing of government employment opportunities, selection results, promotions and job descriptions, for example, creates efficiency in hiring and provides incentives for improving performance. The cost to government is reduced when citizens are informed of budget allocations and activity timelines for publicly-funded projects in their communities. They become the frontline in preventing the waste of public resources.

The more routinely and transparently public information is disclosed the more citizen awareness of government rules and regulations is increased, thereby improving compliance with those rules. Making public information available also reduces perceptions that rules and regulations may be applied arbitrarily.

Practicing proactive disclosure in public offices without waiting for requests for information reduces the volume of requests for information and consequent demands on officials' time spent responding to such requests. Proactive disclosure of public information follows both the spirit and letter of the RTI law and is integral to establishing meaningful transparency and accountability.

When the right to information is universally institutionalized into regular, official activities of every public authority, including government agencies at all levels, and for-profit businesses and nonprofit organisations performing public services as described in the RTI Act, citizens' confidence in government, business and society is increased.

**Advantages to Information Officers for Providing Information Both Proactively and Reactively**

- Higher quality of decision-making
- Compliance with laws and regulations
- Facilitating community participation in government initiatives improves effectiveness
- Greater public confidence in government
- Better service to the community with greater efficiency and lower cost
- Time and resource savings from dealing with individual applications and responding to phone calls and enquiries
- Greater accountability of officials and thus less potential for corruption