

## Unit 1: Introduction to the 'Right to Know'

### Learning Objectives Why the right to know matters

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- Explain the concept of the 'right to know';
- Outline the freedoms necessary for the community to enjoy the 'right to know';
- Appreciate the reasons why knowledge and an informed society are vital to good governance and economic development.

### **Introduction and Overview**

This unit will introduce participants to the notion that citizens have a 'right to know' about the function, day-to-day activities, and outcomes of their parliament's responsibilities. But in order for parliament to *be* responsive to the community and to formulate initiatives to respond to their needs, there must be a greater exchange of quality information between the public and parliament. The media often serves as one of the most important actors in facilitating the exchange of quality information and building an informed society.

This module explains the reasons why it is vital to good governance and equitable development for there to be an informed society.

### **Defining the 'Right to Know'**

How many of your neighbors do you think are faced with problems or concerns to which there are real policy or public service solutions? If they could fully comprehend their

'right to know', they might be able to obtain the solutions to fix these problems. The 'right to know' is generally regarded as the right of the general public to participate in the free flow of information and to know about what is going on in their community. It includes the right of the community to be informed about the functions of parliament. People have a 'right to know' about the workings of parliament because its functions, work and decisions touch upon the lives of every member of the community. An informed society is one in which the public are able to participate in the free flow of information and enjoy their 'right to know.'

### **Freedoms that Facilitate the 'Right to Know'**

New knowledge is driven not only by curiosity, but is made possible when certain natural freedoms are established and well publicized. The general public needs certain freedoms in order to be able to exercise their 'right to know'. The freedom of expression and the right to information are particularly important. These freedoms are an essential precondition for an informed society. In addition to these freedoms, a free and robust media is crucial to facilitating the public's enjoyment of the 'right to know.'

<b>Box 1</b>	
<b>Summary UN Declaration of Human Rights</b>	
<b>Article 1:</b>	Humans are born free and equal in dignity and rights.
<b>Article 3:</b>	The right to life, liberty, and security of person.
<b>Article 5:</b>	Freedom from torture or cruel, inhumane treatment or punishment
<b>Article 18:</b>	Freedom of thought, conscience and religion
<b>Article 19:</b>	Freedom of expression and opinion
<b>Article 26:</b>	The right to an education

The freedom of expression, right to information and a free press are enshrined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. A community needs these universal rights to build an

informed society that understands its 'right to know.' Freedom of expression enables members of the community and parliamentarians to freely ask and respond to inquiries without fear of being unreasonably penalized. The right to information gives members of the public and parliamentarians the right to access the information they need to raise

questions, become more knowledgeable and form opinions about the community they live in and parliament specifically. Finally, a free press helps facilitate the expression of opinions and distribution of information. The freedom of journalists, editors or proprietors to report and comment is an essential precondition to building an informed society.

### **Benefits of an Informed Society**

Having defined the 'right to know' and the freedoms needed to enjoy it; we now turn to the reasons why it is so important to build an informed society. A democratic society should be one in which citizens are exposed to all shades of opinion, irrespective whether it offends or embarrasses some people. This is because the public interest is served through enhanced transparency and by a community that is able to make informed choices.

The more open and transparent a society is the more responsive and adaptable parliaments can be; a parliament that is responsive is better able to meet the needs of citizens. Greater transparency of the budget process, for example, means that a community knows and understands how government resources are being used thereby promoting greater accountability and curbing corruption. Restricting the flow of critical information about parliament and its actions limits citizens' ability to participate in the governance process or choose candidates properly. Democratic accountability assumes that community members know what their parliamentarians are doing, and can reward or punish them through the election process accordingly. The main obstacle to accountability is the unequal access to information that sometimes exists between democratic institutions, such as parliament, and citizens. Ensuring the community can exercise its 'right to know' helps build an informed society, where citizens have access to much of the same information as their representatives.

On the flip side, the greater access the public has to important information the better able they will be to analyze the issues affecting the community. Understanding the

issues enables the community to better articulate their needs to parliament, either via the media, civil society or directly to their parliamentary representatives. Parliamentarians face a great deal of scrutiny with different stakeholders offering analysis, criticism and alternative opinions with respect to the many difficult decisions parliament must make. However, the vibrant debate that comes from having an informed society enables parliament to ensure that it has considered all aspects of the legislation it is contemplating so that it makes the best decision possible. The free flow of information enables parliament to receive the feedback it needs in order to be adaptable and continue making the best decisions possible. Furthermore, the process of including the community in the debate builds public support for parliament's actions.

## **Economic Development**

The increased flow of information between the community and parliament not only assists parliament in being more responsive to the needs of the community, but also aids development. It triggers economic growth by stimulating innovation, increasing efficiency in production by reducing the asymmetry of knowledge in the market place and lowering the risks for citizens when making economic decisions. Innovation is more likely to occur when the information that is necessary to stimulate ideas is present. Greater efficiency comes as a result of such innovation as well as better information flow resulting in people being able to plan for more contingencies. For example, national long-term weather forecasts help farmers decide when and what types of crops to plant. Risks in decision-making are also lowered for citizens as they have more information on which to base their economic decisions. For instance, if parliament passes legislation that would result in improving a stretch of road between a farmer's land and the market, that farmer could consider using his or her land for growing produce that might be more perishable but of higher value as he or she would be able to transport their product to market far quicker. As such, an information rich society promotes investment and economic growth.

## Unit 1 Questions

Please answer each of the following questions. If you are taking this course in a group you may then meet to discuss your answers.

1. What is the 'right to know'?
2. What freedoms are essential preconditions to achieving and sustaining an informed society and why?
3. How does having an informed and transparent society benefit parliament?
4. What is the link between open and transparent societies and economic development?
5. Give an example of how the right to know has helped benefit your own life, or the lives of your constituents.

## Select Bibliography

Article 19: *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

Article 19: *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*

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