

The State of the Right to Information in Mauritius in 2017
Transcription of live tweet session
organised by the African Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC)
with Christina Meetoo (@christinameetoo) and Abdoollah Earally (@AbdEarally)

Hashtag #AccessToInfo

This live tweet session was held on Tuesday 17 October 2017 from 15.00 to 16.30 (Mauritian time)

Tweets have been slightly edited for punctuation and typos.

For more information, read the full report and the Mauritius country report at: <http://www.christinameetoo.com/2017/10/17/report-on-the-state-of-access-to-information-in-africa-2017/>

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Question 1. @christinameetoo Which are the guarantees for ATI in Mauritius, at national and international level?

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- There is no law on access to information in #Mauritius, thus no specific guarantee for access to information in Mauritius.
- There is only a clause on freedom of expression in Constitution to guarantee freedom to receive & impart ideas and information.
- This freedom is curtailed by restrictions linked to national security, privacy, public morality, public safety, health, etc.
- And there's an Official Secrets Act & a Human Resource Manual which prohibit civil servants from sharing information without authorisation.
- In 2005 and 2015, winning coalitions have promised to introduce legislation on freedom of information (but not in 2010).
- In 2013, government appointed consultant Geoffrey Robertson proposed FOI legislation, reform of media laws & media self-regulation.
- In January 2016, Cabinet announced that a bill on FOI was being prepared.
- In March 2016, the ACHPR country report committed to introduce FOI legislation, suggesting that the State Law Office is working on a draft.
- But, there is little visibility so far on progress made.

Sarah @sarahfkiw:

How far has this bill been? Why has it not yet been signed? #SDG16
#accesstoinformation #Mauritius #IDUAI @Gilbertsendugwa

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- No bill has been presented yet. We are assuming that the State Law Office is working on a draft bill but we have no further information.
- FOI legislation is very difficult step for political parties as it could result in constant scrutiny & questioning by mass media & citizens.

- Our political parties are not used full transparency.

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Question 2. @AbdEarally @christinameetoo What is the status of implementation of access to information in Mauritius?

Abdoollah Earally @AbdEarally:

- No obligations for any institutions to give access to information. But because the press has been & is still very vibrant, government has opened up.

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- There is no official status as there is no legislation on ATI.
- However, there is some proactive disclosure on government web portal.
- But the disclosure is not systematic and information is not well organised nor is it done in a user-friendly way.

Abdoollah Earally @AbdEarally:

- I would rather call it selective sharing of information, not really disclosure

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- Yes, we could call it selective disclosure ;)

Abdoollah Earally @AbdEarally:

- A few public institutions are providing reliable information, Statistics Mauritius & Bank of Mauritius. Because indispensable for economy.

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Question 3. @AbdEarally @christinameetoo How would you describe the implementation of proactive disclosure in Mauritius?

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- To date, there are 26 ministries, 44 government departments, 68 parastatal organisations, and 17 other bodies with dedicated websites.
- The portal gives access to extensive database listing laws and government notices as well as the Constitution of the country.
- The information is not necessarily organised in a well-structured, user-friendly manner.

Abdoollah Earally @AbdEarally:

- There is cultural change thanks to the press & civil society for access to information. There has been lots of progress.

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- The National Assembly website contains transcriptions of all parliamentary questions & answers though not always up to date.

- Since mid-June 2016, the National Assembly carries live and archived coverage of proceedings at: <https://parliamenttv.govmu.org/>
- The main issue is that the disclosure does not systematically cover all areas of government business as stated earlier.
- The depth of content is not the same throughout the 155 websites listed on the government portal.

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Question 4. @AbdEarally @christinameetoo How would you describe the status of awareness of the citizens about their RTI?

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- They know there is no legislation on RTI in #Mauritius and there is strong demand for it.
- People are aware that info about public bodies should be accessible but do not necessarily know where and how to look for information.
- But there is limited literacy about what FOI really means and how it would function.

Abdoollah Earally @AbdEarally:

- I would say that citizens rely too much on the press. They are not really aware that they too have the right to direct.
- Yes they rely mostly on the press. Level of trust on the press was very high according to a survey 7 years ago.

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- Yes although trust has dwindled, there is still high reliance on the press.
- Also limited knowledge about what would be required to make implementation effective and how they would need to file requests.
- They tend to believe that just enacting RTI would be the solution whereas it would just be the start.

Abdoollah Earally @AbdEarally:

- For RTI to be effective, public officials have to be trained to be less media shy and reporters too have to be better trained.
- People are looking for more information on government contracts, recruitment of public officials, how money is being spent.

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- Yes and within the FOI law, there need to be clear procedures to file requests to access such information.
- There will of course need to be safeguards to protect personal data of ordinary citizens.

Abdoollah Earally @AbdEarally:

- There are tons of information not being disclosed. FOI would help the government to fight corruption & to set new goals & values.

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- Yes, FOI would help strengthen transparency & ensure maintenance of rights & freedoms does not merely rely on goodwill of governing parties.
- FOI would also allow local media to provide more in-depth investigative reporting as opposed to its current surface-level reporting of news.

Abdoollah Earally @AbdEarally:

- Good reporting need good reporters, & goods reporters depend on good media owners, who are not looking for profits only.

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Question 5. @AbdEarally @christinameetoo How implementation of ATI impacts on citizens' participation in public life?

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- There is no ATI but many NGOs & media organisations who ask questions about governance of public affairs & demand greater accountability.
- For instance about procurement, policy decisions and new regulations.
- Reporting on National Assembly proceedings and cabinet decisions are also highly visible so citizens are aware.
- There are also lots of comment & debates in public sphere (including on social media) as a form of citizens' participation.

Abdoollah Earally @AbdEarally:

- New publications & lots of pure players as well helping.

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- But understanding about profound implications tend to be low on average as people tend to focus on sensationalist aspects & partisan politics.

Abdoollah Earally @AbdEarally:

- The press itself is only looking for controversial issues. Bad news sell best. Reporters need to better trained.

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- + There is a love-hate relationship between press & politicians of all parties of which citizens are not fully aware.

Note: Question 6 was omitted as it was already answered in previous replies.

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Question 7. @AbdEarally @christinameetoo Which are the main recommendations for government to improve the effectiveness of ATI?

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- Introduce FOI legislation after extensive & transparent consultations with all stakeholders with regular reporting on stages of development.
- Limited fees for making FOI/ATI requests, user-friendly models with limited bureaucracy and well-defined timelines for acceding to requests.
- And an appeal system for requests that are rejected.
- Sensitisation campaigns after introduction of FOI/RTI.
- Reduced limitations and maximum proactive disclosure.
- Proper training of civil servants, management cadre within public sector, change of mindset.
- For time being, civil service still operates behind lots of red tape bureaucracy as well as laziness of some, hidden personal agendas, etc.

Abdoollah Earally @AbdEarally:

- Mauritius is too politicized. Civil servants escape the press. They can be embarrassed even if they are giving factual information.

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- Yes indeed. Too polarised. We tend to focus on partisan politics rather than idea politics.
- Actually, I suspect many civil servants would be embarrassed by FOI themselves.

Abdoollah Earally @AbdEarally:

- Yes of course, the level of corruption, favoritism is still high in the public sector. FOI would be too dangerous for many.

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Question 8.@AbdEarally @christinameetoo How can CSOs support the effort of the gov in improving the State of ATI in Mauritius?

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- Help in formulating legislation, training civil servants, literacy & sensitisation campaigns on functioning of FOI.
- For now, provide knowledge about best practice in formulation of FOI legislation and subsequent implementation.
- Later, provide support in training of civil servants, media personnel + literacy and sensitisation campaigns.
- Also help set up monitoring agents to evaluate implementation of FOI legislation.

Abdoollah Earally @AbdEarally:

- I would add training of media personnel as well. The press is under high financial pressure everywhere. Journalists need support for training.

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- Indeed, I support that. Media and citizens alike should be targeted by literacy, sensitisation and training.

Abdoollah Earally @AbdEarally:

- National media literacy campaign/training to help citizen journalism at local level, because the press focus is on national issue.
- Sit with the gov & tell them the press can be a partner on national issues. Sit with the press telling them they are part of the same society.

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- But first, provide support to lobby government & help find out what is status of FOI, nudge them to organise broad consultations.
- Researching for country report has allowed me to have clearer view. We need to step up efforts to lobby for FOI.

Abdoollah Earally @AbdEarally:

- We need to tell the press they should be accountable as well & remind them that there is a code of ethics for journalist.

Christina Meetoo @christinameetoo:

- Indeed. In this respect, we should also ask for the Robertson report; he recommended self-regulation, FOI & review of media laws.

Abdoollah Earally @AbdEarally:

- We cannot be journalist at all costs & forget that we are dealing with people lives . Journalist show more empathy.

AFIC @AFIC1:

Thank you @AbdEarally @christinameetoo for this great discussion.