

## **Stakeholders call on government to implement the Access to Information Act**

Around the world, access to information laws have transformed the relationship between citizens and their governments. When citizens understand what their government is doing, they can actually help it, and ultimately themselves. They can contribute useful and constructive ideas on how to improve society. Sometimes, that can involve uncovering corruption or waste. Often it is just about helping the government make sure its policies and plans are relevant to the local situation. Or it can help researchers to dig deeper and find new solutions to tough problems.

When citizens can monitor what's going on, make comparisons and act, they gain a sense of purpose and control; a sense not only that things happen to us, but that we can make things happen. Creating open societies, where citizens can freely access and share data and ideas, and choose their leaders and hold them accountable, creates a sense of belonging and gives people a stake in public affairs.

We, members of the Coalition on the Right to Information, again congratulate the Government on the passage of the Access to Information Act (2016), particularly for its consideration of some stakeholder comments and views on the law before it was passed.

However we note with some dismay that regulations for this law still have not been prepared; the law has not been gazetted. Effectively we passed this law one year ago but as of now we have been unable to make use of it.

In the run up to the International Day for Universal Access to Information (28 September), we call on the Government to begin a consultative process to prepare the regulations so these can be finalized as soon as possible. In the meantime, we call on the Government to gazette the legislation so it can be used even as regulations are being prepared.

Currently, citizens are unlikely to be able to access government information. In January / February of 2016, researchers posed as ordinary citizens and visited 131 government offices in 26 districts to seek specific types of information. The data collected are nationally representative. We find that these researchers successfully acquired the information they were looking for in 1 out of 3 cases (33%). This means that two out of three times, when a citizen requests information from a government office, they will not receive that information. Although these data were collected before the passage of the Access to Information Act, given the slow pace of implementation there is no reason to suppose that results have changed significantly.

Based on past research, we would further like to draw attention to the following:

- 84% of citizens supported the passage of the Access to Information Act in Parliament before it became law, showing that citizens want to access government information.
- 77% of citizens believe that ordinary citizens should have access to information held by government.
- 80% of citizens believe that corruption and other wrongdoing would be reduced if citizens had more access to information.

- 42% of citizens would be interested in having more information from government about different sectors and services.

Kajubi Mukajanga, Executive Secretary of the Media Council for Tanzania said *“We all know that information is power. The free flow of news and information is a prerequisite for citizens to forge a strong and democratic society in which they have a say in their destiny. The media is an important vehicle in making this happen and the government has the obligation to put into place the requisite legal and policy framework towards this end.”*

*“Although the Access to information Act, 2016 was passed a year ago” he added, “nothing much has been done to operationalise it and ensure that citizens have free and fast access to information from the government and its agencies. It is high time that this law starts being used, in particular by putting into place the necessary regulations through a consultative process. Otherwise we might conclude that the law is merely a smokescreen.”*

Aidan Eyakuze, Executive Director of Twaweza said *“Access to information is the foundation of a principled, democratic and prosperous society. The passage of the Access to Information Act was one of the highlights of 2016 for civil society, media and citizens. We urge the government to follow through on this important commitment it has made to openness and transparency by gazetting the commencement of the law and developing regulations. We also invite citizens to start using the law to try to access information.”*

Dr Helen Kijo-Bisimba, Executive Director of Legal and Human Rights Centre noted that *“Every citizen and non-citizen has right to access government’s information. Any accountable and transparent government should guarantee accessibility of information to its people. In 2016 the government of United Republic of Tanzania passed the law on access to information but the law itself has left behind a lot of irregularities which infringes the right to information. It is for that reason that we call upon the government to make revision and address the inconsistencies regarding right to information act before the law is put into effect. Irregularities like length of time for responding to information request, limited access to information to Tanzanian citizens only, narrow scope of information required to be published, vague exceptions to disclosure of information, information access fees and many others are to be addressed.”*

Gasirigwa Sengiyumva, National Director of MISA-TAN said *“The only way the country can expect responsible citizenship and meaningful participation in development programmes is by making sure the public is well informed. Informed citizenry always make informed decisions.”*

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**Notes to Editors**

The International Day for Universal Access to Information is celebrated globally every year on 28 September. It was established in 2003.