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28 September 2011

Right to Know Day honoured around the world



Thanks to large protests in South Africa, the government has been forced to withdraw its Protection of Information Bill

Right2Know

Right to information (RTI) advocates around the world have much to celebrate on today's Right To Know Day (28 September) with the launch of numerous tools, initiatives and reports that will make it more difficult for governments and



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make it more difficult for governments and public institutions to avoid their duty to promote information sharing and openness.

Beginning in Africa, where much inspiring right to information news has emerged, a landmark African Platform on Access to Information Declaration (APAI) was adopted on 19 September at the Pan African Conference on Access to Information. The Declaration was made possible by a Working Group that included several IFEX members - Media Rights Agenda (MRA), Media Institute of South Africa (MISA), Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and ARTICLE 19 - and was supported by partners Freedom House and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA).

The 14 principles of the Declaration provide guidance to African countries on enacting access to information laws and promoting government transparency on a daily basis. The APAI also highlights the importance of the right to information in fighting corruption and promoting health and education.

South Africa's decision on 19 September to withdraw its Protection of Information Bill, which would criminalise many aspects of investigative journalism, added another positive development ahead of Right to Know Day. Thanks to large protests in Cape Town and Johannesburg, the government has been forced to send the draft legislation back for further consultation, reports the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

Highlighting both the good and bad in the Southern African region, the Media Institute of South Africa (MISA) today released its annual reports on the Most Open and Secretive Public Institutions. In award ceremonies held in eight countries, a number of public institutions will receive a golden key for their transparency efforts, while others will be shamed with a golden padlock to symbolise their inaccessibility. Sadly, the MISA chapter in Botswana, allegedly one of Africa's most democratic countries, was unable to find a single institution worthy of the Most Open award. Furthermore, MISA reports that the Office of the President of Botswana yesterday released a statement saying that it would

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refuse to accept the results of the awards and warning government institutions against attending the ceremony. MISA gave the Golden Padlock award to the Office of the President in 2010.

Africa made the "most substantial" gains in right to information, according to ARTICLE 19. New access to information protections were established in Uganda, the Republic of Guinea and Niger in 2011, bringing the number of African countries with right to information laws to ten.

Meanwhile, says ARTICLE 19, in Brazil, representatives of eight governments launched the Open Government Partnership (OGP) on 20 September to promote transparency, fight corruption and bolster accountability around the world. Despite leading the initiative along with the US, Brazil has regrettably failed to implement its own national right to information legislation, reports ARTICLE 19.

In Colombia, the Foundation for Press Freedom (FLIP) reminded the authorities of the right of the public to access information, as part of its joint platform with other NGOs "Más Información más derechos" (More information, more rights).

In South Asia, a coalition including the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA), Media Defence-Southeast Asia, ARTICLE 19, and the SAPA Task Force on ASEAN Freedom of Information, are calling on ASEAN and its member states to follow the example of APAI with a joint declaration on access to information. The organisations are also demanding that the right to information and freedom of expression be enshrined in the draft ASEAN Human Rights Declaration.

Inspiring more optimism for the future of access to information around the world is today's launch of asktheeu.org, a web portal created by pro-transparency NGO Access Info Europe. The tool radically simplifies and democratises information requests. Now, EU citizens can make a request to any EU public institution using one site and members of the public can see the requests of others and click a simple "Me too" to receive the same information.

Access Info Europe also joined with the Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD) to launch the first detailed analysis of the legal framework for RTI in 89 countries

around the world. See RTI-Rating.org.

In other news that is less positive, ARTICLE 19 reports that some countries have actually weakened their information laws, including Poland and Hungary, while others, including Venezuela, Bolivia, and Argentina, have stalled legislation. The European Union Commission is meanwhile pushing for revisions that would diminish the information-sharing requirements of EU bodies. Frighteningly, at least 10 RTI activists have been killed in India, says ARTICLE 19.

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