

Intervention - 19th June 2012 - Lydia Medland - Access Info Europe

My name is Lydia Medland and I work for the civil society organisation Access Info Europe, which specialises in the right of access to information. Like the other organisations here, we also form part of the UNCAC coalition. It is a huge pleasure to be at this meeting today because we understand that it represents a step forward for openness in the fight against corruption.

As we know, openness and cooperation in the review process of the UNCAC could still be developed further, civil society are yet to be granted full observer status as we understand should be provided for in the relevant rules of procedure.

All of us here are working for transparency and there are many opportunities for civil society, not just to participate, but to work in partnership with governments to identify where action is most gravely needed and where civil society can play a key role in efforts to stamp out corruption.

Sometimes we just need to make a better effort to be in contact. Some small things could make a real difference. There should be no reason why governments cannot publish timeframes for their review process, including dates and agendas for country meetings. Many of us have not attended country visits because we haven't known where and when they were happening, and ultimately it is the responsibility of governments to invite civil society and tell us when and where these visits are happening.

It would really help us if timetables and agendas for country visits were given to UNODC, and we would like UNODC to be given full permission to publish these timetables clearly and openly on their website.

In order to participate in the fight against corruption, civil society needs information. The right of access to information has been recognised as a human right - and its importance, as we know, is specifically recognised in articles 10 and 13 of the UNCAC.

At Access Info Europe, we believe that all information relating to implementation of the UNCAC should be public. It is a shame, for example, that only 12 countries have published their self-assessments.

We think that governments should make their self assessments and reports available to their citizens at the same time as they make them available to the UN, to fellow delegations and to reviewers. This would help us all better target our efforts and recognise

our progress. Civil society can help galvanise public support for measures to tackle corruption, and have insights into how these measures have an impact at the local level. We, as civil society, can also provide expertise, for example in the case of my own organisation, on successful models for implementing access to information laws which in turn build transparency and fight corruption.

Looking forward we are very optimistic. In the next review cycle the focus will turn to prevention and the need for transparency in order to prevent the offences that are under scrutiny as part of the criminalisation and enforcement chapters 3 and 4 which are being addressed during this first round. At this point we should be ready to deepen our conversation on access to information and start talking not just about access to information for CSOs but also for citizens. This is another area in which civil society can help bring things like the UNCAC review process to the public attention where necessary information is available to them.

Access Info Europe last year finished a legal rating of all 90 freedom of information laws worldwide, we hope that even before the UNCAC review process turns to the issue of prevention in chapter 2, we will start talking about a strong and functioning right of access to information which, in practice, allows citizens to take a lead role in the fight against corruption. Our understanding of access to information is not just in terms of the provision of information but also the right to request and receive information from public institutions.

Recent studies from my own organisation showed that requests made asking for information about the implementation of the UNCAC were largely left unanswered. This is a real shame and shows there is a lot to be done to ensure, for example that there exists a right of access to information in practice.

If there is freedom of information or I have a right to information, as a citizen, I can ask just the right questions which shows that a construction project in my local area included a bribe, or that the hiring of a contractor was based on conflict of interests, for example.

We hope governments do all that they can to tackle corruption but we don't want to just rely on them. That is why we believe the right of access to information is so important, because it allows civil society and citizens to take a front seat and work in partnership with governments in the fight against corruption.