

ACCESS TO BUDGET INFORMATION EMPOWERS CITIZENS IN INDIA

For years, many government officials in India operated in a climate of secrecy, allowing corruption to flourish and public funds to be wasted and misspent. Government engineers, accountants, administrators, project supervisors, auditors, and even anti-corruption officials were often entirely unaccountable to the public.

The secrecy of government operations allowed corruption to continue unchecked. But much of this began to change in India nearly a decade ago as citizens and civil society organizations in India's largest state, Rajasthan, started to obtain more access to government budgets and other government documents.

In 1994, Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), an organization of small farmers and workers dedicated to social justice issues, began obtaining and then deciphering the often bewildering budget information provided by the Rajasthan government. After five years of pressure from MKSS the government of the state of Rajasthan finally passed a "right to information" law in 2000. This new law gave the public the right to request information, such as important budget documents, from the state.

Even prior to adoption of the law, MKSS pieced what information it was able to obtain together and started uncovering fraud. In one instance, by combining various documents that detailed the dates that workers were allegedly employed at various project sites, MKSS identified cases of fraud, such as workers shown working at two different sites on the same day.

MKSS began to bring such findings to *panchayats* (clusters of villages administered by the same local government), going door-to-door to further verify names on labor rolls and bills. The residents of these villages became increasingly excited as they uncovered the names of dead or fictitious people on the payroll. In the Janawad *panchayat* alone, MKSS uncovered \$150,000 of receipts for work that was never undertaken, for projects such as a veterinary hospital, a community meeting center, a dam, and several roads. In addition, several workers that were shown as paid in the labor rolls were never actually paid. As a result, several officials were suspended and one was jailed.

Building on the momentum created by its investigations in these villages, MKSS held public hearings in which public officials were asked to explain the often explosive findings of the testimonies. Stories of corruption, inefficiency in utilization of public funds, and poor planning within public agencies were recounted by speaker after speaker. Workers in projects and residents identified false information contained in public records, and many discussions became heated when public officials tried to defend themselves.

In some instances, public officials admitted their wrongdoings. In the Rawatmal and Kukarkheda *panchayats* the head elected official (*sarpanch*) returned money to the *panchayat* account after being confronted with accusations and testimony.

Other organizations in India saw MKSS's success, and a major movement sprang up to push for access to information, including budget information. This finally forced the national Indian government to pass a right to information law in 2005. Now groups such as MKSS do not need to rely on sympathetic officials or individual state laws to get the information needed to monitor government officials for corruption and misappropriation.

In little over a decade, MKSS has developed into one of India's most potent social justice movements. The organization has successfully demonstrated the power of budget information as an effective tool to enable citizen participation in governance. Using public hearings (also known as social audits) MKSS enables structured and focused discussions among residents on the funds spent in their communities on government-sponsored development projects.

Inspired by MKSS, Indian budget groups plan to use the results of the *Open Budget Index 2006* to press for accountability through increased access to budget information.