Second Meeting of
National Forum of Information Commissioners in Pakistan
Proceedings Report: 6 - 7 February, 2020
2nd Meeting of
National Forum of Information Commissioners in Pakistan

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Executive Summary:

Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI) has established first ever National Forum of Information Commissioners (NFIC) in Pakistan. The Forum consists of all in-service information commissioners from Federal Capital Islamabad, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Sindh. The first ever meeting of NFIC was held in Islamabad on September 19-20, 2019, under the banner of CPDI. Now the second meeting has been held in February 2020 in Lahore.

All Information commissioners gathered under one roof and discussed at length the issues and impediments in implementation of Right to Information (RTI) laws in their respective areas. Information Commissioners reviewed the performance of all the Commissions and agreed for mutual coordination for implementation of RTI laws in the country by sharing their knowledge and experiences. Furthermore a consensus developed on establishing synergies and collaboration (Inter-provincial) for utilizing the best practices for making decisions. They further shared cases where they took stern decisions showcasing maximum proactive disclosure of public information and justifying that transparency is the key to good governance.

The second NFIC meeting held in Lahore was a two day event. The first day was scheduled as a formal meeting between the commissioners from Punjab, KP and Federal Information Commissions whereby to discuss their individual progress and status of the commission.

The second day was designed as open forum for the citizens to attend and panel discussion was held on the significance of right to information as a fundamental human right. Open forum was attended by renowned professionals from diverse background. Students from the different universities and colleges actively participated and also raised several questions from the panelists at the end of session.

Commissioners pledged to ensure access to information in the service of people without any fear of favor and mutually decided to continue these meetings biannually and have a theme for each of the upcoming meetings.
Introduction:

The history of Right to Information regime in Pakistan is two decades old but it is only since 2013 that some serious citizens-oriented efforts in legislation have been made by the federal and provincial governments. One aspect of these efforts is the establishment of an independent and powerful appellate body, an Information Commission, being one of the hallmarks of second generation of RTI laws in Pakistan. In pre-2013 information regime in Pakistan, the responsibility to take the citizens’ complaints was bestowed upon Ombudsman. Presently commissions have been established in all 4 provinces and at federal level. These commissions have three main roles to play:

1. To act as an appellate or complaint handling body in case information is delayed or denied to the citizens
2. To raise awareness among citizens about Right to Information
3. To build the capacity of the public bodies by providing training to Public Information Officers (PIO) and sending periodic advices to the public bodies on relevant issues.

CPDI prognosticated the need and stepped forward to establish a platform where information commissioners can share knowledge, learn from each other’s experiences and document their institutional histories. The inaugural meeting of this forum was held in September, 2019 in Islamabad. It was decided that NFIC will be institutionalized as a formal medium where all the commissions will meet biannually to build on past experiences, share learnings and make a joint and concentrated effort for a more transparent and accountable regime in Pakistan.

The second meeting of NFIC was held on 6-7 February 2020 in Lahore. Information Commissioners not only shared their good and bad experiences but also discussed landmark decisions/orders issued by them in accordance to diverse cases in their respective areas of jurisdiction.

The participation of Commissioners in second meeting of NFIC is an affirmative move towards better transparency and accountability in Pakistan. It also helped the commissioners hold a fruitful discussion on the landmark orders passed and decision making process in handling of
certain similar cases by each commission. This helped clarify and highlight more diverse aspects to a specific case.

Unlike the inaugural meeting held in Sep 2019, Sindh Information Commission was not represented in the forum due to the absence of all three Commissioners appointed in Sindh Information Commission. To inculcate the status of right to information in Balochistan, CPDI management extended invitation letter to the Provincial Ombudsmen of Balochistan to be part of the second meeting of NFIC. However, the invitation was politely rejected and Provincial Ombudsmen abstained from participating in the meeting. Provincial Ombudsmen is entitled as custodian of dealing with the complaints of general public under first generation Balochistan Freedom of Information Act 2005.

This meeting was a two day event. On the first day all the commissioners met, shared their work and concluded successfully with mutual agreement on recording their cases and decisions, sharing the knowledge and record with other commissions and deciding a customized theme for the next meeting. The second day of the event comprised of an open panel discussion attended by various professionals and students. A productive discussion was held on the historical and legislative background of right to information in Pakistan with a special reference to the religious teachings of Islam. The essence of the discussion was to spread awareness on importance and need for Right to Information process in Pakistan.
Proceedings of Day 1:

Participants

Second meeting of National Forum of Information Commissioners (NFIC) was convened by the Center for Peace and Development initiatives (CPDI) with the support of Punjab Information Commission. The meeting was attended by the following participants:

1. Muhammad Azam, Chief Information Commissioner, Pakistan Information Commission (Federal Capital)
2. Zahid Abdullah, Information Commissioner, Pakistan Information Commission (Federal Capital)
3. Fawad Malik Awan, Information Commissioner, Pakistan Information Commission (Federal Capital)
4. Mahboob Qadir Shah, Chief Information Commissioner, Punjab Information Commission
5. Saeed Akhtar Ansari, Information Commissioner, Punjab Information Commission
6. Hassan Iqbal, Information Commissioner, Punjab Information Commission
7. Riaz Khan Daudzai, Information Commissioner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa RTI Commission
8. Amer Ejaz – Executive Director CPDI, Islamabad
9. Moonus Kaynat Zahra – Project Manager, CPDI
10. Fiza Minal Mazhar – Senior Program Officer, CPDI
11. Ali Javaid – Program Officer, CPDI
Welcome Address:

The meeting started with a welcome address by Amer Ejaz, Executive Director of CPDI whereby he greeted the participants and extended gratitude to all the information commissioners for taking out time and be enthusiastic to attend the second NFIC meeting as agreed in the inaugural session of this forum.

Another formal welcome note was given by Mahboob Qadir Shah, Chief Information Commissioner, Punjab Information Commission. He expressed his happiness on the hosting of the forum as it took place in Lahore and said that it was his pleasure to be able to help in the arrangements and organizing of the meeting. He was thankful to everyone for joining and accepting his idea for a panel discussion on the second day of the meeting. Mr. Qadir further briefed on how the second day of the meeting is planned to proceed.

Mr. Qadir announced the first day session open with quickly reviewing the highlights from the inaugural session held back in 2019 and the progress since then. Discussion was thereon initiated among all the commissioners and each commission was given a turn to voice their opinion and present their work.
Review of Inaugural Meeting of NFIC

All the commissioners mutually agreed to the fact that this platform provides them an excellent opportunity to discuss their performance, work and decisions made on similar cases.

All the commissioners concurred to the fact that essence of RTI revolves around the maximum proactive disclosure of information by government departments. The dire need to build capacity of government officials on the subject of RTI was jointly agreed upon. Everyone shared how they have worked diligently with government departments on informing them about the compliance of the RTI Law and it’s binding on them.

Another important element identified by Amer Ejaz in the inaugural meeting was regarding the training of Public Information Officers (PIOs) on permanent basis to fully equip them with the salient features of RTI law. As a result PIOs will be capable to fulfil their duties as per RTI Law. He further went on floating the idea of having a dedicated RTI academy. He remarked:

“For the training of PIO’s and other government officials on RTI laws, an academy on permanent basis should be established by the government of Pakistan as this needs to be a continuous effort and not a one-time affair”

This idea was given high appreciation and taken seriously as efforts were made rigorously till the second NFIC meeting. Mr. Qadir, Chief Information Commissioner Punjab Information Commission explained how they requested to have a dedicated training space for PIOs. Although their request was not accepted with concerned authorities on the basis of budget constraints as officially stated, the efforts of the commission did not stop and only raised the motivation level. Mr. Qadir explained how he and his team of commissioners came with alternate ideas of individual capacity building and training at institutional level. They told that they have given trainings in colleges and universities and different departments in various cities across the province of Punjab.

The idea of spreading the arena of RTI in Pakistan through conducting research was endorsed by all the commissioners from last time. Mr Ejaz remarked that:

“A research based journal on RTI should be compiled. This would help in spreading awareness of RTI in general masses”
However no work on this proposition has been initiated till date. All the commissioners acknowledged to spread awareness through trainings but not working mutually on any common research or training material.

After the review, a series of presentations by Commissions started. Representative of each Information Commission discussed progress, achievements, hurdles and a way forward on the path of RTI.

**Progress, Achievements, Challenges and Way Forward Of Punjab Information Commission**

Mr. Qadir started off with greeting everyone again and introducing himself and his team members formally once again. He shortly described all the problems they faced when they started their work as information commissioners, however the team remained resilient to all hardships. Mr. Qadir quoted:

“We decided not to be discouraged from so many hardships including non-availability of regularly hired staff, inadequate office building, starting from the scratch and a hostile perception of civil society. We decided to make each adversity as our opportunity by employing innovative techniques to have maximum output with minimum resources.”

The commission faced lack of human resource which played as a source addition on delays of its daily work. As a result the commissioners had to put in extra effort and hours and rely on daily wagers who were not capacitated professionally for the designated roles and functions.

Mr. Qadir defined that the Punjab Information Commission, apart from its main responsibility of disposal of RTI complaints (appeals) has a few more functions added as following:

1. To conduct trainings of Public Information Officers of all public bodies
2. To take steps for pro-active disclosure of public information by public bodies
3. To launch the awareness campaign for RTI law
4. To advice the government to strike out the laws which run contrary to “freedom of information” and to suggest actions for “access to information”

He further explained on how the commission complies with its function in actual by running awareness campaign across the province and also conduct training sessions at institutional level. Till date the Punjab Information Commission has
conducted number of training sessions for PIOs, trained 30 students as interns of the commission and trained more than 100 students, otherwise, on RTI and the Punjab RTI Law.

**Spreading Awareness of RTI**

Awareness sessions were not easy to conduct and the commission could not straightaway set out to hold such sessions due to lack of budget and funds. There was no allocated budget to print any training material or rent out a place to hold sessions. Hence the commission had to arrange funds on their own for which they joined hands with GIZ (2018-2019) who supported them on developing number of tools and leaflets to be utilized during RTI training workshops and awareness campaigns.

He explained that unlike KP RTI commission which is financially independent as it has its own budget separately approved by the provincial government on annual basis, Punjab commission is still dependent and has to face many issues upon approval of funds.

**Challenges Faced by Punjab Information Commission**

Mr. Qadir explained that all the tasks and functions of the Commission were not easy to complete and the team faced a lot of problems and came across numerous hurdles, some of which they are still working to resolve.

Numerous challenges faced by Punjab Information Commission are listed as following:

1. **Awareness and public perception about RTI law**
   The commissioners recognized the need to work day and night to achieve a breakthrough for mass awareness and winning public confidence to prove RTI law as a game changer. They believe that once common citizen is fully aware of the procedure on how to exercise his or her right to information and is convinced about its efficacy to bring about fair, even handed and equitable governance, then their shall not remain any impediment in the way of RTI law.

2. **Non-availability of regularly hired supporting staff**
   Since the day of commencement of the Commission, non-availability of regular staff and its hiring has been a constant issue. People working on daily wages has been hired who are not even trained or educated enough to professionally understand and execute the tasks successfully.

3. **Service rules**
   The service rules for hiring of staff for the commission were first drafted by the founding commissioners of PIC and were further refined by current batch of commissioners with the technical and financial support of CPDI in Jan 2019. However till date these service rules are struggling to get approved due to some technical and legal clash with Civil Servants Act, 1974. Although the two are not related yet the authorities placed a hold on the approval and creating a main impediment for recruitment of supporting staff.

4. **Appointment of PIOs a defective arrangement**
   PIOs being one of the stakeholders play a pertinent role for implementation of RTI law. However their designation and notification has been a crucial challenge for the
Commission. It was identified by the Commission upon its very outset, a serious lapse on the part of public bodies to designate, within 60 days of promulgation of the Act, PIOs for all offices of the Province of Punjab, a statutory obligation under section 7 of the Act.

5. **Rationalization of administrative department**
   Currently Information and Culture (I&C) is the administrative department for PIC. This arrangement to the extent of PIC, by all means, seems illogical as only bodies associated with media, art and culture are attached with I&C department. Also many RTI complaints against the department are received which then create a conflict of interest. The PIC therefore requires to have its independent administrative department.

6. **Inadequate location for the head office of Commission**
   Location of the office is important with respect to its daily functions. It has been a challenge from the start for Punjab Information Commission to have an office building within the official hub of Lahore and that which is easily accessible for common man.

**Achievements of Punjab Information Commission**

Despite many challenges faced, the commission diligently worked to successfully complete the tasks and achieved success at various issues.

1. **Establishment of RTI courts**
   The setting up of “RTI Court” is a salient example of an innovative initiative reaching its success. Mr. Qadir proudly stated that:
   “Of all the Information Commissions of Pakistan, “RTI Court” has become an identity of the Punjab Information Commission though all the Commissions are vested with powers of Civil Court.”
   This initiative proved to be a game changer as the disposal of RTI complaints were started not only in an organized manner in judicial environment but also at a pace facilitating the disposal within stipulated time period. Furthermore it provides a platform for open and transparent proceedings to be held before the Commission which prevents PIOs or public functionaries to make any false or irresponsible statements.

2. **Maintenance of Official Record**
   The maintenance of official record is important to maintain as it helps in future tracking of the application and complaint proceedings, if needed at any point. Separate files under different heads/titles are being maintained in an organized and chronological order.
3. Establishment of Complaint Management Cell (CMC)
   The establishment of CMC provided an adequate working environment for the
   conduct of complaint management system which contributed to un-precedented
   pace of disposal of RTI complaints and pro-active communication with
   complainants and PIOs.

4. Training of staff of CMC
   Due to lack of qualified and skilled staff and work load increasing by every day with
   respect to more complaints pouring in, the commissioners decided to utilize the
   daily wagers and train them with minimal available resources. These people were
   trained to manage and handle cases as part of the CMC.

5. Introduction of Pro-active Communication
   Pro-active communication mode such as telephonic conversations with PIOs to
   obtain timely information is introduced which helped save a lot of time.

Status of Right to Information at Federal Level and Landmark Initiatives Taken By
Pakistan Information Commission

Muhammad Azam, Chief Information Commissioner, Pakistan Information Commission shared that despite
all the odds, challenges and bureaucratic lethargy, Pakistan Information Commission is turning challenge
into opportunity. With every passing day we are growing and progressing towards better transparency
of public bodies as per the true essence and principle implementation of RTI law.

He stated how we have now started working on
sharing the federal Commission’s proceedings at
different forums aiming to spread awareness on
information laws and their importance, strength and
usage in daily life of a citizen. He said:

“Despite facing many problems and hardships on daily basis, the Commission is
committed to striving hard and is achieving its goals successfully. We have a competent
team of three commissioners and we support each other making conducive working
environment”

Also we promote to work together helping each other with different request. Zahid
Abdullah, Information Commissioner, Pakistan Information Commission said:

“Often we have received requests which were related to Punjab Information Commission
and we replied the person requesting the information with contact details to contact
relevant authorities. Similarly Punjab Information Commission has done the same. This
mutual cooperation will make working smoother across the country.”
Mr. Zahid Abdullah suggested to introduce standardized procedures and working guidelines/mechanisms for all the Information Commissions of Pakistan. He said:

“For transparency narrative we need to tackle secrecy narrative by making more things documented properly and adopting standardized procedures across all the Information Commissions”

His idea was further endorsed by CPDI and few other commissioners.

Constraints faced by Pakistan Information Commission

Since the start of the Commission, the Commission is facing certain problems which are not resolved till date. Bureaucratic influence and conflict of interest has delayed the approvals which has caused hindrances in Commission’s work.

1. Funds for the Commission
Section 21 of the Right of Access to Information Act, 2017 states that the federal government shall provide funding to the Commission. Though a sum of Rupees 70 million has been allocated for the Federal Information Commission in the Budget of 2019-20, however the case of sanctioning of 30 posts dully recommended by the MS wing of the Establishment Division is still pending with the expenditure wing of the Ministry of Finance. This matter is still lying unresolved with Additional Secretary Expenditure who says that,

“How the parliament can pass this decision without my consent?”

This issue has been raised in the media by the Commission after which some relief was given in the form of a few staff being hired.

2. Lack of Human Resource
We still lack qualified and skilled staff to work on daily functions like responding to complaints or dispatching of letters regarding answers to queries. When the issue regarding funding was raised in media by the Commission, then in return as a compensation, the Federal Information Secretary, in August 2019, temporarily provided us 1 stenographer, 1 assistant, 2 Naib Qasid and 1 driver. However this staff is not competent enough to check or dispatch the letters on correct address. Furthermore they are unable to match the query letters with the replies and their respective addresses.

3. Proper Office Space
We have no office and the matter went up to the Secretary to Prime Minister’s Office and they replied back after 2 months saying that “the matter of allotment of office space is a matter between Pakistan Information Commission and the concerned ministry. Actually there is less political will to resolve this matter.
Achievements of Pakistan Information Commission

Despite the hurdles faced, the team is committed to work and fulfill its duties by finding new and alternate ways to tackle all the barriers and achieving success in its functions. Some achievements are listed as following:

1. **Launch of website**
   Since the Commission was not given funds for a proper landline and neither had office space for working therefore the team decided to launch an official website on December 16, 2019. The website is being refined gradually to make it more user friendly. Also we have added a feature for online filling of information request application.

2. **Awareness Campaign**
   The Commission has started mass awareness of general public on RTI and how to request information using the information laws. The team has extended its training work in different cities across all provinces including Lahore, Peshawar, Karachi, Quetta, Multan and Sukkur.

3. **Designation of PIOs**
   The Commission wrote letters to all the Ministries' and departments for the designation of Public Information Officers (PIO’s) following which they got 100 PIO’s designated in different Federal Ministries and Departments. In addition, guidelines for the PIOs have also been prepared by the Commission. Guidelines are available of the the website of Commission. ([www.rti.gov.pk](http://www.rti.gov.pk))
Progress and Achievements of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Information Commission

Mr. Riaz Khan Daudzai, Information Commissioner of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Information Commission started off by briefly explaining the history and background of RTI law in KP in 2013 and the reason for its initiation. He took pride in saying that the provincial government of KP had taken the political ownership of RTI from the time of enactment of RTI Act. Mr. Riaz said:

“KP Information Commission is very committed and works under the slogan of awareness, guidance and access”

He also explained how after the 25th Amendment the geographical spread of the province has increased by addition of Ex-FATA/PATA region which has increased the workload twofold with more requests pouring in and already existing RTI requests waiting to be solved. Yet the commission is committed to work diligently and till now has solved more than 70% of the requests.

He then introduced the e-RTI System which is a web portal to lodge complaints by the citizens. Currently it is for Peshawar only but they are working to extend it throughout the province for all cities. Till date 82% complaints have been resolved on this portal.

Mr. Riaz further expressed his opinion on uniformity and standardization of procedures as suggested by Mr. Zahid Abdullah, Information Commissioner Pakistan Information Commission. To further support the idea he quoted an example of his previous job with UNDP as a Communication Advisor where his suggestion on uniformity and involvement at provincial level was welcomed in policy making process as part of the project. He said:

“Transparency narrative is required to shift from a culture of secrecy to a culture of transparency based on standard procedures across the country”

Challenges faced by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Information Commission

Even though the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Information Commission takes pride being the pioneer in introducing this law and forming a commission, it is still facing a lot challenges which are pertinent for smooth and steady implementation of KP RTI law.

1. Non appointment of Commissioners
   For a long period of time the Information Commission did not have all three Commissioners appointed for its work. The appointment of recently appointed Chief Information Commissioner Mr. Sajid Khan was delayed for six months. Similar was the case with positions of both the information commissioners I and II.

2. Designating PIOs
   There is a lot of bureaucratic resistance on appointing of PIOs in public offices. Furthermore the PIOs that have been designated are not aware of their role and
responsibilities under RTI Law. They need to be trained to build their capacity on how to perform their duties.

3. **Record Keeping**
There is a bad state of record keeping and archive management. No records were being maintained which made things difficult and time consuming. This is still being resolved by maintaining records and trying to recover old ones.

4. **Absence of Baseline Data**
The current body of literature makes it very difficult to make any strong assertions about the impact of RTI as there is baseline data maintained for comparison. Mr. Riaz said:

“A lack of baseline data on the RTI law implementation makes it possible to compare “apples with apples” rather than “apples with oranges.”

5. **Pendency**
Commission usually timely disposes of cases at its end but complainants at times don’t get relief in time. This happens because the cases usually are pending to be resolved. This might not be intentional but due to lack of human resource it is unavoidable on Commission’s end due to which sometimes the requests pile up as pending cases.

6. **Quality of Orders**
Often orders issued by the Commission contain deficiencies in terms of not recording critical facts like-information sought, grounds for decision of PIO designation or why a piece of information requested is denied. This causes more complaints pouring in by the citizen whose RTI request is denied. Therefore it is important that the PIOs are skilled enough to write the RTI responses in a lucid manner.

**Achievements of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Information Commission**
Apart from all the constraints and challenges being faced by the Commission, it is still performing its functions devotedly to successfully meet the objectives of RTI law and spread awareness among people. Some highlighted achievements are listed below.
1. **Proactive Disclosure**
   KP Information Commission believes in proactive disclosure of information on part of the public bodies. This attribute is also significant in identifying the nature of a good RTI law. KP has successfully implemented the “Open Data Strategy” according to which public information will be available to the citizens as declared to be open data. He also gave credit to CPDI for conducting a research study to measure the status of online proactive disclosure. As per results, government departments of KP scored the highest in proactive disclosure and Riaz Khan took it as an achievement and quoted this at many forums.

2. **Integration of RTI at Policy Level**
   KP Information Commission has successfully adopted the “Open Data Strategy” by fluid integration of RTI obligations into internal bureaucratic systems in the province. RTI is being implemented into major planning processes relating to budgeting, HR allocation, and other public sector management systems. RTI has been made the 1st Pillar of Good Governance Strategy and work is being done on this prospect. This is the first ever initiative in Pakistan among all the commissions.

3. **KP Information Commission Going Global**
   KPIC presented its RTI implementation methodologies in Paris Peace Forum and then submitted to UNESCO for its assessment on quality implementation of RTI. This is the first ever representation from Pakistan.
Way Forward to Create Enabling Environment for Implementation of Law

All the commissioners presented different suggestions for a way forward on creating enabling environment for implementation of law. The main attributes of these suggestions are presented below.

**Standardization of Processes**

Mr. Zahid Abdullah, Information Commissioner, Pakistan Information Commission suggested:

"For transparency narrative we need to tackle secrecy narrative by making more things documented properly and adopting standardized procedures across all the Information Commissions. Unified procedures will help set and record best practices that can be latter used for other cases."

**Mass Awareness among Citizens**

Saeed Akhtar Ansari, Information Commissioner, Punjab Information Commission proposed:

"All the information commissions need to focus on working to providing mass awareness raising sessions to the general public. Our target should be educational institutes, civil servants that are passing out every year as officials are the real custodians of information."

**Theme for NFIC Meetings**

Fawad Malik Awan, Information Commissioner, Pakistan Information Commission, suggested:

"If we talk about adopting standardized procedures then we should start working on them in the NFIC meetings and for this purpose we should decide a theme area to work on. This means we should have a theme for each of the upcoming NFIC meetings."

**Sustainability of the Forum**

Riaz Khan Daudzai, Information Commissioner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa RTI Commission proposed:

"We need to create a dedicated platform for such meetings and arrange for its funding from the government. I am extremely thankful to CPDI for hosting these meetings and arranging for them. This initiative taken by CPDI is highly appreciated but some permanent arrangement needs to be made to ensure the sustainability of this forum."
Training of PIOs

Mr. Mehboob Qadir Shah, Chief Information Commissioner, Punjab Information Commission said:

"I would again lay emphasis on the training of PIOs so that they can perform their duties properly. I further endorse the suggestion of having a dedicated academy for the training of PIOs as it is a very time consuming process plus it is a continuous process. Involving ourselves will only affect the functions entrusted upon us as being part of this Commission."

Exploitation of Law

Mr. Hassan Iqbal, Information Commissioner, Punjab Information Commission said:

"If you compare with countries like US then secrecy is still being maintained by Pentagon – we therefore need to realize that not everything can be disclosed and prevent the law from exploitation. We need an independent and dedicated forum for this initiative to regulate cases of exploitation of RTI law and it should be given a statuary or constitutional place.

Proper Documentation

Muhammad Azam, Chief Information Commissioner, Pakistan Information Commission said:

"We need to ensure proper documentation of all the requests and complaints that we receive. This should be religiously followed in all the Information Commissions. I notice from today's discussion that this is a common problem between all of us and it needs to be resolved to make our working better and smoother in future for us and for commissioners appointed after us."
Proceedings of Day 2:

A panel discussion was held on the second and the last day of the meeting in coordination with Punjab Information Commission. The idea was to involve people from every sphere of life including lawyers, civil servants, government employees and students taking their view points and spread awareness in them about RTI and the information commissions working dedicatedly to resolve queries and requests received from the citizens.

Panel Members

1. Mr. Almas Ali Jovindah – Moderator
2. Justice Retd. Syed Afzal Haider – Former Judge Federal Shariat Court of Pakistan
3. Justice Retd. Anwar ul Haq – Former Chief Justice Lahore High Court
4. Justice Retd. Sheikh Ahmad Farooq – Former Chief Justice Lahore High Court
5. Muhammad Azam, Chief Information Commissioner, Pakistan Information Commission (Federal Capital)
6. Zahid Abdullah, Information Commissioner, Pakistan Information Commission (Federal Capital)
7. Fawad Malik Awan, Information Commissioner, Pakistan Information Commission (Federal Capital)
8. Mahboob Qadir Shah, Chief Information Commissioner, Punjab Information Commission
9. Saeed Akhtar Ansari, Information Commissioner, Punjab Information Commission
10. Hassan Iqbal, Information Commissioner, Punjab Information Commission
11. Riaz Khan Daudzai, Information Commissioner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa RTI Commission
12. Moonus Kaynat Zahra – Project Manager, CPDI
Proceedings and Discussions

The panel discussion was moderated by Mr. Almas Ali Jovindah, specialist lawyer on cyber laws and cyber-crimes. He introduced all the panel members individually and then briefed the audience about the objectives of the session. The objectives of this session can be summarized as following:

1. Introducing the Right to Information Law
2. Presence of the Information Commissions at provincial and federal level
3. Work of Information Commissions
4. Usage and Importance of RTI in Life of a Citizen

The discussions and opinions presented by each panel revolved around the theme of RTI law and its usage and importance. The former judges briefed how they worked to promote the concept of RTI in the judicial system to make it more transparent and fair. While the commissioners briefed on how they work in facilitating citizens to gather the required information as per their requests and also guided on how to write an application to request for any piece of information. They further informed the audience about all the RTI laws existing in Pakistan, both at provincial and federal level and how they can use the authority of this law in requesting for rightful information.

Some discussion points of the session are presented below.

Justice Retd. Syed Afzal Haider

“If you study the Quran then you come to know that the concept of Freedom of Information comes back from the time of Holy Prophet (PBUH) when he was preaching and spreading information among people. In my own home I remember as a kid that my father used to teach us and impasse knowledge among us about his work and other regular things. My father was the head of PML-N for certain cities and during the elections of 1965 I remained close to him while he worked and guided his party workers on how they need to spread information among the people. He told his workers that if the general public is not informed about the party objectives and aims then they will not stand by us. Therefore we need to be clear and transparent with the public. With this learning from my father, I moved ahead in my career and realized that there is a lot of ignorance and misconceptions around me which are all due to lack of knowledge. This is when I introduced Section 24-A in the General Clauses Act of 1879. I wrote the clauses to this section myself. The motive of this section was that the informant has the right to be informed about his/her information requested.”
“When you provide information to people it has quite an impact on them. RTI is a fundamental right of every human. I give people a simple example of their own home. I tell them that a father or the head of the family who is responsible to earn and run the house often tells his kids about his monthly budget as per his salary and how they have to go about. This helps the kids understand why some wishes cannot be fulfilled or some things they have to let go and they support their father in it. Similar is the case with the government and the general public. If our government and organizations can show the true picture or their resources and limitations to the people then it will only help in strengthening the country as everyone will then contribute to its betterment. The government just needs to be transparent in its matters unless they are not revealing just because they will be held answerable to expenditures made in their own personal interest.

Justice Retd. Anwar-ul-Haq

“I take pride in saying that the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is the pioneer to introduce the RTI law in 2013. We believe in keeping the affairs transparent and promote proactive disclosure of information by the government departments. We have lived 72 years in darkness due to the absence of RTI law. This is therefore a sunshine law for of us and we should be aware on how to practice our right.”

Riaz Khan Daudzai, Information Commissioner, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa RTI Commission
“There are 2 types of rights. First is ‘Fundamental Right’ which is a baseline that is available by default to everyone just by the existence of a human being with no difference based on religion, caste or creed. If not given then you can also go in the courts to demand them.

Second are the ‘Civil Rights’ which are given to you by the law and you have to acquire these rights like inheritance and others. For such matters you seek help from civil courts.

Similarly RTI is a fundamental right of every citizen and the government is answerable to the public because they are nominated by the public to serve them based on the funds generated by the public in the form of tax money. So the government should be transparent and fair in its expenditures and affairs. Hiding the information from the public is an offense.”

“The commissions are dedicated to serve the public and till now we have successfully resolved hundreds of cases pertaining to complaints against departments not providing information. We help the citizens gather their required information and asks the departments to abide by the law. Furthermore we promote the proactive disclosure of information.”

“Some organizations don’t disclose the information as there are some other limitations of capacity, budget and proper working in those organizations which is a hindrance in itself. When people will start to actively participate only then it will make difference and organizations will realize that they have to provide information and therefore need the required resources for it in terms of budget and human resource.”
Moonus Kaynat Zahra, Project Manager, CPDI

“There are five RTI laws enacted at federal and provincial level in Pakistan. All citizens of Pakistan are empowered under Article 19-A of Constitution of Pakistan, to have access to information held by the government departments. CPDI is making continuous efforts to promote citizen’s right to know by conducting trainings of PIOs and awareness sessions for general public in urban and rural areas of the country. Till date, we have trained more than 700 government officials and conducted more than 500 awareness sessions at the community level. Now it is time for people to use RTI for promoting public accountability and resolving issues of public service delivery. Step forward and take RTI not only as your right, but a duty.”
Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI) is an independent, non-partisan and a not-for-profit civil society organization working on issues of peace and development in Pakistan. It is registered Under Section 42 of the Companies Ordinance, 1984 (XLVII of 1984). It was established in September 2003 by a group of concerned citizens who realized that there was a need to approach the issue of peace and development in a an integrated manner. CPDI is a first initiative of its kind in Pakistan. It seeks to inform and influence public policies and civil society initiatives through research-based advocacy and capacity building in order to promote citizenship, build peace and achieve inclusive and sustainable development. Areas of special sectoral focus include promotion of peace and tolerance, rule of law, transparency and access to information, budget watch, media watch, election watch and legislative watch and development.