

***Strengthening Democracy
Empowering through Promoting a Rights perspective and Right To
information***

*An initiative of
Mahiti Adhikar Pahel
surendranagar, Mehsana , Patan; and
Society for Women's Action and Training Initiatives*



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Topic Index

1. Introduction	2
2. RTI: Setting Up the Stage/Programme Strategy	4
3. Creating People's movement through Building Associations	5
4. Getting ready for the field: training of the team	8
5. Creating RTI aware communities	11
6. Nagarik Sahayata Kendra & Help Line: Strong Support System	16
7. Moving towards Issue Based Approach to RTI	19
8. Advocacy and Networking for effective implementation of the RTI Act	24

ABOUT SWATI

SWATI, Society for Women's Action and Training Initiative has been working since 1994 for the socio economic empowerment of women in Gujarat. In order to build women's leadership at the grassroots and help them gain control over resources in a rights perspective, SWATI has organized women into large scale, block level collectives, who work towards developmental issues of women in particular and communities in general. To increase the outreach of its work, SWATI aligns with other groups and organizations through capacity building and networking for collective action.

An important outcome of this is the initiation of women led forums of Mahila Nyaya Samitis (Women Justice Forums). These quasi-legal platforms work with a gender-just approach to combat violence against women, supporting women to fight for their rights in family and society, and equitable say and ownership of resources particularly the land.

SWATI's presence has been in the Surendranagar district for almost 14 years. As an outcome of its activities, in two blocks Patdi and Dhrangadhra, women's federations known as Mahila Vikas Sanghs (MVS- Women's Development Association), have been formed. MVS are now independent organizations having about 4500 women members.

Since 2005, when Right to Information (RTI) Act came into effect, SWATI recognized the immense potential this act offers, to capacitate the poor and marginalized sections of the community and particularly women to demand their rights and lawful entitlement. In 2006 SWATI initiated its work on promoting RTI in Surendranagar district with the aim of empowering women and building a peoples' movement for eradicating corruption and creating a transparent administration through training federation members, NGO activists and civil society organizations in the use of RTI. This programme named as 'Strengthening democracy: Empowering through Promoting a Rights perspective and Right to Information' yielded demonstrable impact in initial two years in Surendranagar District, leading to its further expansion in two more districts Patan and Mehsana in year 2008. Thus in four years the programme has spread into 3 districts.

RIGHT TO INFORMATION ACT: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

RTI, Right to Information act is being seen as a revolutionary Act. Its objectives are,

- i. To promote transparency and accountability in the working of every public authority and
- ii. To set up a practical regime for giving citizens access to information that is under the control of public authorities.

The Act gives citizen not just liberty to ask for information rather it entitles them with Right to get information from Government, which makes this Act revolutionary. As part of the Act every government department has to appoint a Public Information Officer, who receives the RTI applications and acts on it. PIO has to provide the information sought within 30 days. There are

provisions for further appeal and penalties in case of any delays in providing the information, giving misleading or false information, or denial to accept the application and so on.

Is this Act really a powerful tool or is it all hype?

Well, for SWATI's team the answer lies in the range of experiences they got while working on this act. It is through use of RTI, Taraben of Soladi village asked the PDS shop owner why they are not being given their entitled quota of Sugar or Padmaben, a common rural woman from Patdi block of Gujarat asked the government how PHC (Public Health Centres) of the block has utilized the grants allotted to them. Isn't this power to ask the state 'WHY' in itself an empowering tool for the marginalized section of society?

In the pilot phase of the programme, while trying to understand the Act and directly access information or help others to do so, several issues emerged. These are listed in the adjoining box. From the analysis it was clear that poor and marginalized are so accustomed to being petitioners, that to access information as a right is something they will really have to be educated, equipped and empowered for. This required a strategy that can tackle multiple concerns simultaneously.

DESIGNING THE PATH STEP BY STEP: THE STRATEGY

Team's understanding of the Act itself, peoples' perception towards it, and problems faced while accessing the information generated a more profound vision of what is to be done. Some of the basic principles on which programme foundation and strategy is laid are:

1. The programme should evolve as a people's movement.
2. SWATI's role should be mainly centered around coordination, capacity building, networking and advocacy .
3. The programme should not stop at just creating awareness but should actually enable people to use the act and provide support as needed.
4. SWATI's overall vision of empowering women should be strengthened by this programme.

Based on these, overall strategy for the programme was outlined as below;

1. Networking with local groups, CBOs and other NGOs to form citizen's forums (Associations) at Block and District level;
2. Developing a group of RTI trainers who can further train volunteers at village level;
3. Prepare a cadre of Volunteers including women who can assist the community in using the RTI Act;
4. Create awareness of the Act amongst the community and promote it's use through educational material, campaigns, block level camps, frequent village visits by volunteers etc;
5. Setting up of Nagrik Adhikar Sahayta Kendras (Citizen's Rights Help Desk- NASK)and a telephone helpline to facilitate and support communities in seeking information under RTI;
6. Liasoning and advocacy with government officials for effective implementation of RTI act.

Blocks in people's access to the Act:

1. Lack of information regarding the Act among government officials
2. Lack of information on procedures and formats to be followed under the Act
3. Lack of clarity amongst citizens on what and how to seek information
4. Lack of clarity on how much information can be sought in one application
5. Behavior and attitude of the government officers dissuades people to use RTI. They often demand as to why the person requires this information or ask him/her to take the information informally rather than seeking it through RTI
6. People living below poverty line are to be provided information free. This is often not known to the people and the government departments have charged a fee.

CHAPTER 3: CREATING PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT THROUGH BUILDING CITIZEN'S ASSOCIATIONS

From the beginning it was realized by SWATI that if the RTI act is to really percolate down to the whole cross section of rural community and at the same time spread across the district, then this can be done most effectively by involving local NGOs, CBOs, village level associations, and people representing different strata of community. If it has to become a peoples' movement to build democracy at grassroots, then right from the beginning it requires strategic interventions that would create a broader (beyond SWATI) ownership of the programme.

BUILDING ASSOCIATIONS

To consolidate this vision SWATI initiated formal dialogue with civil society organisations and individuals. For the purpose nine meetings took place in the district Surendranagar, five in Patan and three in Mehsana, involving a total of 413 persons. Community leaders, civic society groups, farmers groups, women's associations, retired government officials, teachers, lawyers and people from village committees, regional CBO-NGO representatives etc remained present at these meetings.



These meetings served to shape a process through which the initial vision of one organization SWATI, became a shared vision of all the participants. Along with orientation to the Act, positive experiences of using RTI by SWATI and others were shared to

motivate the participants. Towards the end of the initial meetings, interested participants, individuals as well as organizations came together to form an association known as **Mahiti Adhikar Pahel,(MAP or Right to information initiative)** at the block and district level. A block level committee of 5-6 interested association members were formed who would actively participate in further planning process at the local level.

ROLE AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE ASSOCIATION (MAP)

Block and District level Associations are the backbone of the programme. Through them actual field level implementation of the programme takes place. Associations take the responsibility for the programs at block level while SWATI plays a catalytic role in terms of , planning, guiding and coordinating .

Some of the crucial roles and functions performed by associations include:

1. Identify and support volunteers in their functioning;
2. Plan and coordinate field activities at block levels;

STRENGTH OF ASSOCIATION

3 District level Associations covering 8 Blocks, Mahiti Adhikar Pahel (MAP) - Surendranagar, Patan, and Mehsana have collectively 225 members including 55 women.

3. Run Nagarik Adhikar Sahayata Kendras (NASK) on weekly basis at local CBO/NGO's office;
4. Coordinate and conduct camps and campaigns to promote RTI;
5. Maintain records of applications being made under RTI and its follow up.

While performing these functions associations have become stronger as a civic group. Participating CBO/NGOs have seen enhanced outreach and stronger community relationships. Now the programme and the associations are in its fourth year, one can clearly see the capacity building that has occurred among the association members themselves. Though there have been many ups and downs, association has remained the main force behind the field level execution and functioning of the programme. The following table indicates the growth in membership of the MAP Surendranagar

Block	year 07-08	Year 08-09	Year 09-10	Out of total members at the end of year 09-10 no of		
				Local groups	NGOs	Individuals
Patdi	13	11	24	05	06	13
Libdi	11	10	21	01	09	11
Halvad	13	11	24	06	04	14
Chuda	10	09	19	06	02	11
Dhrangadhra	10	07	17	07	04	06
TOTAL	57	48	105	25	25	55

Association Member Strength: An analysis for Surendranagar

SOME OF THE MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE ASSOCIATION:

- Association meetings in each block are being held regularly with positive outcomes. This itself is a critical indicator of sustained interest of association members in the programme, more so as members are not being paid to attend the meetings.
- Association members support applicants and each other during the problems and opposition faced while working.
- Many of the association members have become active as resource persons. They also help in developing educational material.
- Association members and volunteers remain present every week at the NASKs
- Association members are now also becoming active in other programmes related to community development and women empowerment.

ASSOCIATION MEMBER OFFERING SPACE & TAKING COMPLETE RESPONSIBILITY TO RUN NASK ON DAILY BASIS

The help desk in Halvad is running from a shop belonging to one of the association members. Himanshubhai runs an STD and photocopying shop in Halvad. When the local coordinating CBO who was also housing NASK shifted its office, issue of running NASK from an easily accessible place came up. Himanshubhai offered his shop premise which is located at a central location. The local members welcomed his offer and since then the help desk runs from his commercial establishment. It has now become a permanent all days of the week process with people dropping in any time Himanshubhai willingly helps.

ASSOCIATION MEMBERS PLAYING ROLE OF AGENTS OF CHANGE

PLOT ALLOTMENT IN ZAINABAD VILLAGE

In Zainabad village 100 Sq.mts plots were allocated by gram panchayat to 12 families. But the registration was not being done. Akbarbhai , an active member of the Patdi association made an RTI application. As a result of it 7 out of 12 families got their plots while matter is under process for remaining 5 families.

PAYMENT IN NREGS

kishore bhai, member of Patdi Block Association, exposed wrong doings in NREGS. In his village the measurement Book (MB) was not being maintained. Information regarding the same was sought from the district authorities through RTI. The matter was brought to the notice of the District Development officer. It was found that the MB was not filled for the entire district. As a RTI application was filed for this, immediate action was taken on the matter. Within 23 days MB was prepared for 7 villages of Patdi block and due payment was made to 49 persons.

MAKING GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABLE

Yogeshbhai, an active member of Halvad Block Association demanded information under RTI from all the Gram Panchayats regarding how much grant has been received and how it is being utilized. He started getting calls pressurizing him to withdraw his application, but he remained firm. Now he has received all the answers in written with the bills, which is being scrutinized to check if there is any corruption involved and if the money has been properly utilized for the purpose it was sanctioned for.

TRAINING OF TRAINERS: EQUIPPING TEAM FOR THE FIELD

In the early stages of programme to prepare a team of RTI trainers who can eventually reach out to prepare large number of volunteer group, Training of RTI-Trainers was conducted. In the first training organized in November 2006, a team 32 RTI trainers (8 women and 24 men) was prepared in Surendranagar. Similarly in 2008 while spreading the programme in Patan and Mehsana district, another team of 42 RTI-Trainers was prepared.

As per the predetermined criteria the participants were all at least tenth class pass and many were graduates. These RTI trainers in turn help conducting volunteers' training at block level. Other than SWATI, leading RTI activist Mr. Harnesh Pandya from Mahiti Adhikar Pahel, Gujarat, Ms. Sonalben from CHRI, Prof. Jagdeep Chhokar, president, Association for Democratic reforms (ADR) etc were also involved in the trainings.

The trainings essentially served following purposes

1. Provided participants detailed information about what, who, and how of the Act. Some of the participants had previous experience of using the Act for their individual needs. Their experiences and questions raised fair amount of fruitful discussions.

*In Four Years SWATI has developed
A cadre of 74 RTI Trainers,
1400+ volunteers,
and 100+ devoted RTI-SV.
This cadre is the base,
on which stands
The RTI Movement!*
2. Positive case studies of the power of RTI from across the nation shared by the resource persons, motivated the participants towards promoting the Act for wider benefits of community.
3. Range of cases presented broadened participants' perspective about type of information that can be sought under the act.
4. Generated clarity regarding how to make precise application, whom to approach and what to do when information is not received or if officer- in-charge denies to accept the application.
5. Discussed about proactive disclosure requirements, type of information to be displayed and benefits of such disclosure for the whole community.
6. Participants were given practical training in preparing the application.

At the end of these two day workshops action plans for promoting RTI in their respective blocks were developed. The group also developed a plan of the training they will conduct at the block level for other association members and volunteers.

CAPACITY BUILDING OF WOMEN

In all the volunteer trainings equal emphasis was laid on involving young women and men as it was felt that compared to men, awareness regarding the act is less among women. To enable women to understand the Act and start using it, two women specific trainings covering 79 participants were held at Patdi and Halvad blocks of Surendranagar district.

These trainings oriented them towards the Act, its importance, how and where it can be used. The workshop discussed the problems identified by the women in their own villages and how to use RTI for the same. It also discussed which type information can be sought as a proactive disclosure and which information would need RTI application. These programmes encouraged women to demand answers in the matters concerning welfare of their own as well as of their families and society.

PREPARING VOLUNTEERS

The programme relies for its implementation on a highly inspired, committed and rigorously trained team of volunteers. In Surendranagar from **400 villages, total 800 volunteers including 473 men and 327 women and from Patan and Mehsana Districts more than 625 volunteers including 341 men and 284 women have been prepared.**

SELECTION AND TRAINING

Association members of the block selected enthusiastic and interested young men and women for volunteers training. Two youth were selected from each village, who were then trained in a 2 day training programme. The training covered topics such as, detail information regarding what and how of RTI, information about rights and entitlements of community, etc. The participants discussed some of the major issues/problems concerning their own villages and were encouraged to make actual applications under the Act regarding the same. These trainings served as an opportunity to choke out the action plan for village level activities.

During the first phase in year 2007, nine such volunteers' trainings were organized in Surendranagar. Similarly during expansion phase 8 such trainings prepared a team of 628 volunteers in Patan and Mehsana Districts. It is indicative of the relevance of the methodology to the issue that all the trainings were organized by MAP, with the support from local CBOs, and previously trained RTI trainers.

Padmaben Sadhu, participated in RTI training organized by SWATI. Since then RTI has become a passion for her.

Being a village health worker by occupation she knew that every PHC (Public Health Centre) is allotted a grant of Rs.10,000, to improve their services. Hardly this grant is being used properly. She filed an RTI application demanding details of how this fund is being utilized by all the PHCs of Patdi block. It came out that out of the 8 PHCs 5 had not used the grant at all while 3 had used it for other purposes. This created accountability and transparency in the administration of PHCs and those who hadn't used the grant initiated process towards it.

Furthermore, out of these 1400 volunteers, a team of **100 RTI – SVs (RTI support volunteers)** have been prepared. This team got further exposure in preparing applications, supporting individuals in doing so, understanding citizen's rights, and various rural development schemes and so on. While all the volunteers support in promoting the Act at community level in different ways, the RTI-SVs are regularly involved in the day to day implementation of the programme at field level and take a lead role. They also run NASKs along with the association members.

ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS

- ✓ Promote RTI through village level awareness activities such as mobile camps and campaigns;
- ✓ Actively participate in organizing block level RTI camps;
- ✓ Support community in preparing RTI applications, gathering necessary documents and forward them to block level Nagarik Sahayata Kendras (NASKs);
- ✓ Distribute Informational material, pamphlets, posters etc in the villages;
- ✓ Regularly visit the villages, conduct group meetings/ create awareness regarding relevant government schemes and inquire if communities are satisfied with the implementation;
- ✓ Through informal talks with people gather information about functioning of the public services, implementation of government schemes and entitlement under different schemes. If there are discrepancy in what is legal provision and what community is getting, in that case volunteers motivate villagers to seek information under RTI.

VOLUNTEERS IN ACTION

Kiranbhai from Kanesara village of Sidhpur taluka made use of RTI to help 2 students of his village receive their scholarships of Rs.5000. the larger impact that followed was that 73 other students received their pending scholarships.

Akbarbhai from Jainabad village of Patdi, taluka Panchayat had sanctioned cycles to 35 children of salt pan workers but despite of repeated reminders the department was not giving the same. He asked for the requisite information under the Act and in 17 days the children were given cycles by the office of labor commissioner.

Once the team got trained, came the actual challenge; going to the field, making people aware of the Act, helping them formulate their concerns and complaints, capacitate them to find solutions, fight against corruption and irregularities in government at all levels.

Print and digital media has been used extensively towards promoting RTI. A series of informative booklets, posters, pamphlets on provisions of key government schemes and services, such as social security schemes, public distribution system, revenue department related information with particular reference to land records, NREGS, and how to use RTI has been developed and widely distributed during camps and otherwise. As an innovative promotional strategy, RTI messages carrying kites were distributed during ‘Uttrayan’ - the kite flying festival. Local cable television advertising has also been used.

Along with this material Block level camps, Awareness Campaign and Mobile camps remained three major tools to publicize the RTI act among community.

BLOCK LEVEL CAMPS

These camps were meant to provide publicity to the Act, and provide need based support to villagers in actually preparing applications. Most of the camps were of 3-4 days, organized at Block Level. Coordinating agency for the block served as convener for the camp. RTI-SVs were actively involved in the process.

OUTREACH THROUGH EDUCATIONAL MATERIAL	
Type of Material	Quantity
Posters of RTI	25,000
Booklet of NREGS	10,000
Booklet Provisions of RTI	30,000
NSK brochures	17,000
Helpline stickers	3,000
Banners and Handouts	2,000
Posters about Aanganwadi Scheme	500
Handouts for different schemes	1,500
Campaign brochures/posters	1,500
RTI message carrying kites	10,000
RTI application form samples	20,000
TOTAL REACH:	1,20,500



Camps were combination of informative lectures, presentations, exhibition, one to one counseling for the issues, guidance regarding preparing applications etc. RTI-SV distributed informative handouts regarding various schemes, RTI Act, information regarding NASK and help lines. These camps also revealed the issues concerning villages in the respective blocks. A sample analysis of applications received during the camps is shown below.

Example of RTI applications made during two of the RTI-CAMPS

Block	Total applications	men	Women	Issues
Halvad	13	4	9	Ration card(2) Water works department (5) Education department (1) Accessing govt. subsidy, aid or schemes (5) Insurance (1) Bank loan (1)
Patdi-Dasada	19	14	5	Health dept(5) Schemes and subsidy (8) Water shed works (2) Housing, education , land, electricity (4)

Camps helped in networking and rapport building with government officials, as in majority of the camps inauguration was done by TDO or Community leaders and many government officials, Sarpanch, Talati, retired officers, teachers etc visited the camps. Moreover many village heads, Community leaders, representatives from local associations etc visited the camps. The table 1 & 2 at the end of the chapter shows number of people who visited camps and a profile of visitors.



Volunteers helping visitors make RTI applications at Camp

While conducting the camps it was felt that organizing such camps at village level can enhance participation of people and specifically from women and marginalized. Based on this consideration village level awareness campaign was initiated.

VILLAGE LEVEL AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

Mahiti Adhikar Pahel took up village level awareness campaign in each district to create awareness on RTI and support the citizens in addressing their grievances and problems related to public resources and entitlements. The campaign was led by seven organizations (NGOs and civil society groups) and over 70 trained RTI support volunteers (women and men) who covered 225 villages in six blocks; Halvad, Patdi, Dhrangadhra, Limadi, Lakhtar and Chuda of Surendranagar during 1st to 20th of March 2008. In Mehsana and Patan 53 volunteers have been involved in carrying out awareness campaign covering total 279 villages and identifying 515 issues.

For each Block a group of ten to twelve active volunteers divided into small teams of 3-4 volunteers was prepared. Each team had at least 1 woman volunteer. Lakhtar block had an all women team.

In a span of 20 days the teams covered 225 villages creating awareness and supporting people to use the RTI. The response to the campaign was heartening. In Surendranagar over 8452 persons visited NASKs set up by the volunteers in the villages. 842 problems related to individual or public money, development works etc. came up. While applications were made in the villages, the NASK at the block office of the organization scrutinized and helped in finalizing the applications.

RTI awareness campaign in Surendranagar
A roller coaster ride
20 Days, 70 volunteers
covering 225 villages
Result: 8452 visitors and
842 applications

As a follow up of campaign at Surendranagar, a feedback meeting to share experiences and present issues faced by citizens in exercising RTI was organized in presence of State Information Commissioner Shri R.N Das . He was presented with a memorandum of demands listing action to be taken and reforms required, to facilitate the process of making application and accessing the information. Mr. Das responded positively to the suggestions and stayed on for a small group meeting with the NGOs to discuss long term measures on RTI.

ROUND THE YEAR MOBILE CAMPS:



One more approach to publicize the Act and capacitate communities in using RTI Act, has been of conducting mobile camps. During the period of July 08 through Sep 09, it was decided to conduct one day mobile camps at village level on a round the year basis. Target was to conduct at least 500 such camps reaching to as many villages .

Trained teams of 7 to 10 RTI –SVs from 5 blocks totaling to 45 RTI-SVs, were selected as a resource pool while a team of other volunteers supported them for conducting one day mobile camps at village level on round the year basis. Prior to the camp, volunteers visited the villages to publicize the camp date and place. They held meetings at the public places with SHG group members, Panchayat Members, school teachers etc, to create awareness regarding using RTI in addressing their grievances. During the camps volunteers displayed IC material containing information on using RTI like addresses of government department, key person, RTI format, necessary documents etc. and helped villagers in preparing applications relating to local issues.

Villages covered in each block through mobile camps organized during July08 to Sep 09

No.	Blocks	No. of Camps	No. of volunteers associated
		Jul'08 to Sep'09	Jul'08 to Sep'09
	Chuda	70	29
	Limdi	91	23
	Dhrangdhra	114	29
	Patdi	162	35
	Halvad	88	29
	Total	525	145

The camps have been beneficial in motivating community to understand the RTI act and use it efficiently for their own issues/problems. In the five blocks, minimum 70 mobile camps have been held per block, the highest being Patdi with 162 camps. Over the period of 15 months 23 to 30 volunteers per block remained active in conducting the campaigns.

Table -1 : Visitor Profile of Block level Camps at Surendranagar

No	Name of the block	No of villages covered	no of visitors (women)	no of visitors (men)	Visitors' Profile	NO of RTI-SV
1	Limdbdi	35	71	139	NGOs (6), Sarpanchs and Ex MLAS (6), Talatis (4), lawyers(3)	7
2	Halvad	30	65	116	NGOs (9), Sarpanchs (3), government officers and Talatis (11), school principals and teachers(3)	16
3	Patdi-Dasada	41	78	389	NGOs (2), sarpanchs and Ex MLAS (2), Doctors (2) agri. co-op members(3)	22
4	Chuda	29	19	347	NGOs (3), Sarpanchs and the Panchayat members (13), Talatis (2),	15
5	Lakhtar*	15	17	60	Doctors (2) , School principal (1), Talatis (2)	8
6	Wadhwan	22	27	186	Government officials, Talatis , local NGOs, journalists	11
8	Dhrangadhra	25	32	386	Government officials(5), Talatis(2) , local NGOs(3), journalists(1), lawyers (1)	9
9	Chotila	22	31	365	NGOs(2), Doctors (1), Teachers (2)	7
	TOTAL	224	340	2008		95

Table -2 : Details of Block level Camps at Patan and Mehsana

No.	Block and	No. of villages covered	No. of people visited	Applications under RTI	no of RTI –SV
1	Varahi	25	303	7	3
2	Santalpur	11	213	3	4
3	Siddhpur	21	428	12	12
4	Patan	29	346	9	4
7	Visnagar	52	315	8	4
8	Unjha	35	214	6	4
9	Mahesana	68	442	11	4
10	Vadnagar	36	184	6	3
11	Satlasna	30	189	7	3
12	Kadi	49	263	5	3
13	Kheralu	27	378	6	5
	TOTAL	383	3275	80	49

CHAPTER – 6

NAGARIK ADHIKAR SAHAYATA KENDRA & PHONE HELP LINE

Weekly Help Desk or Nagarik Sahayata Kendra (NASK) and mobile phone help line are two novel tools that provide communities needed practical guidance to prepare their applications. Both these creates a strong support system that facilitate use of RTI by communities.

PHONE HELP LINE:

A mobile phone helpline has been initiated and the phone number publicized through the print and audiovisual media. Though slow in the initial months, an average of four to five calls seeking information and / or problem solving support were received by the help line. At present on an average daily 6-8 phone calls are received on the help line. A register is maintained and the details of the case and the advice given are recorded. Each help call is followed up for further support and its outcome.

Hirabhai is a farmer from village Navalgadh of Dhrangadhra. Hirabhai was trying to get a bank loan which was being denied without giving any justification. Through SWATI's handout, he came to know about the ACT and help line Numbers. He called up Helpline to get more information about the same. He filed an RTI seeing justification for denial of his loan. After filing the application within 10 days loan got sanctioned.

NAGARIK ADHIKAR SAHAYATA KENDRA (NASK)

Setting up of NASKs has been visualized as an ongoing support to further strengthen the use of RTI by women and general community. SWATI's experience in use of RTI act is that often people need some guidance to collect relevant proofs and information required to be attached to an RTI

<u>District Surendrangar (2006-2010)</u>		
Organization housing the NASK	Block	No. of visitors
Jan Sewa Karol	Chuda	1026
Gram Udyog Sewa Trust	Limdi	518
Mahila Vikas Sangh	Dhrangadhra	1533
Mahila Vilkas Sangh	Patdi	1898
Shirdi Sanstha	Halvad	1569
TOTAL		6554
<u>PATAN –MEHSANA (2009-10)</u>		
Jan Jagruti Sakhi Vikas Sangh	Varahi	228
Sadbhagya Trust	Sidhpur	292
Taluka Panchayat Meeting Hall	Visnagar	248
TOTAL		768

application. NASKs assist the villagers in making applications with precision in formulating questions, following prescribed format and attaching proper documents. Thus all the complaints or applications drafted during the village meetings or camps are finalized at NASK. Here applications are also scrutinized for their genuinity. NASKs also entertain fresh queries related to RTI.

Once application is completed the applicant is guided on where and whom to submit the application. One copy of application is kept at NASK as record. This helps in further follow up. These records are periodically analyzed for the purpose of monitoring, follow-up and advocacy.

Initially started in two blocks Dhrangadhra and Patdi, currently NASKs are functional on a weekly basis in five blocks of Surendranagar and in three blocks of Patan and Mehsana districts. NASKs are held at women's federation offices in Patdi and Dhrangadhra blocks and at association members' identified offices in rest of the blocks. Thus in all the blocks local federation or CBOs have taken up the task of running NASKs with the help from trained volunteers. On average NASKs cater about 150 visitors and helps in preparing about 27 RTI applications monthly.

Other than being RTI support system, NASKs are also becoming an information sharing space, as it handles several different queries related to government schemes, form availability, form filling, ration card etc. Participation of women and women groups is increasing in NASKs.

The NASKs have been functioning now since three years and are demonstrating the potential to be a long term RTI support platform sustained by the local organizations. In the period from July 08 to March 2010 a total of 674 persons visited NASK in Mehsana, Patan and 464 applications were made of which 187 got satisfactory response. 112 applicants went into appeal of which 68 have gone into second appeal. For the remaining applications in some cases either applications have been withdrawn or further follow up was not done. A profile of issues that have come to NASKs is shown in adjoining box

Some of the observations related to processing applications are as below

- Applications of individual cases are resolved soon, such as in cases where the villager has used RTI to know why the bank has not sanctioned the loan or less quantity given on the ration card, So in 131 cases as there is no direct involvement of the local administration, the cases are resolved speedily.
- Cases that have gone for the first appeal mainly are the ones in which there is direct involvement of the local administration, such as construction

Profile of issues coming to NASKs

Health dept:

- Demand for wages to the mid-wives
- Irregular visits of the ANMs
- Sanitation related issues
- Mal-practices in appointing PHC staff member

Revenue dept.:

- Demands for subsidy to the farmers regarding credits
- Demand for correcting the mis-handled land records
- Compensation for land acquisition under Narmada project

Supply dept.:

- Malpractices in MDM recruitment
- Non-issuance of the ration card in the said time limit
- Less quantity of ration given to the consumers by PDS shop owners than actual provision under the ration related schemes for APL/BPL/Antyoday families

Education dept.:

- PF related problems of teachers
- Irregularity of teachers in schools
- Recruitment of vidya sahayaks

Panchayat:

- use of in-appropriate materials in public constructions
- Irregularity of gram sevak & talati
- Issues of salary to the drinking water valve operators
- Wrong bills submitted under watershed project by the sarpanch-talati-TDO
- Non-functioning of bio-gas plant and street light
- release of third installment under housing scheme to the beneficiary
- Mal practices in road construction in the village.

Other:

- Issues related to police station, bank & PGVCL.
- Irregular payments of wages under NREGs

of the Gram Panchayat office, mishandling of the land records, fraud in underground drainage construction, etc.

- In hearings of the first appeal, the local administration some time plays role which is extremely time taking, such as give wrong information, bargains time from the applicant, don't allow the NGO worker to remain present during the hearing, remain absent and thereby delays hearing date, etc. That's why the first appeal goes into second appeal level. Even in second appeal due to aggregated applications and lack of RTI commissioner's time, the orders are given late.
- Public interest appeals mainly have direct involvement of local administration and less amount of personal benefit involved, for example check-dam construction or grant utilization for village school. In such cases local administration also creates hurdles as there is a possibility that someone's undue personal interests or corruption is revealed. Due to such delays and pressures some time the applicants in such scenario withdraws the application or doesn't do proper follow up.
- Irrespective of all hurdles and challenges NASKs have indeed played a very important role in the success of this programme. Some of the key impacts of NASKs include:
 - Increased awareness amongst village community on the RTI act and its use for seeking information.
 - Increase in the number of persons coming to NASKs for making application under RTI rather than merely coming to seek information on government schemes.
 - Participation of the RTI-SVs and association members in the RTI hearings along with the applicants has helped in identification loopholes in execution of the act on government part, thereby take steps to speed up the process.
 - Increased linkages of the association members and NASKs in following up the complaints, in follow up visits with the complainants to the local admin., etc.

NASK playing instrumental role in effective use of RTI Act

NASK supporting women's group to get NREGS payments

In Bubvana village of Patdi, work was done under NREGA for 6 weeks but 18 people had not received their payment. Despite repeated requests, there was no response. NASK-Patdi helped the women's group members to draft their application complaining about non-payment. Upon this TDO summon the master clerk overseeing NREGA work and rebuked him for not making payments. The very next day master clerk visited the village and made the due payments.

Retired Teachers gets his due payment

Danabhai, a retired teacher at Chuda village was eligible for encashment of leaves that he did not use. With the assistance of NASK, he applied first to the Taluka Panchayat but as the Taluka panchayat could not give answer within 30 days of RTI application, he went into first appeal. After 10 days, the DDO called for hearing and ordered his due payment to be released within 15 days. This is how, Danabhai got his due amount of Rs. 3,05,000/-.

NASKs, a low cost voluntary initiative, have become important hubs for addressing citizen's queries. Though there are challenges such as need for a more structured follow up system or designing innovative approaches that can sustain peoples' faith and enthusiasm to fight till they get honest reply. In a nutshell NASKs have proved to be a critical factor to empower citizens to use this Act and exercise their rights.

During first two years of its inception, SWATI and MAP-Surendranagar reached into more than 50% of the villages of the district with demonstrable impact. A detail analysis of this journey gave new directions to the programme. It raised several key concerns and needs such as:

- ✓ There are individual complaints regarding various schemes, but there is a need to bring them together under one umbrella, so as to give these complaints an edge, that can penetrate system, cut the chain of malpractices or irregularities prevalent in it. The individual complaints should actually be converted to a public concern.
- ✓ There is need to create more awareness regarding the rights and entitlements, as many times information regarding what they are entitled for never reaches the poor and marginalized and hence there is no question of raising a WHY?
- ✓ There is need to concentrate the efforts in issues and concerns which are of utmost important to the community, and change there in can actually create a positive ripple effect. For example regularizing the services of a PDS shop, running of an Anganwadi (Government Run Pre-nursery programme) or regularizing work and payment under NREGS can actually affect the whole community.
- ✓ There is need for stronger efforts to make government administration accountable to the people, marginalized in particular.

With these concerns, and understanding of the major issues that surfaced in RTI applications made through NASKs it was decided to concentrate efforts in rights based issues such as:

1. Right to food : Food security and irregularities under PDS
2. Child rights and right to food for children under ICDS
3. land rights and inheritance
4. Right to work and NREGS

First step of moving towards issue based campaign was to capacitate volunteers to understand these issues, and government provisions in detail. Initially based on the importance, issues related to NREGS and Food security were selected for further training in Patan and Surendranagar District. Forty six volunteers from five blocks – Halvad, Patdi, Dhrangadhra, Chuda and Limdi participated in two day training.

The training provided hands on experience of using RTI for issues related to implementation of NREGS and the Public distribution system. On the first day the focus was on understanding of the NREGS and Food security Act and the rights of the citizens under these acts. The second day was devoted to planning a campaign around these two issues and making of applications.

ISSUE BASED CAMPAIGN

The 46 volunteers trained during the issue based training took lead in conducting a campaign in 25 villages of the 5 programme blocks of Surendranagar during 2008 while in year 2010 in Patan and Mehsana Districts 16 volunteers took the campaigns to 35 villages in Varahi, Siddhpur, Kheralu and Visnagar talukas. The campaign aimed to stream line the functioning of NREGS and to implement the proactive disclosure at PDS shops in villages. During the campaign volunteers visited the village, held ward/ community wise meetings and held discussions on implementation and functioning of the NREGS and the norms for proactive disclosure at the fair price shop (PDS). Some of the examples of outcomes are listed below.

- ✓ In Patdi block proactive disclosure was implemented in three villages of Aechhwada, Metasar and Valewada. In two villages – Nana Goraiyya and Waghada the women's groups got active in demanding for works and payment under NREGS.



- ✓ In Dhrangadhra block three villages – Kankavati, Rajpar, Nimaknagar proactive disclosure at fair price shop was implemented or updated. In two villages NREGS work was demanded in writing. In one case information was sought on payment anomalies.

- ✓ In Chuda block in Mojidal village 28 persons received their payment under NREGS, after an RTI application was made to the block Panchayat office.

Apart from these issues related to other government schemes, irregularities by government officials, job card under NREGS not issued etc came out during the campaign and were directed to the NASK in the respective block.

PREPARING FOR JANSUNVAI (PUBLIC HEARING)

To strengthen the issue based campaign and create a mass movement regarding these issues, Public Hearings or Jansunvais were planned at each block. To prepare villagers for Jansunvai an extensive campaign was planned. Along with the association members taking major responsibility of holding the public hearing, the entire planning was done by the associations with support from SWATI. It was planned to take up above mentioned 4 major issues to the villages in phases below;

1. Raising awareness on the schemes through public meetings in villages and dissemination of informative material. It was decided that in every village, group meetings should be conducted in at least 4 hamlets.
2. Identify implementation gaps and document written complaints regarding the same, through meetings with village community, site visits and discussions with concerned officials where ever feasible.

3. Planning for the hearing such as confirming dates with local administration, follow up with villagers, publicize the dates and inviting guests such as other NGOs, activists, concerned individuals, journalist and media.

As a result of **this whole process total 789 complaints were received from the district, out of which 538 were on PDS (Public Distribution System), 132 complaints were on ICDS (integrated Child Development Scheme), 92 were on NREGS (National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) and 27 complaints were on issues related to land inheritance.** To avoid misleading complaints, volunteers took written assurance from complainants that complaints are true, and they would come forward at Public Hearing to represent their complaints.

Prior to Public Hearing copies of all these complaints were collected and analyzed to prepare a summary to be submitted to the government official along with the actual complaints. A few examples of the complaints received are shown in the box.

In the first stage public hearing was planned at Block level and then at District level. Public Information Officers were invited at the public hearings.

EXAMPLES OF COMPLAINTS RECEIVED

- In Patdi Block 65 BPL card owners complained about the shop keeper for giving them less quantity of the commodity compared to the actual provision.
- From Chuda block 14 complaints were received regarding moving name of card owner from BPL to APL.
- One public interest complaint from Chuda was regarding 8 Anganwadis not having adequate equipments/toys for the children to play with.
- In Patdi block regarding NREGS, 11 complaints were about work being done by JCB instead of manual labor to provide employment, and no payments being made from past 9 months though work has been accomplished in 2 villages

Summary of block wise public hearing

Particular	Chuda	Limdi	Patdi	Dhrangadhra	Halvad
Date	11/6/09	12/6/09	16/6/09	18/6/09	21/7/09
No. of participants	178	50	315	274	45
No. of complaints received	344	56	217	172	28
No. of people presenting their complaints	13	8	10	11	07
Presence of the govt. officials	-	Mamlatdar Deputy Mamlatdar- Supply Programme Officer – ICDS	Mamlatdar Deputy Mamlatdar- Supply Chief officer- corporation	Deputy Mamlatdar Ass. Programme. Officer- NREGS	Mamlatdar Deputy Mamlatdar Circle officer, Chairman- Social justice committee

OUTCOMES OF THE PUBLIC HEARINGS

The initial response to the complaints submitted during the public hearing was slow and in some instances even negative where complainants were made to withdraw complaints or negate what they have previously said. This was in a way not so unexpected, as the team was aware that with public hearings they are not just questioning a small shop owner or a single officer, it is the whole system and the corruption prevalent at different levels which is being exposed and questioned. So the team didn't leave the battle. Village volunteers based on the complaints received, put collective RTI on the issues, and presented it to the district level. This led to further responses from authorities. A summary of further follow up in different issues is summarized below.

PDS:

- Presentation of all the data and narrative reports to the central monitoring committee – Wadhwa Commission and 3 case women presented their cases.
- Follow up meetings with the Mamlatdars of all the four blocks held by the association members and visits made to the villages from where complaints were received. As an effect, the Mamlatdar issued written positive responses by ordering to give ration to the beneficiaries on regular bases in 7 villages, and assurance to take positive steps in other complaints as well.
- Written letter from the district supply officer to the association and SWATI organization members to be part of the district monitoring committee and attend the monthly meetings.
- As a follow up strategy, an overall letter consisting of all the PDS related complaints from 4 blocks is diverted to the district supply officer.

Land inheritance:

- Out of 7 RTI applications related to land inheritance including issues like fake documents and wrong names of the land owners, long pending 4 complaints got resolved and remaining 3 are under process.

NREGS:

- A meeting with the DRDA director was held to expose corruption in NREGS implementation and to seek permission for social audit in 5 blocks of Surendranagar, which was out rightly sanctioned. The director also suggested to share the report of social audit.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT:

In the Ghanshyamgadh village of Dhrangadhra block, under NREGS, authorities had planned to repair the road. Vaniben from the same village, who is also an active RTI volunteer, was aware that under NREGS the work should be decided after consulting village community. She held meetings with women's group and other village community groups to discuss needs of the village. The community felt that the construction of a village pond should be done under NREGS. The group demanded to stop the ongoing work and pressurize the authorities to start construction of village pond under NREGS, which was accepted after a long struggle. Women took lead in monitoring the work, regularity of presence of labors and payments.

- The Mahiti Adhikar Pahel- Surendranagar took the initiative to ensure that the NREGS was implemented in villages where the migration due to unemployment is high. Village level meetings regarding the process of demanding for NREGS, role of Gram Panchayat etc were held. In villages where people wanted the scheme, an intensive process of giving memorandums to the block development officer was followed.
- As an immediate impact of this, the process of form filling and giving of job cards was initiated in almost all villages. It is also noteworthy that in Limdi block three Sarpanchs joined the representation. In Patdi the memorandum from 11 villages was presented by an all women representation of 54 women. The volunteers and the association members supported the village community in filling up the registration forms, getting job cards etc.

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE PUBLIC HEARING:

- Increased awareness on the issue amongst the villagers;
- Trust building on the associations and SWATI by the villagers;
- More no of villagers visiting NASKs and local administration;
- Increased cohesive feeling amongst the block level NGOs and CBOs to collectively work towards a common developmental agenda;
- In four villages of Dhrangadhra and Patdi blocks, local women's federation was involved to coordinate initiation of NREGS work during the monsoon season;



Public Hearing on Issues of NREGS and Food Security

SUCCESS STORIES FROM THE CAMPAIGN

- In 2 villages of Chuda block ration and kerosene quantity allotment under BPL/APL/Antyodaya card has been regularized.
- In Ghodi village of Dhrangadhra taluka, 17 people received wages which were pending for 3 weeks and in Khambhda village, wages were pending for 5 weeks which were paid.
- In mid day meal scheme, children used to bring their utensils from home, which are now given from the center itself.
- In Chokdi village, the works of road cleaning and pond were completed and payments were immediately made.
- During campaign in Ghanshyamgadh village of Dhrangadhra taluka, 23 women of the women's group together went to the ration shop and questioned the shop owner about why was the information about stock not mentioned on the board and why was he not giving ration regularly? As a result of this collective action, information was displayed on the board in 3 days time and ration is now being given regularly and on time to all the women.

Throughout the programme, Liaisoning with government officials and other possible users of the Act remained an integral part. SWATI always laid emphasis on involving system so as to get better results. Public Hearing was one of the most striking examples of how advocacy efforts were merged with community awareness and mobilization activities.

Some other efforts in this direction are mentioned below.

PROACTIVE DISCLOSURE AT GOVERNMENT FAIR PRICE SHOPS UNDER PDS

Surendranagar Mahiti Adhikar Pahel – has had two meetings with the commissioner on the issue of proactive disclosure. SWATI is also linked to the process of Anna Suraksha Abhiyan (food security campaign) and is an active contributor in demanding quantity and quality compliance from the state government. MAP -Surendranagar will continue its focus on proactive disclosure at the fair price shops by using methods of survey, Jansunwais, press conference and collective demand at the highest levels in the state.

LINKAGES WITH GOVERNMENT ON RTI ACT

Learning about the interventions on RTI campaign by SWATI, the director of SPIPA proposed a collaboration to promote awareness on the act, especially in Mehsana & Patan districts. A planning meeting was held with the district collectors, DDOs and vice director of SPIPA along with SWATI for campaign design, education material generation and the overall planning. 4 volunteers from blocks and a coordinator from SWATI were associated with 'On the Wheel RTI campaign' held for 7 days.



Rallies were brought out, block level camps and seminars with local government were held.

TRAINING OF GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

In Gujarat, to support and educate the village community in areas of health, education, civic amenities one community helper known as Gram Mitras (Friends of Village) is appointed in every village. AKPBS one of the active local CBO at Mehsana, took the initiative to organize training in RTI for the Gram Mitras in Nov, 2008.

SWATI Also organized district and block level orientation meeting for Government officials. 158 officials were present at the programme. Dr Ganatra, An RTI expert and consultant at SPIPA, DDO,

Chair person of District Panchayat, and District health officials also attended the meeting. Block level officials also participated in the programme.

Due to the above processes, there has been help and support in working with government officials and after trainings with them at taluka and districts levels, there has been decrease in the problems faced by people in using their right to information and disposal of application has become speedier.

Taluka and District Level Workshops

Sr no	Date	Number of Participants	Officials	Resource Persons
1	18/03/10	165	District Panchayat Head, District Development Officer □ District Health Officer- Surendranagar district	Dr. Ganatra (SPIPA) Falguniben Jadeja (SWATI)
2	23/03/10	69	Mamlatdar, Dhrangadhra Taluka Development Officer PSI- Dhrangadhra □	Falguniben Jadeja (SWATI)
3	27/03/10	58	Mamlatdar, Halvad Taluka Development Officer	Rajnibhai Kotak, Right to Information Initiative- Surendranagar Association
4	23/06/10	55	Municipal Chairman, Surendranagar Chief Officer, Surendranagar	Mahendrabhai Parmar and Rajubhai Parmar (SWATI representatives)

BEING PART OF NATIONAL LEVEL CAMPAIGN

SWATI is a member of the expert group set up by Government to oversee the effective implementation of the act. Mahiti Adhikar Pahel –Surendranagar is linked to state and national campaigns. An active coordination has been developed with the state information Commission, to whom several recommendations have been made by the MAP-S members. In addition SWATI was invited to make a presentation of its work at National Level RTI gathering and Conference (Sammellan) organized at Byawar –Rajasthan by Kissan Mazdoor Shakti Sangathan.

CONCLUSION:

With extensive use of the act by facilitating interventions in terms of camps, helpline, NASK, etc. volunteers, federations and association members have become conversant in using RTI at the same time, loop holes in execution of different government schemes like housing, regularizing land, Public distribution system, NREGS, etc. have been identified and some of which got resolved too.

With taking up large scale training program as one of important component of this programme, skills of village volunteers, Associations and women federation members as RTI users and trainers have developed a lot. Also skills of the NGO staff as RTI trainer has enhanced. Through this programme, relations with govt. functionaries have improved.

This programme, carried out in 18 blocks of 3 district showed that the capacity building measures of the existing village level structures promoted by NGOs prove beneficial in promoting RTIs and positively using it for public-private cause. But in the areas where such Village Level Institutes are not formed or NGO's presence is not there, people remain in isolation. So there is a need to scale up such interventions.

<i>People involved in various programmes</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Volunteers</i>	<i>741</i>	<i>682</i>	<i>1423</i>
<i>Block Level Camps</i>	<i>9680</i>	<i>5341</i>	<i>15021</i>
<i>Village Level Awareness Campaign-</i>			
<i>Seminar with Educational Institute-</i>	<i>790</i>	<i>886</i>	<i>1676</i>
<i>Public Hearing</i>	<i>829</i>	<i>1154</i>	<i>1983</i>
<i>NSK</i>	<i>4699</i>	<i>2534</i>	<i>7333</i>
<i>Help line</i>	<i>5767</i>	<i>2567</i>	<i>8334</i>
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>27301</i>	<i>15818</i>	<i>43119</i>

Figures for the period Aug-06 to oct-10

Finally this journey of 4 years has proved that, when the power vested by democracy in citizens is exercised with responsibility, it truly can empower the people to work towards common good.

This is what strengthening Grass root Democracy is all about!

RTI,
A PROMISE
TO BRING NEW DAWN
OF DEMOCRACY, JUSTICE AND EQUITY!
WILL IT REALLY END
THE ROTTEN BEUROCRACY ?
WILL IT GIVE VOICE TO MILLIONS
WHOES RIGHTS
HAVE BEEN CRUSHED BY
CURRUPTION OR AGES OF SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION?
WILL IT EMPOWER
THE PEOPLE – THE CITIZENS OF THE LARGEST DEMOCRACY OF WORLD,
TO DEMAND THEIR RIGHTS
TO MAKE GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABLE
TO BRING THE CHANGE THAT WE ALL SEEK....
IT'S A BEGINNING,
THAT'S SO ENCOURAGING...
LET'S COME TOGETHER FOR A BETTER TOMMORROW!

ABOUT SWATI

SWATI- Society for Women's Action and Training Initiatives - is a non-profit organisation that works for the socio-economic empowerment of women in Gujarat.

In order to build women's leadership at the grassroots and help them gain control over resources in a rights perspective, SWATI has organised women into large-scale, block-level collectives. These work on developmental issues of women and communities. An important outcome of this is the initiation of Mahila Nyaya Samitis (Women Justice Forums). These quasi-legal platforms work with a gender-just approach to combat violence against women. SWATI has been actively involved in PWDVA, 2005 at the Gujarat state and the national levels, initially in the formulation of rules and regulations and now in effective implementation.

SWATI took up in 2006 the implementation of the Act through building a people's movement for eradicating corruption and creating a transparent administration.

RIGHT TO INFORMATION AND OUR WORK SO FAR:

The RTI led initiative by SWATI is today mapped out in three districts with over 1400 trained volunteers and 250 association members. The association and the volunteers have spear headed the movement which began with RTI and today encompasses issues of Food security, NREGS, Health and Education to name a few. While we have no way of proving but perhaps it is no coincidence that Surendranagar, Mehsana and Patan districts are amongst the top 5 users of RTI in Gujarat .

SWATI's other key areas of focus/involvement include

- promotion of thrift and credit and enterprise development among women;
- eliciting male involvement in combating violence against women;
- reproductive health concerns of women;
- action research and studies in the areas of women's health, violence against women; and
- advocacy on issues of women's right to land and property.

To increase the outreach of its work, SWATI aligns with other groups and organisations through capacity building and networking at national and international levels for collective action in the areas of violence against women, right to information and advocacy for reproductive health concerns of women.

