

THE INTERNATIONAL

" RIGHT TO KNOW "

One of the most refreshing, and newest, developments on the international scene is the emergence of a global movement toward the "right to know." This trend has great import for enhancing the transparency and accountability efforts of public, private, and international organizations (such as the UN). According to an article by Thomas Blanton in 2002:

"During the last decade, 26 countries have enacted new legislation giving their citizens access to government information. Why? Because the concept of freedom of information is evolving from a moral indictment of secrecy to a tool for market regulation, more efficient government, and economic and technological growth. ...

Making good use of both moral and efficiency claims, the international freedom of information movement stands on the verge of changing the definition of democratic governance. The movement is creating a new norm, a new expectation, and a new threshold requirement for any government to be considered a democracy. ...

Perhaps the ultimate challenge for the freedom-of-information movement will be the need for governments and citizens alike to adapt to a new cultural and psychological climate. ... in the words of the Bulgarian activist Gergana Jouleva, "Democracy is not an easy task neither for the authorities nor for the citizens."

Thomas Blanton, "The world's right to know," *Foreign Policy*, **July-August 2002**, pp. 50-58 [lead-in, pp. 56-58].

[Note: the article contains an excellent resource guide on sources and studies dealing with this issue]

In a follow-up article a year later, Blanton noted that Armenia had become the 51st country to guarantee its citizens the right to know what their government is up to. He noted further that Armenia's action is part of:

"the worldwide movement that took off in the 1990s and just this year also brought in the world's second most populous country, India, and one of China's largest cities, Guangzhou.

The new openness laws vary tremendously, face huge implementation problems, and often receive only lip service from bureaucrats. But the trend is producing much more government accountability and often dramatic headlines. ...

Ironically, ... this extraordinary progress [occurs] at the very time that the United States is backing away from its previous leadership in open government. ...

... While the U.S. Freedom of Information Act continues its status as the most-used in the world (over two million requests per year at a cost of about a dollar per citizen), delays and backlogs are mounting as top officials throw sand in the gears.

The administration's reflexive secrecy will be self-defeating. ... The right to know

fighters terrorism, corruption, and repression. The world is embracing, while Washington willfully forgets, the familiar finding by Justice Louis Brandeis: "sunlight is the best disinfectant."

Thomas Blanton, "The right to know is gaining around the world," International Herald Tribune, **October 11, 2003**.

[Note: Mr. Blanton is also the managing editor of www.freedominfo.org, a web network of international access advocates]

The most recent update to this website, posted on May 12 2004, shows further progress. The full report, plus a map on worldwide access, and news stories, reports, case studies, and analysis are also available. The report states that:

"A new era of government transparency has arrived. It is now widely recognized that the culture of secrecy that has been the modus operandi of governments for centuries is no longer feasible in a global age of information. ...

Over fifty countries have adopted comprehensive laws to facilitate access and over thirty more are in the process. The laws are broadly similar, allowing for a general right by citizens, residents and often anyone else to demand information from government bodies. ...

However, there is much work to be done ... Many of the laws are not adequate and promote access in name only. In some countries the laws lie dormant ... In others, the exemptions [for critical information and appeals processes and oversight] are abused by governments. Older laws need updating to reflect developments in society and technology. International organizations have taken over the activities of national government but have not subjected themselves to the same rules.

Access to information ebbs and flows in any country but the transformation has begun and it is no longer possible to tell citizens that they have no right to know."

"The Freedominfo.org global survey: Freedom of information and access to government record laws around the world", by David Banisar, May 2004, found at www.freedominfo.org. [emphasis added]

An excellent paper in a 2002 OECD survey of public sector transparency and accountability further underscores the importance of this trend:

"Public scrutiny of state affairs and access to information are key phases in the current debate on the development of democracy ... The two concepts are interdependent, since one cannot play its part under the rule of law without the other. There can be no public scrutiny without access to information. ...

... It is even possible to conclude ... that the level of democracy attained by a country should now be measured in terms of the volume and quality of the information in circulation. ...

... it should now be clear that it is not possible to fight corruption in the absence of a culture of transparency. Building such a culture can begin with a legislative commitment to the public that breaks with the many years of concealment and the persecution of those who take an interest in public affairs. ...

Legislation of this type must overcome the huge temptation to control access to information as a means of maintaining the conditions under which an authoritarian state can achieve its objectives. It must also overcome a culture of blatant isolation, behind which administrations have long sheltered in an effort to avoid 'undesirable' interference in their affairs."

Alfredo Chirino Sánchez, "The right of access to information and public

scrutiny: Transparency as a democratic control instrument," in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Public sector transparency and accountability: Making it happen, OECD, Paris, **2002**, pp. 163-166 [163, 166].

The "right to know" and new important new transparency tools are appearing in other ways on the global scene, as indicated by the following articles.

"A new report by a coalition of environmental, labor and human rights groups, including the Sierra Club, Oxfam, Amnesty International and the AFL-CIO, the largest U.S. labor organization, argues for an international right to know. The groups ... want large companies that are traded on U.S. stock exchanges and have significant international operations to be required to disclose information that could affect the communities in which they operate. ...

The group's model is the registry created by ... the Environmental Protection Agency's Toxic Release Inventory.

The organizations also cite the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act as an example of a successful tool to improve American business practices overseas.

Globalization has brought new scrutiny ... [and the] groups are using lawsuits, good conduct labels and public protests to force or shame companies into better behavior. ...

American companies could still behave badly if they choose to do so. ... But they would have to tell the public about [their] practices, and let the market, and public opinion, go to work.

Companies and international trade groups say the reporting requirements would be onerous. In fact, such disclosures would pose very little burden on large companies, the only ones that would be covered."

"A global right to know," International Herald Tribune, **January 24, 2003**.

"In the world of international relief agencies, it's known as 'the fog of disaster.' Brought on by ... calamities, ... getting the necessary donations to buy the right supplies and get them to rescuers on the scene can be a bureaucratic nightmare. But [the the Red Cross (IFRC)] has instituted a new web-based technology designed to cut through the confusion and paperwork of a crisis.

[It] Can track donations of money and supplies in real time ... [and] allows aid groups to make an instant and accurate accounting for every dollar a donor gives.

The software couldn't come at a better time. According to the World Disaster Report, 226 million people were hit by disasters in 2002. A study by the IFRC shows that the software [can] ... speed up the relief process by 20 to 30 percent."

"Technology: Online relief," Newsweek International, **September 15, 2003**.

"Should oil and mining firms be made to fess up? Secrecy clauses often forbid them to reveal details of contracts with developing countries. That makes it all too easy for crooked rulers to extract all sorts of 'facilitation payments' from firms that, on the whole, would rather not pay bribes.

... This week [Britain's prime minister, Tony Blair] chaired a conference, dubbed the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, at which he called for a voluntary agreement to disclose payments. Several oil firms ... made positive noises.

Yet transparency may come slowly. ... If American oil firms do not comply, their European rivals are unlikely to. Going public while your competitors stay silent risks a

backlash ...

The real villains are crooked politicians in oil- and mineral-rich countries. It is government transparency -- both about what revenues are received and how they are spent -- that is the enemy of such corruption. This week, Mr. Blair offered British help [and money] to any developing country willing to start a pilot scheme on disclosure. As George Soros has argued, a better strategy would be to make such transparency a condition of IMF and World Bank loans."

"Oil and corruption: Shine a light," The Economist, **June 21st, 2003**.

Perhaps equally important is a new trend in global affairs in which nations are assessed, and more importantly ranked and compared on their performance in key economic, social, and other areas. Among the first such efforts were the Human Development Index of the UNDP, which was introduced with its annual Human Development Reports first published in 1990. UNICEF has also provided substantive and analytical reports on children's issues since 1983 in its annual report on the state of the world's children, and other UN system agencies have developed such reports as well.

Human Development Report, United Nations Development Programme, (UNDP), since 1990, at www.undp.org/, Publications, and The State of the World's Children, United Nations Children's Fund, (UNICEF), since 1983, available at www.unicef.org/, Publications.

But in the past decade, and especially more recently, many NGOs, foundations, and international organizations are jumping in as well. The trend to publicly assess nations as a group is a very significant step towards international and organizational transparency, by comparing them with each other and relying on the public exposure (and pride in a good performance or shame at a bad one) to encourage overall improvement. Current major efforts include the following two, and IO Watch will eventually be adding considerably more.

-- An annual CGD/FP Commitment to Development Index ranks 21 rich nations on how their policies -- from aid to trade to environment and security -- help or hinder progress among the world's poor countries (Denmark and the Netherlands are on top, Australia and the USA climbed sharply, and Japan finishes last.)

"Ranking the rich", Foreign Policy, **May/June 2004**, pp. 46-56, available at www.foreignpolicy.com and at the Center for Global Development at www.cgdev.org.

-- An annual A.T.Kearney/*Foreign Policy* Globalization Index ranks 62 countries as "global nations" based on on personal, political, economic and technological factors.

"Measuring globalization", Foreign Policy, **May/June 2005**, pp. 52-60, available at www.foreignpolicy.com, and at www.atkearney.com .)

One other very important facet of transparency that greatly facilitates the "right to know" must also be cited: clear and attractive visual and graphic presentations, underscoring the old adage that "a picture is worth a thousand words."

The UN Secretariat produces vast piles of reports, press releases, and formal records on its activities each year, which provide a mixture of the tedious, the routine, and the very important. But its reporting has one constant. It relies almost always on dry bureaucratic and diplo-speak text, with only very limited or confusing statistics and analyses, little analytical insight and context, and what truly seems to be a visceral dislike (or fear) of charts and other graphics.

It is extremely hard for even the most dedicated UN admirers to understand the overall situation and trends of UN operations from such textual documents. This verbiage is a great shame, particularly in an age when excellent computer graphics can easily be generated by almost any "desktop publishing" software to make a report much more understandable, appealing, and attractive (and also much more transparent, which may well be why the UN insists stubbornly on text, text, and more text.)

In contrast, the *Atlas of War and Peace* provides a remarkably clean and clear overview of worldwide and UN peacekeeping activities and aspects. With extremely attractive and informative color graphics, it covers the background, causes, participants, factors, and status of past and recent conflicts globally and region by region. One can learn more about UN peacekeeping from 30 minutes spent with this report than with hours spent attempting to decipher even the best material that the UN Secretariat provides.

Dan Smith, with Ane Bræin, [The atlas of war and peace](#), Earthscan, London, 2003.

[Notes: the author is a senior adviser and former director of the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo. Other books in the series include [The Atlas of Food](#) and [The Atlas of Endangered Species](#).]

Another excellent set of presentations comes from the *New Internationalist* magazine, which covers a topic of current worldwide interest each month (and has done so for some 30 years). In a very recent issue on global religion, for instance, it offers eight central factual elements in clear and colorful graphics and carefully-chosen and succinct text, in only two pages, while providing more up-to-date insight than months of concerted individual research might uncover:

"Alive and kicking: the facts:

Faith in numbers
Rise and fall
With God on our side
Bloodiest hands
Humanitarianism
Social violence
Levels of belief
Holy lucre"

"In the name of God: The use and abuses of religion", New Internationalist, No. 370, **August 2004**, pp. 18-19, available at NI online, www.newint.org .

Other sets of "knockout graphics" providing extensive, fresh, and significant new insights into global problems can be found in *Foreign Policy*. Recent examples include a presentation on the worldwide small arms trade, and -- as already mentioned above -- those on the CGD/FP Commitment to Development Index ranking 21 rich countries on multiple facets, and (perhaps most attractive and insightful of all) the A.T.Kearney/Foreign Policy Globalization Index ranking 62 countries.

William Hartung and Rachel Stohl, "Hired Guns", Foreign Policy, **May/June 2004**, pp. 27-28,

"Ranking the rich", Foreign Policy, **May/June 2004**, pp. 46-56, and

"Measuring globalization", Foreign Policy, **May/June 2005**, pp. 52-60.

[Note: all three articles are available at www.foreignpolicy.com . The development index is also available at the Center for Global Development (at www.cgdev.org) and the globalization index is also at www.atkearney.com .

IO Watch will be looking for other such useful and attractive presentations of UN-related issues. Meanwhile, comments on the *Atlas of war and peace* by its reviewers demonstrate the high informative qualities which this report possesses (and which many other public reports, including especially those of the UN, should provide):

"It combines short, brutally clear analysis of such topics as civil war and terrorism with maps and graphics showing exactly what is going on around the world."

"The book's greatest strength is the clear, if numbing, historical perspective it provides on the arms race and the threat of nuclear war."

"Arms sales, terrorism, conscription, military advisers and nuclear accidents, ... in easily understood pictorial form ... all its information is drawn from authoritative sources."

"A new kind of visual journalism ... the authors deserve this year's Nobel Prize for Data Presentation ... this book comes with a flavour or originality hard to find in publishing today."

Review quotes on previous editions of the Atlas from, respectively, The New York Times, Publishers Weekly, Sunday Times (UK), and The New Scientist, in Dan Smith, with Ane Bræin, The atlas of war and peace, Earthscan, London, 2003.

As the many new indices cited above indicate, much attention is now being given to international comparisons among countries, and this of course means much activity to develop meaningful and valid indicators of such performance. Of particular interest to this archive are comparisons of the quality of governance (both among countries, and in the UN and other international organizations.)

An excellent source of research, analysis, and news on recent developments is provided by the World Bank, which provides a "User's guide to governance indicators" -- their dimensions, their use in development research, process indicators, and references and suggested readings. As the Bank's website states:

"New global standards of governance are emerging. Citizens of developing countries are demanding better performance on the part of their governments, and they are increasingly aware of the costs of poor management and corruption. Attitudes are also changing in industrial countries where bribery is no longer viewed as a legitimate cost of doing business overseas. At the World Bank and other international agencies, scarce resources must be allocated to governments that will use them most effectively, and countries are asking for help in diagnosing governance failures and in finding solutions. These developments have led to new interest in measuring the performance of governments, using indicators of governance and institutional quality."

"Indicators of governance and Institutional Quality, World Bank, at www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/indicators.htm .

Finally, and in accord with these general "right to know" trends, initial comparative assessments -- of accountability no less -- have also finally begun for international organizations and the UN. The One World Trust (UK) has a Global Accountability Project, which produced the very first Global Accountability Report in 2003. The report rated 18 organizations, including inter-governmental organizations, transnational corporations, and international NGOs (and included one UN unit, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.) The report explains in its summary that:

"This ... report is the first of its kind to compare the accountability of [IGOs, TNC's, and NGOs]. Eighteen of the world's most powerful organisations are assessed in this pilot report. Scores are provided for their performance in two aspects of accountability: member control of governance structures and access to information. The results show wide differences within and between the three groups, clearly indicating leaders in the field and those that fall behind.

Why does accountability matter?

The decisions [such organizations] ... make affect all of our lives in many different ways; ... Individuals and communities who are affected by these organizations' actions should be able to hold them to account. However, few mechanisms have been identified at the global level to enable these stakeholders to exert such a right. The result is a growing sense of disenfranchisement ... These organizations need to become more transparent and accountable to their shareholders, both those internal and external to the organisation, to enable wider participation in decision-making. This will increase their legitimacy and lead to more effective decision-making."

Hetty Kovach, Caroline Neligan, and Simon Burall, The global accountability report 1 2003: Power without accountability?, The One World Trust, Houses of Parliament, London, 2002/2003, at www.oneworldtrust.org.

One can only hope that all these trends toward transparent "sunshine" in the form of clear information and analysis, easily understandable graphics, rankings and indicators, and clear and understandable information for everyone interested on the operations and performance of the UN will arrive sooner rather than later.

However, the UN problem in this area is not just extremely vague Secretariat reporting and secrecy, nor the organization's distance from the global public. A clear and painful example of the relentlessly-politicized UN was provided by the Millennium Assembly festivities in 2000, where Secretary-General Annan urged a gathering of 1,000 world spiritual leaders to speak out against intolerance. Unfortunately, he was also forced to explain that the UN had excluded the Dalai Lama from the meeting because:

"this house is really a house for the member states, and their sensitivities matter."

"UN spiritual talks to bar Dalai Lama", AFP, International Herald Tribune, **August 25, 2000**.

[Note: As futurist Alvin Toffler also noted, the UN "has been little more than a trade association of nation-states", in his Policy Shift: Knowledge, wealth, and violence at the edge of the 21st century, Basntam, New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland, 1990, p. 456.]

All nations obviously have areas of good and bad performance, but at the UN the "sensitivities" to any reporting and defective national performance seems too often to generate indignation and attempts to suppress such analyses. (The excellent UNDP Human Development Index seems the exception that proves the rule, having overcome some serious opposition during its early years, and apparently still not totally "out of the woods" as an open and annual comparator of nation-state performance.)

In this very important area, the growing international right-to-know and an internet-linked world are leading to more and more knowledgeable analyses of nations' and organizations' performance. It appears that one must at least recognize that political realities cripple, or certainly retard, the UN's overall basic ability to make straightforward comparative -- or negative -- assessments and insights concerning nation-states' (as well as its own) performance.

Nevertheless, transparency of information and frank outside analysis are the cross-cutting theme of the various possible solutions to the UN's entrenched non-accountability culture, which IO Watch discusses further in the following subsection on Answers: A Starting Point .

Useful Sources

(Note: informally assembled by IO Watch, roughly ranked from "most useful" on down, and subject to change as new sources are added)

Blanton, Thomas, "The world's right to know", Foreign Policy, July-August 2002, pp. 50-58.

Blanton, Thomas S., "Freedom of information: The right to know is gaining around the world", International Herald Tribune, October 11, 2003.

"The Freedominfo.org global survey: Freedom of information and access to government record laws around the world", by David Banisar, May 2004, found at www.freedominfo.org . [emphasis added]

Kovach, Hetty, Neligan, Caroline, and Burall, Simon, The global accountability report 1 2003: Power without accountability?, The One World Trust, Houses of Parliament, London, 2002/2003, at www.oneworldtrust.org .

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