Falling Short Of

The Asian Development Bank is about to embark on a review of its Public Communications Policy (PCP). Also known as the Disclosure Policy, the PCP has been the subject of debate among stakeholders and has received criticisms from affected communities and civil society. They have questioned the Disclosure Policy in terms of the merits of its content and implementation based on their experience at the ground level.

Information is both power and empowering. With it, people are able to make sound and informed decisions. It allows them to participate actively and effectively in the decision-making process, which in turn ensures that their respective communities would benefit directly from the development agenda of international financial institutions such as the ADB in their communities without causing any harm and danger to them and the environment.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, has recognized the right of the people to seek and receive information. The ADB has continued to claim its support of the right of the people to access information in relation to its operations in the field.

In spite of this, the ADB has continued to fall short in recognizing and respecting the right of the people to information. Experiences at the ground level have shown that the Bank lacks both the political will and the resources to recognize this right.

In Northeast India, the Khasi indigenous people, who have been fighting to recover their ancestral land due to a cement project supported by the ADB, have been denied access to project documents and reports by the Bank's review missions. In Cambodia, only a few people from the 2,000 families directly affected by the ADB's Highway One project have been invited to consultations. In Kyrgyzstan, a local non-government organization monitoring an ADB-funded power and heating project has been denied access to project information. And in Aceh, women suffering from a cement facility which is a component of an ADB-funded reconstruction project have neither been consulted nor informed about it. These are only a handful of cases clearly manifesting the ADB's violation of people's right to information.

Access to information should not be viewed as a discriminatory privilege given to a select few. Information should be provided to the public at the least possible cost -- if not totally free -- and in the most practical manner. The Bank has been speaking of inclusiveness when it comes to its development agenda. At present, this has not been the case. The ADB has equated making information public to providing information only in its website, clearly excluding the poor who should be the foremost beneficiaries of its very existence.

Adequate resources should be allocated to effectively implement the Disclosure Policy. People should be informed in the most simple and affordable way.

A long exception list that allows certain projects not to be covered by the PCP is also a strong indication of the ADB's lack of political will to be transparent in its operations, denying people their right to be

informed. Project documents should always be made publicly available. Non-disclosure of documents should only be allowed in instances wherein the harm that could be caused by disclosing such information outweighs the interest of the public.

For sure, if one goes through the existing PCP, s/he may assume that the ADB is supporting the public's right to information. However, taking the sideline and merely playing the role of a cheering squad is not enough. The Bank should play its role. Merely putting it on paper is not acceptable, especially to those whose houses are being dismantled; to those whose ways of life are being drastically altered; and to those whose lands have been robbed.

The ADB is about to embark on a reviewing of its Public Communications Policy. It is high time to recover from what it has fallen short of.