

Physical FOIANet Steering Committee meeting 1-2 July 2014 Madrid, Spain

The FOIANet Steering Committee met in Madrid, Spain from 1-2 July 2014 to discuss strategies for moving forward with the network. All FOIANet SC members were present, as well as the Coordinator.

The FOIANet has already started to undertake activities and produce publications, and this has received positive feedback from members. At the same time, it was understood that the network should not overlap or compete with the work that is already being done by members.

Idea 1: International Right To Know Day

This has been the main activity of FOIANet so far. The SC asked whether members should be obliged to do something to celebrate the day.

Theme – The SC discussed the potential for a central RTKD theme, which could be identified using the World Advocacy Update publication to find opportunities and threats that are similar across regions resulting in letter/statement drafting etc. The SC noted that themes and topics are often country-specific, so a FOIANet theme/topic may not be relevant with many organisations. The SC concluded that it would not be that useful to try to promote a central FOIANet theme or event.

Products – The SC also considered the usefulness of the materials we have historically produced for RTKD, and doubted whether they were really value for money; a spot check found that many SC members were not using them. The added value of FOIANet would be more usefully directed towards helping weaker organisations to celebrate RTKD. The SC concluded that the RTKD materials we have historically produced were not really needed.

Recognition of International RTKD – The SC looked at whether we should try to work on getting RTKD officially recognised. The question was raised whether there are the time and resources, and the probability of success of getting the day recognised by a body such as the UN, given what a large task this is large and since many governments would not be prone to support it (they prefer open data!). UNESCO was identified as a more likely channel to take. FOIANet members could be asked as part of a campaign to meet with their governments and push for support within

UNESCO to get the day recognised and get a group of countries to support the idea. Information Commissioners could also be mobilised to support recognition of the day internationally. Regional bodies such as the AU and OAS, and bodies such as UNCAC, were also identified as channels to get some recognition. The SC concluded that this would be a useful project for FOIANet to try to raise resources around.

Idea 2: Information services and products

The SC recognised the positive feedback regarding materials such as the 10-10-10 Statement and the *Global Right to Information Update*, while noting that we need to be sure not to recreate resources that may already exist.

Translations – Regarding translations, the SC noted that this was useful but also that it would be expensive and need extensive human resources, and that it was not necessary a particular value added for FOIANet. It was felt that it should instead be left up to members to translate the materials they want or need, perhaps also encouraging the use of crowd-sourced translation platforms such as Transifex.

Engaging all of our Members – The SC spent some time discussing the problem that only some members are active on the list, with many members being less active. There was a sense that there was a need to reach out to members to encourage them to use the list, and to make it clear that it was not only supposed to be for elite discussions about fine RTI issues, but also any concerns or challenges that members might have. One idea was to take this to a personal level, with SC members making direct approaches to members to encourage them to engage.

It was also noted that in some cases posts to the list do not receive any reply, which is obviously discouraging. It was agreed that the Coordinator and SC need to monitor such situations and either make an effort to post answers themselves or encourage others to do so, perhaps by sending reminders.

Collecting Existing Resources – The SC supported the idea of collecting existing information from the many conversations that have taken place over the list and to make these available via the website in a searchable and otherwise accessible form. It was noted that this might require some reworking of the website and that we needed to look into ways of doing this that were not too costly and human resource intensive, noting that previous attempts to do this have not been successful. One suggestion was to reach out to universities for help in mining the existing data. It was important that the information be presented in a way that would be useful for various activities, including advocacy and research.

Some other ways of collecting existing resources were put forward. One was to serve as a central repository of resource materials on RTI (not to duplicate existing resources, but to supplement them, for example in the area of research). Such a resource could be driven by members (i.e. members would upload their work or work they felt was useful). The website could also host a section on members, including by profiling their expertise.

RTI Success Stories – The SC noted that there is a need to tackle the recent backlash against RTI, including by demonstrating its importance and value. Producing accessible stories about how RTI has helped improve people's everyday lives was highlighted as a potential activity. This could help change the dialogue around the issue and also help convince funders about the importance of RTI.

Several ideas were put forward as to how to go about this. One idea was to create a blog or other online dialogue space for this purpose to which members contribute (which would also help introduce members to stories/experiences from different places/regions). It was suggested that we could produce strong audiovisual materials on this, which might be more popular than written products. We would should keep in mind that in some cases we might need to protect the identities of those whose stories are used.

Other Resources – The issue of providing other resources for members was discussed. The idea of hosting webinars on different RTI topics, using members as expert resources, was put forward (see below). It was also noted that the Update was a very useful resource, which seemed to build on FOIANet's special value added, namely its global network of experts in different regions, and that consideration should be given to doing further work along these lines, although no concrete ideas for this were discussed.

Idea 3: International engagement

FOIANet has already started to engage internationally, for example at the OGP 2013 London Summit, where it hosted a panel. There was strong support among the SC to look into ways to further expand this sort of engagement.

OGP – The OGP is a natural candidate for FOIANet engagement, following on from its earlier engagement there and the strong interest of its members in the OGP. The precise modalities of this would need to be worked out, but it could include having more formal FOIANet activities focusing on OGP events, as well as assisting our members to engage more with OGP processes. It was agreed that there was a need to bring

more of an RTI spin to OGP, to get people talking more about RTI instead of focusing mainly on Open Data.

FOIANet could also contribute by creating documents/publications with a view both to helping members understand better how to get involved in the OGP and to advocating for a greater focus on RTI within the various OGP processes. One idea would be to prepare a document with a list of possible RTI actions points for inclusion in OGP Action Plans. The SC was clear that any work in this area should neither compete with members nor duplicate work already being done.

UNCAC – Another natural candidate for FOIANet international engagement is the UNCAC Coalition. UNCAC is now moving into a second phase in its implementation work, where there will be far more of a focus on RTI type issues as part of the wider framework for anti-corruption efforts. There are also internal access to information challenges with the UNCAC system (e.g. obtaining full evaluation reports), as well as challenges to getting strong language on RTI as a preventative measure into UNCAC resolutions. FOIANet could work with the UNCAC Coalition to campaign on these issues.

GRECO, PACE, Global Impact, IFIs, business forums (Davos) –The SC noted these as other areas FOIANet could work in.

Idea 4: Measuring Implementation and Promoting Success

Monitoring – The SC agreed there was no need for FOIANet to do this as it is already being carried out reasonably effectively by members and others, and is costly and intensive in terms of human resources.

Measuring/ranking implementation – There has been a lot of discussion in various RTI circles about the need to measure and possibly even rank how countries are doing in terms of implementation of RTI laws. The SC discussed the possibility of FOIANet engaging in this sort of work. It was recognised that the most appropriate element of this for FOIANet would be developing a methodology which could then be passed onto members for use, rather than FOIANet applying the methodology itself. There were concerns that this was an impossible task, or beyond the capacity of FOIANet, and questions were raised about whether others like the World Bank are doing it, or whether they are doing it successfully. FOIANet could create a working group of organisations to work on this; in this case, FOIANet could crowdsource among its membership to ensure broad engagement on this and the most effective outcome. Such a project could be a longer-term activity that then feeds into advocacy and campaigning at the national level. The methodology could ultimately lead to maps which could be sorted or filtered to show progress on

implementation and the extent of access to information in different areas/fields. Opinions were mixed on the idea of doing a ranking but there was agreement that if FOIANet did engage on this and it didn't work out, then it could always be dropped.

Idea 5: Other Services to Members

Capacity building via workshops and webinars – The SC promoted the idea of members sharing more information about what they are doing, especially in ways which go beyond the current regular exchanges of information on the list. This could include things like campaign ideas and strategies.

There are many ways this sort of information could be shared. One would be through FOIANet holding workshops and webinars on different topics. Members could propose topics for discussion as part of a webinar series to help build capacity in areas where members felt this was needed. These could be recorded and saved on the resource section of the website for ongoing use and reference.

The idea of a 'training of trainers' programme on RTI to help build capacity and skills amongst members was also mooted.

Webinars could also be developed to provide basic introductions to RTI for citizens, non-members and organisations starting to work on RTI to help them engage in advocacy and promotional work.

Different members could lead the webinars.

Litigation – There was some support for the idea of FOIANet helping to build capacity on litigation or to support members taking cases. The SC noted as issues the challenge of getting lawyers to do this and getting funding for such activities. In any case, FOIANet should be careful with the provision of legal advice and probably not do it itself, but perhaps more act as a networking resource in this area.

One possible idea would be for FOIANet to prepare a list of pro bono lawyers working on RTI and to facilitate contact between members and those on the list. The list could be published on the resources section of the website. Collecting and maintaining such a list could be time consuming and costly, and there would need to be some sort of quality control before individuals could be accepted to the list.

Regional networks – The SC agreed that it was not FOIANet's role to duplicate the work of regional networks, but it was recognised that there is a need to make sure that underrepresented regions are able to participate in the RTI community more effectively. This might involve

connecting with such members in order to help support their work (this could also be done through other networks and organisations such as the UNCAC, Transparency International, etc.) There was some brainstorming but no concrete conclusions on how to integrate regional networks more fully into FOIANet, for example by having them somehow participate in or contribute to SC meetings.

Building confidence – The SC acknowledged that only some members are active in posting to the list and the need to enhance outreach to members who do not feel confident about doing this. Language is also an issue. Members need to feel less intimidated and be encouraged to participate more actively in the network. Part of this also depends on FOIANet doing a better job of explaining itself to its members.

New members need to feel that they are able to contribute to the list, which the SC could help with by acting as mentors/communicating directly with new members to see if they are OK/benefitting from the list. This would help the list feel less elitist and also make FOIANet a more personal experience for those who are new and may feel intimidated about contributing. The Coordinator and SC could also act as contact points and encourage people to share information and contribute to the discussion.

The idea of preparing a membership package was also discussed in order both to build confidence to participate and also to help build capacity and understanding about FOIANet. This could include information about the network and expectations of members, as well as encouragement or advice for advocacy and promotional strategies.

Participation – The SC discussed the need for FOIANet to conduct participatory activities, such as the photo competition that was held a couple of years ago, as this was successful. This helps encourage engagement with the network and between members. This could include collecting success stories, as mentioned earlier, and/or an online blog to which members could post stories.

FOIANet could be more actively used as a forum for encouraging signons to letters or statements, and could also take advantage of the websites of other platforms such as Change.org for such actions.

The SC agreed that FOIANet should not sign advocacy letters or statements in its own name, given that members may hold different views about the contents; instead, these should come from members. However, FOIANet could help encourage members to sign such statements and also promote the use of the network for this purpose.

The SC agreed that members should be encouraged to display the FOIANet logo on their websites to increase the profile of the network.

Helpdesk – The idea of FOIANet providing a helpdesk for members on RTI issues was discussed but ultimately not supported by the SC. It would be costly to organise and would result in people suing the helpdesk instead of posting to the list, which does not make sense for FOIANet. Any question, big, small, complex or simple, should go through the list and members should be encouraged to help further participation and debate. To help encourage new groups and individuals to join FOIANet, some kind of forum could be established on the website for people to pose questions to FOIANet that would get fed into the online discussion (however, this also raised questions about blocking spam).

Idea 6: Campaigning for legal expansion and better implementation

One way to promote legal expansion and better implementation would be to get organisations such as GOPEC and the IPU to put RTI on their agenda, and to engage with MPs on the issue as part of their ongoing processes. It was reiterated that the FOIANet should not engage in national campaigns or focus on the national context, but that it could help to push or engage local members in places with no or bad RTI legislation.

Having FOIANet make awards at the global level, as many organisations do at the national level, was also discussed but ultimately deemed to be too controversial and impractical for FOIANet.

Protecting RTI activists – The SC recognised that this was a major problem which FOIANet should try to engage on. However, the SC also recognised that it would be difficult and time consuming to factfind or verify threats or dangers to RTI activists when they are presented. Organisations that already do this are very well equipped and have significant resources, which FOIANet does not have, and neither the SC nor the Coordinator have the capacity to carry out such a role. This also requires in-country presence in most cases.

However, the SC said that statements in solidarity with such individuals or groups could be a way to demonstrate support.

Working with technology – The SC also mentioned the possibility of interacting with Hackathons and other open data activities to bring tech/open data groups closer to RTI advocates. These could also include joint webinars and other information sharing activities.

Other issues

Fundraising

During the discussions, potential funders and the issue of funding was constantly raised. Potential funders include: HIVOS, UNDEF, Charles Leopold Mayer Foundation, SIDA, Southern Voice MDG.

The SC proposed the idea of members including FOIANet in their proposals, where this would result in mutual benefits. In this case, members would submit proposals to funders under the FOIANet name. The activity would need to be approved in advance by the SC and there would be a need for some sort of cooperative element. Such activities would help to link members together, and increase capacity and knowledge exchange across the network, particularly if weaker and stronger organisations work together. The question is whether organisations would want to do this. Further work needed to be done to establish clear modalities for this.

[Legal status](#)

The SC also addressed the issue of whether or not the network should become a separate legal entity. The first question here was what the need was that would drive such a change. The SC recognised that building FOIANet into a legal entity would significantly change the style and way FOIANet works. There would be important benefits to this, for example in terms of fundraising. But there would also be challenges, including technical issues, such as where it would be registered, who would host the secretariat, how to go through a process like that legally and so on. The current SC decided it was not appropriate to engender such a major change at the end of their mandate, but decided instead to pass this issue over to the next SC to discuss further. In any case, the membership would need to be informed and included in any such decision.

[Membership](#)

The SC decided that a more formal process and rules needed to be created regarding membership in future. While the current system works reasonably well, it can be problematical when members of the SC do not recognise or have contacts that can verify applicant organisations.

The SC also recognised the need to check whether all of our current members are still active in the sense both of continuing to exist and in the sense of being active in the area of RTI.

The SC discussed but rejected the idea of charging membership fees. Instead, FOIANet should encourage members to make voluntary donations to support the running of the network, particularly from bigger organisations.

[Elections](#)

The SC agreed that the upcoming elections should be carried out using the same rules and regulations as the last election, which worked well. Potential applicants should be informed about the responsibilities of the SC, so that they understand what they would be getting into.

For the campaign period, it was agreed that candidates should be required to submit a message to the list in English outlining why they should be elected, along the lines of a manifesto.

Each member organisation has one vote, which involves identifying their top seven choices for SC members from among those running. Member organisations are responsible for making sure their point of contact information is updated.

Parking Lot ideas

Programmes, in especially FOIA weak regions

How to put FOI back on the agenda/priority list? Link to other initiatives (OGP, etc.)

Leveraging members priorities nationally by acting as a network

How to offer a better place on the website for RTKD events

Membership – reinforce their commitment by asking members to do something on RTKD

Welcome/communication to new members, direct approaches regularly from SC members (maybe annually)

Website: post success stories as blog posts 2x month. Provide a basic format to help people post

Collect photos and stories from RTKD

Research/plan advocacy plan for recognition of UN day

Document success stories / positive impact of FOIANet (case studies, videos, etc.), TED talk

Datamining – JFK/Harvard, MIT/civic media/media lot