

Conference on Transparency and Governance
Centre on Asia and Globalisation
Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy
National University of Singapore
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In the information age, debates and struggle over who has the right to know what have become central to virtually all issues on the public agenda. Citizens' groups around the world are demanding – and often getting – new right-to-know laws that have the potential to transform the relationship between state and citizen. Corporations find themselves pressured from all sides to adhere to “voluntary” disclosure arrangements that reveal their environmental and societal impacts. The vacuum left by the collapse of the “Washington Consensus” on economic development strategy is being filled by a new focus on transparency and accountability of public institutions.

This trend toward greater openness confounds the usual divisions between North and South, rich and poor, democratic and non-democratic. The traditional proponent of open government, the United States, now finds itself condemned at home and abroad for its devotion to secrecy. Countries as diverse as South Africa, China, and India have promulgated sweeping new laws and regulations in government transparency. Altogether, in recent years more than 50 countries have adopted new right-to-know laws.

Yet little is known about the causes or consequences of greater openness. Proponents of greater openness assert that transparency promotes effective and honest government, economic efficiency, social justice, and individual empowerment. Critics point to the need to ensure that governments have space to formulate policy, conduct negotiations, and protect national security, and argue that businesses must be allowed to protect a wide range of proprietary information in the face of relentless competition.

The international Conference on Transparency and Governance will bring together top practitioners and analysts to provide new insights into whether, how, and when greater openness serves public interests, and how to bring about beneficial forms of transparency. It will move beyond the often-sterile rhetoric of “democracy” and “freedom” versus “security” and “privacy” to address practical problem-solving. The speakers will provide a global context but will focus on Asian cases and experiences.

The Conference on Transparency and Governance is being held in association with the launch of a compelling new book: *The Right to Know: Transparency for an Open World* (Ann Florini, editor, Columbia University Press, 2007). *The Right to Know* distills the lessons of many nations' experiences and provides careful analysis of transparency's impact on governance, business regulation, environmental protection, and national security.