

Access to Environmental Information Rapid Assessment Tool

A practical tool for assessing access to environmental information in Pacific countries



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About This Tool

Access to environmental information enables communities to understand decisions affecting their land, oceans, natural resources and livelihoods. It supports meaningful participation in environmental decision-making and strengthens transparency and accountability.

This Rapid Assessment Tool provides a practical way to assess not only what environmental information should be available, but whether people can actually find, access and use it.

The tool was developed from the methodology used in Transparency International New Zealand's Access to Environmental Information in Fiji and Solomon Islands research pilot. The methodology was designed to be adaptable across different Pacific countries, environmental sectors and governance contexts.

The assessment draws on three complementary sources of evidence:

1. Desktop review: map the existing laws, policies, institutions and systems governing environmental information and assess what information appears to exist and be publicly available.

2. Stakeholder interviews: explore people's actual experiences of finding, accessing and using environmental information using structure interviews.

3. RTI/ATI testing: submit targeted Right to Information (RTI) or Access to Information (ATI) requests to test how information-access systems work in practice.

The findings from all three stages are then brought together to identify strengths, gaps, barriers and opportunities for improvement.

In some Pacific contexts, environmental information may also be held or shared through customary, Indigenous, community or informal systems. The assessment should consider these alongside formal government systems where they are relevant.

Before You Start

You will need:

- one person to lead the assessment
- access to relevant government websites, laws and public documents
- people with experience of the environmental issue who you can interview
- contact details for relevant government agencies

- a spreadsheet or document for recording information requests
- approximately 12 weeks to complete the assessment.

The stages do not need to happen strictly in sequence. For example, information requests can be submitted while stakeholder interviews are underway.

Define Your Assessment

Before beginning, clearly define the scope of the assessment:

- Country
- Environmental sector or topic
- Assessment period
- Researcher/organisation
- Key government agencies or institutions
- Relevant environmental decisions, activities or processes

Relevant International Standards and Best-Practice Frameworks

Identify any international conventions, standards or sector-specific guidelines relevant to the assessment. These can provide additional benchmarks for assessing what information should be collected, disclosed and accessible. For example, an assessment focused on corruption might draw on UNCAC, while an assessment of extractive industries could draw on the EITI Standard.

Guiding Questions

Use four questions throughout the assessment:

1. What environmental information should be collected and made available, based on national laws and relevant international standards?
2. Is that information currently publicly accessible, and how easily?
3. What information is fragmented, difficult to access or missing from public systems?
4. What happens in practice when people try to access this information?

Stage One: Desktop Review

The desktop review establishes what environmental information should exist, who is responsible for it and how the public should be able to access it.

It should consider both the formal framework (legislation, regulations, policies and institutional responsibilities), and the public-facing information system people experience.

Questions to Consider

For each source, system or type of environmental information, consider:

- What information is the government legally or administratively required to collect, maintain or hold?
- Is there a requirement to proactively make the information public, or is it available only on request?
- Can the information be found by a member of the public?
- Is it clear where someone should look or who they should contact?
- Is the information available online or only in person? Is there a cost? Is it provided in an understandable and usable format?
- Is the information current? Is there evidence that it is regularly updated?
- Is the complete information available or only summaries or selected information?
- Can people access information early enough to participate meaningfully in environmental decisions?
- Are there barriers affecting people with disabilities, rural and remote communities, women, Indigenous or customary rights holders, people who use different languages, or people without reliable internet access?

Desktop Review Output

Prepare a short desktop review covering:

- **Country and sector context** — brief overview of the sector and environmental governance context.
- **Legal and policy framework** — summary of key laws, policies, agencies and responsibilities relating to environmental information.
- **Information systems** — what environmental information should exist, who holds it, and how it should be made available.
- **Public access** — what information can actually be found and how it can be accessed.
- **Accessibility** — practical barriers including language, location, cost, digital access and disability.
- **Key findings** — main strengths, gaps and areas where practice may differ from formal requirements.
- **Issues for further testing** — questions or uncertainties to explore through stakeholder interviews and information requests.

Suggested length: around 5 pages, with details legislative mapping or supporting information included as references/appendices where needed.

Stage Two: Stakeholder Interviews

Stakeholder interviews provide a way to test whether the formal picture identified through the desktop review reflects people's actual experiences.

The aim is not simply to ask whether information exists. Explore how people find it, what happens when they ask for it, what barriers they experience and what information they believe is missing.

Who to Talk To

Aim for around 5–8 stakeholder interviews, depending on the size and scope of the assessment. Prioritise a mix of perspectives rather than simply the number of interviews.

Aim for a mix of perspectives appropriate to the country and sector. This could include:

- community and civil society organisations
- environmental organisations
- Indigenous or customary rights holders
- journalists and media
- researchers
- businesses operating in the relevant sector
- government agencies and regulators
- oversight bodies
- Disabled Persons Organisations.

Where possible, include people who have actually tried to obtain or use environmental information.

Before Each Interview

Explain the purpose of the assessment and how the information will be used. Ask the person if they are comfortable participating. Explain that their feedback will be kept anonymous and they will not be identified in the final report. Consider whether sharing particular information could create risks for the person or community involved.

Interview Questions

1. What information about [sector/topic] is currently publicly available?
2. In practice, how easy or difficult is it for the public or civil society to access this information?
3. What important information is not publicly available, but people often want or need to access?
4. If someone wants information that is not already public, what is the usual process for obtaining it?
5. Are Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), where relevant, or other important information about [sector/topic] easy for the public to access?

6. From a civil society perspective, what environmental or [sector/topic] information should be publicly available but currently isn't?
7. Are customary, Indigenous or community governance systems relevant to how environmental information is held, shared or accessed? How should these systems be recognised or respected in this assessment?
8. Are there people or communities who find it particularly difficult to access or use this information e.g. due to disability, language, geography, internet access, cost, gender or other locally relevant barriers? Why?

Interview Summary

After each interview, record the most important findings rather than producing a full transcript.

- Stakeholder type
- Key information-access issues identified
- Practical examples provided
- Barriers, delays or refusals described
- Accessibility or inclusion issues
- Governance/accountability concerns
- Issues requiring further investigation

Stage Three: Test Access in Practice

The third stage moves beyond what laws, policies and stakeholders say should happen and tests the information-access system directly.

Select a small number of pieces of environmental information identified through the desktop review or interviews and attempt to obtain them from the relevant government agency.

For example, you might request: a list of current licences or permits; an environmental impact assessment; monitoring or compliance reports; information about enforcement action; or the conditions attached to an environmental approval.

An information request simply means asking a government agency for information that isn't already publicly available. Depending on the country, this may be called a Right to Information (RTI), Access to Information (ATI) or Freedom of Information request. Some countries may not have a formal process at all.

Where an RTI or ATI framework exists, follow the relevant national process. Where there is no formal process, use the public information-request mechanism available e.g. an agency email address, online form or written request.

Aim: to submit at least three information requests where practicable.

Record what happens in a spreadsheet, for example:

- who the request was sent to and how it was submitted
- what information was requested
- whether the request was acknowledged
- how long it took to receive a response
- whether the information was provided in full, partly provided, refused, or no response was received
- whether there were costs or practical barriers to accessing it
- whether the information was provided in an accessible and usable format
- any difficulties finding the right agency, contact person or request process
- how helpful and cooperative the agency was.

The focus is not simply to measure response times, but to understand how easy or difficult it is for an ordinary person to obtain environmental information in practice.

Stage Four: Bring the Evidence Together

The final stage brings together the findings from the desktop review, stakeholder interviews and RTI/ATI request testing, to build an overall picture of how access to environmental information works in practice.

Compare the three evidence sources to identify where they confirm or strengthen each other, as well as where they tell a different story. Differences between what should happen and what happens in practice can be particularly important findings.

“Legislation may require information to exist and a government website may suggest it is publicly available, while stakeholders report difficulty obtaining it and an RTI/ATI request confirms that access is difficult in practice.”

The aim is to identify the main strengths, gaps and practical barriers and use this combined evidence to inform the final recommendations.

A note on caution: not finding information is itself useful evidence but be careful about what you conclude. Record where you looked and what you tried. Unless you can confirm otherwise, say “we could not locate this information publicly” rather than “this information does not exist.”

As you start to bring the evidence together, use this structure as a starting point:

- What the desktop review found
- What stakeholders said
- What happened when we tested it
- Overall findings

From Assessment to Action

The purpose of the assessment is not simply to identify problems. Use the evidence to identify practical opportunities to strengthen access to environmental information.

- What is working well?
- What are the three most significant barriers?
- **Quick wins:** what could be changed relatively quickly using existing systems or resources?
- **System improvements:** what changes to processes, information systems, institutional practice or capability are needed?
- **Structural reforms:** are longer-term legislative, policy or institutional changes required?
- **Priority actions:** who needs to act; suggested timeframe/s.

Stage 5: Prepare Your Report

Structure the final report as follows:

1. **Executive Summary** — brief overview of the assessment, headline findings and priority recommendations.
2. **Introduction and Context** — purpose of the assessment, country/sector context, relevant governance framework and key assessment questions.
3. **Methodology** — summary of the desktop review, stakeholder interviews and RTI/ATI request testing undertaken.
4. **Findings** — **including** what information exists and what is publicly available; how information is accessed in practice; key themes from stakeholder interviews; results of RTI/ATI request testing; accessibility and inclusion issues; and governance gaps and potential corruption risk points.
5. **Overall Assessment** — bring the different evidence sources together: where they confirm each other, where they reveal different issues, and what this tells you about access to environmental information overall.
6. **Recommendations** — practical actions based on the findings, prioritised where useful into quick wins, system improvements and longer-term reforms.
7. **Conclusion and Limitations** — overall conclusion, scope of the assessment and any limitations affecting interpretation of the findings.
8. **Annexes and References** — supporting material such as the desktop review matrix, legislative mapping, RTI/ATI request results and references.

On corruption risk points: identifying a corruption risk does not mean corruption has occurred. Look for weaknesses in systems that could allow favouritism, bribery, conflicts of interest or decisions to go undetected. Clearly distinguish these risks from evidence of actual wrongdoing.

A Note on Interpreting Your Findings

This is a rapid assessment tool, not a comprehensive audit of a country's environmental information system.

Be clear about:

- how many stakeholders were interviewed
- which agencies and information systems were examined
- how many RTI/ATI or other information requests were tested
- requests that remained unresolved
- information you were unable to verify
- perspectives or communities that could not be included.

Distinguish clearly between what the evidence demonstrates, what stakeholders reported, and what the assessment team observed.

The value of the tool lies in bringing these different forms of evidence together to identify practical patterns, barriers and opportunities for improving access to environmental information.

What the Rapid Assessment Can Provide

- A clear baseline of how environmental information can be accessed
- A clearer picture of the gaps and barriers affecting communities
- Practical recommendations for improving access to information
- Evidence to support stronger transparency and environmental decision-making
- A foundation for wider assessment across sectors or countries
- Evidence that can inform environmental governance, climate policy and accountability initiatives

From Information to Participation

Access to environmental information is ultimately about more than documents, websites or government processes. It is about whether people have the information they need to understand and participate in decisions affecting their land, oceans, natural resources and livelihoods.

This tool is intended to help civil society identify where access is working, where barriers remain, and what practical changes could make a difference.

By combining what the rules say, what people experience and what happens when information is requested, the assessment can provide practical evidence for working with governments, communities and other stakeholders to strengthen access to environmental information.

The assessment is a starting point. The next step is using the evidence to support change.

Understanding the Rio Declaration on Environment & Development

Why This Matters for the Assessment

Rio Principle 10 and the Bali Guidelines provide a useful framework for understanding what good access to environmental information looks like. This assessment uses these principles to help identify what information should be available, how people should be able to access and use it, and where there may be gaps between formal requirements and what happens in practice.

Rio Declaration on Environment and Development

The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, often shortened to Rio Declaration, was agreed at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), informally known as the Earth Summit, and signed by 175 countries. The Rio Declaration consists of 27 principles intended to guide countries in sustainable development.

Article 10 of the Rio Declaration sets out the right of every person to have timely and effective access to information on environmental matters. It acknowledges the key role of information, participation and justice in the transition towards environmentally sound and sustainable development.

Over the years, Principle 10 has provided a globally recognised framework for the development of national standards and laws for access to information, public participation in decision-making, and justice, in environmental matters.

There are three components of Rio Principle 10.

- **Access to Information** is essential to enable members of the public to participate meaningfully in public affairs and to make informed decisions about their lives. Transparency is critical because governments cannot be held accountable if decisions are made in secrecy. Transparency also exposes whether authorities are complying with environmental laws. Early access to information allows civil society to identify risks (e.g. pollution, biodiversity loss) before irreversible damage occurs.
- **Public participation** enables people and communities to have a meaningful say in environmental decisions that affect them. It strengthens accountability, improves decision-making and helps ensure that diverse voices are heard.
- **Access to justice** promotes accountability and the rule of law. It recognises that the achievement of sustainable development depends on fair and independent ways for people to challenge decisions. Laws are meaningless if there is no mechanism to enforce them. Courts and tribunals should act as independent checks on executive and administrative power, and the possibility of legal challenge encourages compliance by both public authorities and private actors.

To help governments put Principle 10 into practice, the Bali Guidelines were adopted in 2010. They provide practical guidance on improving access to environmental information, public participation and access to justice. Together, the 26 guidelines provide a practical framework for stronger environmental governance, with seven key guidelines particularly relevant to assessing access to environmental information.

The Bali Guidelines

The Bali Guidelines translate Principle 10 into practical guidance for governments. They promote clear environmental laws, proactive disclosure of information, meaningful public participation, accountability, effective institutional arrangements, accessible dispute resolution and measures to prevent corruption.

When communities can access reliable environmental information, they are better able to understand decisions that affect their land, oceans and livelihoods. They can participate more effectively, contribute local knowledge, ask informed questions and hold decision-makers accountable. Access to information also helps build trust between governments, communities and civil society, leading to better environmental outcomes.



Explore the research

Scan the QR code to access the research behind this Rapid Assessment Tool and explore the findings from Fiji and Solomon Islands.