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**Forum:** Social and Human Sciences (SF1)

**Issue:** Ensuring universal access to information

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**Position:** Deputy Chair

## **Introduction**

Can access to information create more socially and economically inclusive societies? Given the unprecedented ability we have today to gather, use, exchange information how can we make governments more transparent and accountable, find gender equality or combat poverty and inequality? The world's governments have never before jointly recognized the principle that people should have the right to all information in government hands – unless officials can show why specific information should not be public, whether for privacy or national security or other demonstrably legitimate reasons.

In turn, that requires enforcement of the right to “seek, receive and impart information, through any medium, and regardless of frontiers,” as stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and acknowledged in the new global commitment under SDG 16.10 to “protect fundamental freedoms.”

Access to information and freedom of expression are international human rights norms. Article 19 of both the UN Declaration on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) states that the right to freedom of expression includes not only freedom to ‘impart information and ideas of all kinds’, but also freedom to ‘seek’ and ‘receive’ them ‘regardless of frontiers’ and in whatever medium. Freedom of expression and the right to information held by public authorities are related but different concepts. Access to information is not only about promoting and protecting rights to information but is equally concerned with promoting and protecting communication (use of information) to voice one’s views, to participate in democratic processes that take place at all levels (community, national, regional and global) and to set priorities for action





Information comes in many different forms of varying relevance, accessibility and quality. It can be held by governments, civil society organizations (CSOs), communities, and the private sector. Official information is extremely important and represents one of many information types that ordinary people need in order to make informed decisions on matters that affect their lives.

A rights-based approach to information access recognizes that access is only one aspect of the human right to be informed; other dimensions (the ability to create, use, understand, and share) must also be considered before the right can be exercised. We argue, as the Association for Progressive Communications does for ICTs, that the right to information affects all other rights as well. Human rights are all interdependent and indivisible.

Research shows that the information needs of the poor has confirmed that poor men and women face a series of problems in locating and using knowledge and information for their own benefit. Poor people have difficulty accessing the 'right' kind of information. Often the information is inappropriate to meet their needs, either in content (e.g. it does not reflect their reality) or in presentation (is not in their local language).

Furthermore, information is disseminated without understanding the needs of the users, or the contexts in which they can access and use the information. Many information systems exist to provide information to the poor that are not demand driven, overlook local knowledge, misunderstand the role of intermediaries and do not monitor usage.

## **Definition of Key Terms**

**Information:** knowledge communicated or received concerning a particular fact or circumstance; news

**Communication:** a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior the function of pheromones in insect *communication*  
*also:* exchange of information

**Sustainable Development Goals (SDG):** universal set of goals, targets and indicators that UN member states will be expected to use to frame their agendas and political policies over the next 15 years.

**United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO):** is responsible for coordinating international cooperation in education, science, culture and communication. It strengthens the ties between nations and societies, and mobilizes the wider public so that each child and citizen:

**UN Declaration on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR):** is a key international human rights treaty, providing a range of protections for civil and political rights

**Freedom expression:** Right to express one's ideas and opinions freely through speech, writing and other forms of communication but without deliberately causing harm to others character or reputation by false or misleading statements



## Background Information

Political tensions, insecurity, threats of violence and crises within a country have a significant impact on access to information. Access to information and communication in countries in crisis are absolutely critical for providing effective humanitarian assistance as well as for long-term crisis and conflict prevention. At a global level, increasing uncertainty has in some instances violent governments' surveillance and censorship activities and their tendency to withhold information under the guise of 'national security'. This is primarily the case in relation with Internet access and use. Balancing national security considerations as well as privacy concerns with access to information and communication is a key issue under consideration at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

In the United States, despite constitutional guarantees of free speech and press freedom, it was not until 1966 that the Congress passed the US Freedom of Information Act. France first ratified a similar law in 1999 while Germany took until 2005 to adopt a freedom of information act. The UK, where wide-ranging official secrets restrictions had long limited the scope of press freedom, also enacted an



access to information law for the first time in 2005. Then-prime minister Tony Blair would later call the act one of the most "naive, foolish, irresponsible" of his government's initiatives.

Perhaps the best national model for SDG16.10 Since Sweden's pioneering example can be found in South Africa, whose post-apartheid constitution of 1993 states: "Everyone has the right of access to any information held by the state; and any information that is held by another person and that is required for the exercise or protection of any rights."

That latter clause underscores the principle that "public access to information" should include access to any information relevant to people's rights, and by extension to national and global development, including information from privately held corporations and other non governmental sources.

The guarantee of access to information in South Africa's constitution was seen by its drafters as a necessary complement to its strong, unambiguous commitment to freedom of expression: "Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes freedom of the press and other media; freedom to receive or impart information or ideas; freedom of artistic creativity; and academic freedom and freedom of scientific research."

These mutually reinforcing principles are also both recognized in SDG 16.10.

## Timeline of Major Events



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## 28 September 2002

Originally called Right to Know day, has been celebrated globally since 2002 as rest of a conference of international freedom of information experts establishing a coalition, held from 26 to 28 September, 2002 in Sofia, Bulgaria.

## 2009

Establishment of the African Platform on Access to Information (APAI) Working Group (WG), formerly known as the Windhoek + 20, with the aim to advance access to information in all its dimensions, regionally and internationally

## 2011

The APAI Declaration calls on UNESCO to proclaim 28 September as International Right to Information Day

UNESCO is a partner of the Pan-African Conference on Access to Information (PACAI), which adopts the APAI Declaration on 19 September.



## 2012

Letter of appreciation for support of the Campaign to UNESCO Director General and reiteration of call to UNESCO as stated in the APAI Declaration

## 2013

1st Mission to UNESCO Headquarters (HQ) in Paris in May: Meetings with 5 UNESCO Delegations and the UNESCO Assistant Director General; presentation at a meeting of the UNESCO Africa Group

2nd Mission to UNESCO HQ in September: Meetings with 8 UNESCO delegations; presentation at the UNESCO Africa Group Meeting; informal side discussions

Further engagement of governments and UNESCO Commissions on national level

## 2014



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Prior to the 195th Session of UNESCO's Executive Board, 15-31 October: APAI WG sends formal letters requesting support for a resolution to proclaim 28 September International Right to Information Day to Chair and Deputy Chair of the Executive Board and African Executive Board Members.

## 2015

APAI WG members continue advocacy during national, regional and international conferences and meetings.

## September 2017

Secrecy Law Aiding Public Officials to Deny Citizens Information

UNESCO in partnership with the Information for All Programme (IFAP) will host a Conference under the theme “**Overcoming Divides and Achieving the SDGs in Africa**” in Balaclava, Mauritius. This event will consist of plenary sessions, workshops and technical sessions.

## Major Countries and Organizations Involved

**UNDP:** ‘Implementation of the rights to freedom of expression and to access information are prerequisites for ensuring the *voice and participation* necessary for a democratic society. The promotion and protection of both access to information itself and *flows of information* that exist between constituents, government, parliament, community groups, civil society organizations and the private sector are of equal importance. It is essential to create and strengthen communication mechanisms that enable poor people to influence national and local government policy and practice.’

**UNESCO:** ‘15 percent of the world population lives with some form of disabilities. Nonetheless, information and communication technologies (ICT) have the potential for making significant improvements in the lives of these persons, allowing them to enhance their social, political and economic integration in communities and society by enlarging the scope of activities available to them. UNESCO contributes to the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, particularly on article 9 Accessibility, article 21 Freedom of expression and access to information, article 24 education and article 32 International cooperation.’





## **Possible Solutions**

There is a growing need to ensure that existing networks of organizations find new ways to enhance the scale and scope of their efforts. This can be achieved by capitalizing on synergies within the networks of expertise that currently exist.

There is a broad consensus on the need for clarification about which organisations have the resources to play an ‘intermediary’ role to promote learning and investment in partnerships to reduce the universal access gap.

One or more of the universal access stakeholders should take the lead in helping to build synergies between the growing number of organisations that are involved directly or indirectly in promoting universal access. Leadership would produce a step shift in the scale of action oriented to reducing universal access gaps. It would provide a stronger basis for ensuring that global access to information and communication technologies - ‘GAIT’ - becomes a reality for many more people in developing countries.

Strengthening the legal and regulatory environment for freedom and pluralism in information, supporting capacity strengthening, networking, and elevation of standards of media at national and local levels to promote the exchange of independent and pluralist information, raising awareness on rights to official information and strengthening mechanisms to provide and access information, strengthening communication mechanisms for vulnerable groups .

## **Useful Links For Further Research**

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002352/235297e.pdf>

<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/peace-justice/>

<https://economist.com.na/32589/speak-your-mind/access-to-information-is-a-pervasive-local-problem-not-only-a-government-headache/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/feb/13/rough-sleeper-political-decisions-stop-criminalising>

<https://en.unesco.org/iduai2016/about-day>



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<https://planeta.com/iduai2017/>

<http://globalaccessibilitynews.com/2017/09/26/web-accessibility-for-universal-access-to-information-and-sdgs/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I56cXeCt2yE>

<https://qnl.qa/en/about/news/qnl-and-unesco-celebrate-first-international-day-universal-access-information>

<https://www.un.org.ir/all-stories/item/3670-28-september-2016-iran-celebrates-the-international-day-of-universal-access-to-information>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Access\\_to\\_Information\\_Day](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Access_to_Information_Day)

<http://www.undp.org/policy/docs/povertyreduction-humanrights0603.pdf>

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<http://ela-newsportal.com/how-to-enable-universal-access-to-information/>

<https://www.ifla.org/node/10887>

<http://globalaccessibilitynews.com/2017/09/26/web-accessibility-for-universal-access-to-information-and-sdgs/>

<http://www.scimagojr.com/journalsearch.php?q=2600147401&tip=sid>

<http://uganda.um.dk/en/about-us/news/newsdisplaypage/?newsid=406ace64-aeca-4ab7-add5-491478a946c6>

<https://technologyatwork.itcilo.org/international-day-for-universal-access-to-information-september-28/>



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<http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/unesco-celebrates-int'l-day-universal-access-information-irbid>

<https://en.unesco.org/iduai2016>

<http://www.dictionary.com>

