

2017 INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO INFORMATION

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AT INTERCONTINENTAL HOTEL, BALACLAVA

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I am very happy to be with you today 28th September, the International Day for the Universal Access to Information.

Access to Information is an inalienable fundamental human right - as knowledge and information are the keys that open doors to personal development, success and fulfilment in life.

Moreover information is the key contributor to the realisation of all the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations.

However, the brutal fact is that a sizeable proportion of people on the Planet does not have access to necessary information. The whole world should be grateful to

UNESCO for organising this conference, which aims at finding ways and means for overcoming the Divides and Achieving the SDG's in Africa, with particular emphasis on Access to Information in line with the African Union's agenda to realise "**The Africa we Want**".

It is a great honour and privilege for Mauritius to host this ambitious International Conference. I thank UNESCO for this choice and for inviting me to be part of it.

After the successful achievement, albeit not altogether total, of the Millennium Development Goals over 15 years up to 2015, member states of the UN are now resolutely geared towards the 17 Sustainable Development Goals through the program: **Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**. It must be said that the sine-qua-non for the realisation of these goals is, of course availability of and universal access to information. In particular, Goal No. 16 proposes a specific target in ensuring public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements. The UN has noted that legislation that calls for freedom of information has increased steadily, but slow or inefficient implementation of such laws remains a concern. More than 110 countries have adopted freedom of information legislation and policies. However, expert assessments suggest that 47 of those countries fall short of having clear legal provisions for exceptions to that right, while another 47 countries lack sufficient provisions for public education.

"A successful democracy requires accountability, and accountability requires transparency" dixit Barack Obama, former President of the United States of America. What is important to know is that transparency can only be reflected

through availability and dissemination of information. In fact, access to information is of the essence in any country which aspires to be a real democracy.

The achievement of democratic governance goals requires that information be widely available. However, there must be special attention for the needs of those who are poor, vulnerable and frequently excluded from mainstream governance processes and institutions as a result of poor access to information and communication support. Poor and vulnerable groups often lack information that is vital to their lives – information on basic rights and entitlements, public services, health, education, work opportunities, public expenditure budgets, etc. They also lack visibility and voice to enable them to define and influence policy priorities and access resources. Access to information must be considered as an empowerment tool.

In a number of countries, political tensions, insecurity, threats of violence and crises within a country have a significant impact on access to information. Access to information and the free flow of information in countries in crisis are absolutely critical for providing effective humanitarian assistance.

At a global level, increasing insecurity has, in some instances, intensified governments' surveillance and censorship activities. Hence their tendency to withhold information under the guise of 'national security'. This is particularly the case in relation to Internet access and use. We need a good balance between national security considerations and privacy concerns with regards to access to information.

While the media is a powerful purveyor of information, the media industry must avoid concentration of media ownership and curb down sensationalist reporting. There is need for mentoring within the profession to foster critical and analytical skills and to agree on a solid mechanism for self-regulation.

To ensure universal access to information, every democratic country must protect freedom of expression, the free operation of the media and development of public service broadcasting. There must be laws and regulations that promote and implement the right to access official information. These must be supplemented by legislation that protects freedom of association and organisations' rights to produce and disseminate information.

The 13th edition of World Economic Forum's Global Information Technology Report (GITR) published in 2016 reported that the Sub-Saharan Africa countries continue to develop their ICT infrastructure but at a relatively slow pace. Emphasis is being placed on mobile telephony and the vulgarisation of Internet usage. These improvements have led to many important innovations that provide more and better services that were previously unavailable, such as financial services. In the field of information technology, Mauritius and South Africa were the only two African countries ranked in the top half of 148 countries, Mauritius being positioned at the 48th position and South Africa at the 70th position. According to the Internet World Statistics, 62.7% of the Mauritian population were internet users in March 2017.

Since yesterday, through to-day and the following few days UNESCO is hosting panels, workshops and discussion sessions.

This morning's session is devoted to e-learning Africa 2017 under the theme “**Overcoming Divides and Achieving the SDG's**” and the launching of a long-term initiative entitled “**International Platform on knowledge economy**”.

We are to-day in the digital information age. Knowledge, that is information, is power that leads to success. Failure or lagging behind can only stem from ignorance, that's lack of information.

With the digital revolution, access to information is made so easy and abundant; but it is only those who are computer literate and who have access to the hardwares and softwares who can reap the benefits. If the computer illiterate section of the world population is left behind, unattended, the divide will further widen. The uneducated and uninformed become prey to exploitation. UNESCO rightly believes that Universal Access to high quality education is key to the building of peace, sustainable social and economic development and intercultural dialogue.

It is comforting to know that one panel will focus on addressing challenges of Universal Access to information for developing countries and gender sensitive capacity building so as to ensure inclusive development and free flow of information and images. This panel will also focus on the international strategy of cooperation on cyber space for peace and security and sustainable development.

When it comes to Cyber space, one of the most important issue is **info ethics**. It is important that this conference addresses the misuse and abuse of the Internet.

Hate speeches, fake news, discrimination, defamation, racism, radicalisation, pornography, censorship are thorny ethical issues not so easy to find solutions for. But we must hope that the panel which will consider this topic of **info ethics** as it relates to SDG 16 – Peace, Justice and strong Institutions, will come up with interesting and workable solutions.

It is also very interesting to note that one discussion session will focus on the training programme about the discipline of Cyber law, whereby experience will be shared, while exploring what lessons African Nations can take from the Indian Cyber law experience allowing Africa to leapfrog into the next level of Cyber law jurisprudential growth.

Distinguished Delegates.

Ladies & Gentlemen

It is indeed a great honour and privilege for me to associate myself with this momentous conference. I wish the conference great success and subsequently a fruitful and a sustainable implementation of the **Port Louis Declaration**, or should we say the **Mauritius Declaration**, that can only usher in peace and prosperity the world over.

Thank you for your attention.