UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Pan African Conference on Access to Information (PACAI) and Highway Africa Conference 2011

Joint opening session

Speech by

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Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here. As you may know, UNESCO is mandated by its Constitution to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image. Within this mission, our support of free, independent and pluralistic media is grounded in the belief that it fundamentally underpins democracy, dialogue and sustainable development. Furthermore, Africa is one of the two global priorities within our strategy for 2008-2013, Gender Equality being the other.

Access to information and journalism education have a critical bearing upon both.

The discussions to take place during the Pan African Conference on Access to Information and the Highway Africa Conference are therefore of central importance to our Organization. As we build upon a twenty-year process that started with the adoption of the Windhoek Declaration in a UNESCO-sponsored seminar, it is an honour for me to take part in these sister events.

In 1991, African journalists gathered in Windhoek to express their concerns and needs, setting standards that contributed to change the media landscape in the region and throughout the world. That meeting would also give way to the proclamation, in 1993, of World Press Freedom Day by the UN General Assembly. I hope our deliberations will be as fruitful as those held back in 1991 and those resulting in the African Charter on Broadcasting in 2001.

Ever since the Windhoek Declaration was agreed upon, freedom of expression and press freedom have been guaranteed constitutionally and through particular laws and regulations in several African countries. The African media sector has become increasingly plural. The first decade after Windhoek saw the expansion of media liberalization, as well as important efforts to foster the transition from state to independent public service broadcasting. Also, community media are a key part of media pluralism in Africa. Moreover, the spread of the Internet, mobile and other information and communication technologies has brought unprecedented opportunities for the production, dissemination and sharing of news.

In the past few years, initiatives at the national, regional and international level have also made possible a number of achievements in terms of access to information in Africa, yet significant obstacles remain. The number of countries in the region that have enacted access to information laws in line with international standards is still very limited, and the implementation of this type of legislation in those countries where it exists has run into notable difficulties.

In this context, it is vital to create institutional and human capacities that can guarantee that governments adequately respond to public information requests and
automatically make available key categories of information. This implies sufficient allocation of financial resources, as well as strong political will to move towards openness at all administrative levels and to avoid backsliding in regards to previously achieved progress. It also calls for the establishment of effective enforcement and monitoring mechanisms. Awareness about the right to access information should be more widely expanded among the population at large, and among specific groups, especially those who are marginalized or vulnerable. In our digitalized times, there are also complex emerging challenges related to safeguarding freedom of expression, privacy, personal safety and other legally protected interests that need to be addressed.

Access to information laws and policies are inherently linked to democratic governance, empowerment and development, by underpinning citizens’ informed participation in public processes, strengthening governments’ openness and responsiveness, expanding opportunities for journalism education and contributing to combating corrupt practices. Enhanced flows of information can bring tangible improvements in terms of access to education, healthcare and the provision of basic public services in general. Consider the difference that the availability of critical information related to HIV and AIDS, income-generating opportunities or protection against gender-based violence can make, for example. Access to information critically affects each and every African, and can be seen as instrumental to the achievement of each and every one of their rights.

As I mentioned, one of the principles that sustain a democratic system is citizen participation in public affairs. That journalists represent a vital pillar in this regard underscores the need to foster their professionalism and adherence to ethical standards. By improving access to and the quality of journalism education, newsrooms stand a better chance of being staffed by well-trained and critically-minded journalists. Their reporting can help cultivate a well-informed citizenry, which is in turn likely to influence the processes of democracy and development in their societies. Moreover, by disseminating quality information, the news media strengthen accountability mechanisms. In line with these premises, UNESCO is undertaking efforts to nurture excellence in African journalism education by supporting institutional capacity, curriculum development and networking, among other actions, and particularly through the International Programme for the Development of Communication.

Also relevant to stimulating effective participation in democratic and governance processes are challenges of a different kind. Free, independent and pluralistic media, Internet and ICTs can greatly facilitate access to information. However, there is still much to do in terms of furthering their reach in Africa. In addition, besides a few promising initiatives, in general not sufficient attention is being given to media and information literacy in the region. UNESCO is working closely with African partners in this area, understanding that the impact of access to information is magnified exponentially when citizens have the competencies (knowledge, skills and attitude) to critically and effectively engage with the media, Internet and other information providers.
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Connecting the themes of both conferences that bring us here, I now invite you to reflect on how access to information, along with journalism education, can be pivotal for African media’s role in meeting the global sustainability challenge. By channeling information back and forth between policy-makers and citizens, media can facilitate the collaborative design of sound climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies. Moreover, media can demand government and private sector accountability on environmental matters. Media are uniquely prepared to disseminate life-saving information before, during and after natural disasters, or in a food crisis context. However, for media to fulfill these functions, their timely access to accurate information and the support of a strong system of journalism education need to be in place. This presupposes the elimination of legal obstacles to the disclosure of information on issues at the core of sustainable development. Capacity gaps also have to be filled: for governments to supply such information, for the public to demand it, for journalists to produce quality reporting on the related topics.

As we commemorate the adoption of the Windhoek Declaration, let us also keep in mind that next year marks the 20th Anniversary of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, which enshrined access to information, public participation and access to justice on environmental matters in its Principle 10. Considering that furthering both access to information and media’s role toward ensuring sustainable development in Africa are inter-locking goals, I encourage the delegates from both conferences to provide their feedback on the draft African Platform on Access to Information. Kindly do so by 2 p.m. tomorrow, in order for your comments to be taken into account in the version that will be presented for adoption on Sunday afternoon.

I would like to conclude by thanking the Windhoek +20 Campaign for their commendable initiative, as well as those who took part in the organization of the events that convened us here. And of course I am grateful to everyone in the audience, for your contribution to the cause of advancing access to information in Africa.

Thank you.