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Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
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Организация
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Concept Note

for the Celebration of the International Day for Universal Access to Information (IDUAI)

2020

I. Overarching Theme:

In times of crisis, constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information save lives, build trust and help develop sustainable policies. They strengthen access to health, education and justice, and can contribute towards reduced inequalities.

II. Slogan:

Access to Information – Saving lives, Building Trust, Bringing Hope!

III. Aim of the IDUAI 2020 Commemoration:

- To advocate for the adoption and implementation of sound constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for access to information in times of crisis;
- To endorse principles of the right to information in times of crisis and underline the role of multiple stakeholders in that view;

- To highlight the impact of proactive sharing of information on health and education, as well as of inclusive and gender-sensitive initiatives, focusing on vulnerable groups, for prosperity and sustainable development;

IV. Deliverables and Expected Outcomes:

- Presentation of key findings from UNESCO's 2020 survey on progress made on "public access to information" as per Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicator 16.10.2;
- IDUAI 2020 Declaration on "Access to information in Times of Crisis" and additional good practices identified in implementing statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information;
- Campaign to raise awareness of the importance of the Right to Information in times of crisis, and to promote principles of the right to public information to save lives and address the multiple crises triggered by COVID-19.

V. Why Access to Information Matters:

The growing number of Right to Information constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees in recent years shows that information has become an important area of policy development and a key dimension for the implementation of these policies.¹

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the plan of action adopted by all UN Member States to protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, recognises public access to information within Goal 16 that covers the need to promote peaceful and inclusive societies (target 16.10).

UNESCO is the UN designated agency tasked to monitor progress in this area, through indicator 16.10.2 on the number of countries that **adopt** and **implement** constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information.

¹ UNESCO. 2019. *Access to information: a new promise for sustainable development. In-Focus Series | World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development* <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000371485>

Recognizing the significance of access to information, the 74th UN General Assembly proclaimed 28 September as the International Day for Universal Access to Information (IDUAI) at the UN level in October 2019. The day had been proclaimed by the UNESCO General Conference in 2015.

Freedom of Information laws and/or policies are the cornerstone of public access to information. Once adopted, these measures establish a "right-to-know" legal process by which requests may be made for government-held information (and sometimes with wider scope), to be received freely or at minimal cost. As per the SDG target, there is also the issue of implementation of guarantees for public access to information. Such guarantees are necessary, but their effective implementation is also key to lead to sustainable development.

Access to information is a human right that serves the entire public, in particular civil society and the media. When citizens have access to information held by public bodies, societies as a whole are empowered to contribute to sustainable development. Access to information is essential to hold leaders accountable, to increase safety in the field of health and to ensure other human rights. The right to information, especially when overseen by special bodies, ensures that governments inform citizens on their actions, which is especially relevant in times of crisis. Such transparency and disclosure contribute to sustainable development in general and ensure access to health, education and justice in particular.

A holistic response to the COVID-19 acknowledging the Right to Access to Information, but also other human rights such as the Right to Freedom of Expression and the Right to Privacy are essential in addressing the pandemic in 2020.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which monitors the implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), has emphasized that information accessibility is a key component of all rights including the right

to health.² The Committee has specifically warned against censoring health-related information.

VI. Background:

Over the past 15 years, global progress on access to information, both in law and in practice, has been significant, as noted in the 2017/2018 edition of UNESCO's report on World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development. According to the 2019 in focus edition of the report, the number of laws that specifically guaranteed the rights of citizens to access government information went from 40 in 2009, to 126 laws adopted worldwide in 2019. This represents an extraordinary surge, marking an increase of more than threefold in one decade.

These trends are especially important since access to information contributes to advancing the right to freedom of expression, and to strengthening health, education, gender equality, building efficient and accountable institutions, countering corruption and ensuring that crises such as the COVID-19 outbreak are addressed efficiently. Accordingly, governments that recognize the crosscutting significance of access to information are more likely to strengthen associated legal frameworks and their implementation.

As the custodian agency for the global monitoring of SDG Indicator 16.10.2 on Access to Information, UNESCO carried out in 2019 a survey on constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees. The findings of the survey demonstrated the need towards better design and implementation of legislation, and pointed out that better implementation requires investment and provision of legal advice, promotion, monitoring and capacity-building assistance, particularly in developing countries.³

VII. The IDUAI 2020 Theme in Brief

² <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Coronavirus-final.pdf>

³ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000371485>

IDUAI 2020 will focus on the right to information in times of crisis and on the advantages of having constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information to save lives, build trust and help the formulation of sustainable policies through and beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

During the IDUAI 2020, participants will advocate for sound constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for access to information and their implementation in times of crisis. The elaboration and validation of principles of the right to information in times of crisis and the role of multiple stakeholders will contribute to necessary implementation guidelines in times such as the present.

The celebrations will also showcase the impact of proactive disclosure of information on health, education and inclusive and gender-sensitive initiatives.

When authorities fail to proactively share health-related information and data or block access to such information, populations suffer adverse impacts and cannot fully enjoy their right to health. Informing citizens in times of crisis should be an integral component of any campaign aimed to address health emergencies. Policies and practices that could be put in place to advance public access to information, will be the second theme of the IDUAI 2020.

VIII. Additional IDUAI themes for national commemorations:

- Public information and its role in addressing disinformation, especially in times of crisis.
- The right to information and prerequisites to protect personal information.
- Open data, data usage and the right to information.
- The role of access to information in reducing inequalities (the right to information as a precondition for persons with disabilities to overcome exclusion in times of crisis).
- The role of Media and Information Literacy in combatting the COVID-19 “infodemic”.

UNESCO materials presented during the Day:

- Monitoring SDG 16.10.2 - Report to the IPDC Council (to be published in 2020);
- Access to Information: a New Promise for Sustainable Development (UNESCO publication, 2019) <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000370686>
- UNESCO SDG 16.10.2 Questionnaire and Methodology (UNESCO website, 2020); <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-launches-2020-survey-public-access-information>
- DISINFODEMIC Deciphering COVID-19 disinformation & DISINFODEMIC: Dissecting responses to COVID-19 disinformation
- Report on Freedom of Expression and Addressing Disinformation on the Internet (Broadband Commission)
- UNESCO Media and Information Literacy resources.

IX. Global Structure of the UNESCO Advocacy Campaign for the IDUAI 2020:

The global commemoration events in Tashkent, Uzbekistan and Monrovia, Liberia have been postponed to the end of the year.

Details will be announced as the situation clarifies. Instead several online events will be organized around the date of 28 September:

- (i) **High level online panel “Access of Information – Saving lives, Building Trust, Bringing Hope!”** Organized on 28 September to launch the date and the theme
 - Opening Statements of the UNESCO Director General or her representative;
 - Representative of Liberian Government on the importance of the Day;
 - Representative of the Uzbek Government on the International Conference;
 - Partners of UNESCO within the UN System (e.g. WHO, UNDP);
- (ii) **Webinar “Access to Information, transparency and openness are the international standard which is taking forward Agenda 2030 in times of crisis”**
Organized together with the Open Government Partnership addressing issues related to:

- How to uphold international standards for Access to Information? What are the consequences of suspending or altering Access to Information laws and their implementation during crises?
- How to get ready in advance and what are the benefits of having legal frameworks in place?
- What is the oversight role of parliaments in ensuring prioritization of rights and what kind of policies are required for Governments to maintain Access to Information laws in full scope in times of crisis?
- What is the role of Access to Information laws during crises in reducing inequalities and saving lives *vis a vis* the existing information, linguistic and social divide?
- How to plan for increased proactive publication of information in times of crises and improve systems that permit rapid updating of documents and data?
- How has the provision of COVID-19-related information and data by governments impacted the response to the crisis ?How can investment in robust information collection, provision and storage capabilities strengthen the capacity to respond to crises?

(ii) **Webinar “Access to Information implementation and Crisis Resolution during COVID-19 Outbreak”** Organized with the Information Commissioners International Conference addressing issues related to:

- How can access to information saves lives? What are some best practices in reviewing the implementation measures in times of crises?
- How to get ready in advance - benefits of having access to information implementation mechanisms in place;
- How Access to Information implementation bodies directed other government agencies in providing information in times of crises;

- How to invest in robust information collection and provision of capabilities in order to strengthen capacity to respond to requests;
- Digital technology – how to get ready for going online in digitalizing Access to Information implementation;
- How to enhance access for persons with disabilities, other vulnerable groups;
- How to upgrade management of record-keeping and processing information requests if the requirement to provide information “as soon as possible” is to be maintained;
- Why it matters to prioritize COVID-19 related requests in such fields as health, economic, education, employment and social measures.

(iv) **Webinar on measuring SDG 16.10.2**, organized with the Global Forum for Media Development, the World Bank, and the United Nations Development Program;

- How can monitoring and reporting on progress on Access to Information provide meaningful insights for the achievement of SDGs?
- Why does Access to Information data collected by the governments matter? And how it can be used in complementarity with data from CSOs?
- How does the data (including on results and commitments?) feed into national and international planning and reporting? How can Access to Information monitoring be used to respond to health crises?
- How can countries be more active in the monitoring and reporting on Access to Information within the context of SDGs? What needs to be done and what resources are needed?

(v) **Webinar on infodemics**, organized together with MIL coalition;

(vi) **Webinar on Open Science for building resilience in the face of COVID-19**;

(vii) **Webinar on the COVID-19 outbreak and Access to Information in Africa**;

(viii) **Hackathon** in coordination with UNESCO Cairo Regional Office for Science (TBC);

(ix) **Ten online national IDUAI 2020 events, organized by UNESCO field offices.**

X. Partners:

- Member States hosting UNESCO events;
- Transparency International;
- World Bank;
- UNDP;
- WHO;
- Open Government Partnership;
- UNODC;
- UNOHCHR;
- Open Society Justice Initiative;
- International Conference of Information Commissioners;
- NGOs.