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The right to information - a fundamental right

UNESCO office in Kathmandu and OHCHR-Nepal today launched a joint campaign to promote the right to information with the film «I am Nepali – Hear My Voice». A 23 minute documentary, “I am Nepali” highlights the obstacles faced by many Nepalese people in accessing information during this period of great political change and development, as well as the great impact access to information can have on the lives of Nepalese people.

An ex-bonded labourer from Bardiya says “Nothing comes here, no radio, no newspapers. No one has a radio in the camp”.

A man from the Gaine community in Kaski says “Here we have no development. We’ve heard of the Constituent Assembly, but we don’t know what it is. We want to know more of what this means”.

“The principle that public bodies hold information not for themselves but on behalf of the public is essential for free flow of information. The right to freedom of information, also known as the right (for all citizens) to access information held by public bodies, is central to promote accountability, good governance, universal access to essential services, local ownership - all elements also vital to eradicate poverty and to achieve sustainable development”, said Mr. Abdul Waheed Khan, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Communication and Information in his message on the occasion of the first public screening of «I am Nepali – Hear My Voice».

The right to information is enshrined in international law, in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 19 of the ICCPR guarantees freedom of opinion and expression, and clearly states that these rights include the right to seek and receive information. Nepal acceded to the ICCPR in 1990, and the Government of Nepal has a legal obligation to act to guarantee the right to information. The 1990 Constitution of Nepal guaranteed the right to information, which was also recognized in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the Interim Constitution. The legal foundation for the right to information is present in Nepal. But the challenges facing the Government and people of Nepal to ensure this right in practice are many.

“In relation to the current peace process, the right to information means that Government and political parties have a responsibility to share information about processes of decision making, about why decisions are made, and about how they affect the lives of people. This highlights the need for Government to be effective at the local level, where it can share information with rural communities who are often marginalized from Government and the seat of power. In the lead up to

Constitution Assembly elections, political parties will have a special obligation to act responsibly and to share accurate information. In Nepal, we have seen in recent times how inflammatory rumour can be in a society where long conflict has eroded social trust. People need accurate information, on time, in order to be able to trust such important and often complex political developments” said Lena Sundh, Representative in Nepal of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.