



OHCHR-Nepal

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Address at the launch of the film “I am Nepali, hear my voice”

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UNESCO-Nepal and OHCHR-Nepal today launch a joint campaign to promote the right to information with the film “I am Nepali – hear my voice!”. This documentary 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.

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

The right to information has long been held to be a fundamental human right. In its very first session, in 1946, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 59 (1), stating that “Freedom of information is a fundamental human right [...] and touch-stone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated.”

Access to information is a foundation of democracy and freedom of information is essential for the fulfilment of all other rights. The right to information is indispensable for creating a more open and democratic society; it is a key element in the effort to reduce poverty, and a tool for challenging corruption and enhancing transparency.

The right to information is enshrined in international law. Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) guarantees freedom of opinion and expression, and expressly 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 take the appropriate steps to guarantee the right to information.

At the national level, the 1990 Constitution of Nepal guaranteed the right to information, which was also recognized in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and

the Interim Constitution. However, despite this legal foundation, the challenges facing the Government and people of Nepal to ensure this right in practice are great.

In her recent visit to Nepal, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, focused on the human rights issues related to discrimination and social exclusion. The diversity of Nepalese society – which should be among the country's greatest assets – also sees many groups and communities marginalized and excluded due to longstanding prejudice and discrimination. If those peoples who have been traditionally left on the margins of society are to feel that the peace process in Nepal is at last offering them an opportunity to be equal members of society, they need to have sufficient information about the process in order to be able to participate in it. Information can help to unify a diverse society. If all people have access to the same information about the path that Nepal is taking then they can feel that they have a stake in making the process work. On the other hand, if people do not understand how decisions are made, if they do not understand the major changes that are taking place in Nepal or how they can participate in the process, then they will be left out of the process and lose trust in it.

After 11 years of conflict and the historic April 2006 Jana Aandolan, transparency and access to information are essential if the people of Nepal are to be able to participate in decision-making about transforming their country. Government and political parties have a responsibility to share information with the people, so that they in turn be part of building sustainable peace and democracy.

Nepal remains one of the poorest countries in Asia. Effective poverty alleviating programmes require accurate information on problems hindering development. Information can empower poor communities to battle the circumstances in which they live. And information is an essential tool for open Government, accountable to the people who, through information, are able to understand and question Government policy and action and so play an active role in shaping their future.

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 communities that 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 damage 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. This puts a lot of responsibility on media to report accurately. It also puts responsibility on leaders, not least in the context of the situation in Terai today, to ensure that their organizations, parties and sympathizers allow journalists to work in safety.

Beyond the political transition process itself, access to information contributes directly to economic growth and development. The ability to find and apply information can help people tackle some of the most pressing problems in their lives, such as poverty, health, education, disaster prevention and care of the environment. Timely essential public health information can save lives of children and vulnerable groups. Early warning systems can help reduce the loss of life from natural disasters. Students and teachers need access to quality learning resources.

In the UNESCO-OHCHR film “I am Nepali” you will see Nepalese people from the Terai and from the hills, from rural communities and from the city. Many do not speak Nepali. Many do not read or write. Many do not feel like they have any effective way to learn about the fundamental changes going on in their society. Many feel left behind due to this lack of knowledge. They are all Nepali, and they all have the right to information. If the promise of the Jana Aandolan is to be fulfilled, and the aspirations of Nepalese people for a fairer society in which they can all take their place as equals is to be realised, then this inequality in access to information needs to be recognized and addressed by Government and political parties. By delivering on the right to information, they can make a big step toward promoting so many other human rights which are fundamental to building sustainable peace and democracy in Nepal.

Thank you