



Children's Declaration on Access to Information

PREAMBLE

We, the participants in the **Children and Access to Information Workshop** held on International Right to Information Day, and Day of the Namibian Child, on 28 September 2014:

Remembering Article 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child which states: "The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds";

Recalling Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 10 December 1948, which guarantees that: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers";

Considering Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights which states: "Every individual shall have the right to receive information"; and that "every individual shall have the right to express and disseminate his opinions within the law";

Reaffirming Article 4 of the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa, which provides that "Public bodies hold information not for themselves but as custodians of the public good and everyone has a right to access this information, subject only to clearly defined rules established by law";

Noting the African Model Law on Access to Information for Africa and the;

Acknowledging the Windhoek Declaration which promotes an Independent and Pluralistic African Press and has stated explicitly the Right of Freedom of expression and information for every individual.

Expressing our sincere appreciation for the support provided by the fesMedia Africa and the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) Namibia Chapter;

Having used the **African Platform on Access to Information Declaration** as our guiding document hereby declare that:

- To the greatest extent possible, information should be available in a child-friendly format at times and places frequented by children. These include but are not limited to schools, playgrounds, libraries, on-line, public transport, civil society organisations, hospitals and community clinics, churches, billboards, through mainstream and social media, and at child-centred events.
- It should be availed not only in English, but in local languages because many of us are more fluent in our mother-tongue. This will also ensure that indigenous languages do not become extinct.
- The information needs of children with disabilities are severely neglected. As citizens of this country,

they deserve to know what is happening and why. Government, civil society and the media need to put greater effort into catering to their information needs.

- Using various forms of artistic expression, such as theatre, music, poetry, and children's books is also a great way of keeping children informed. We thus call on government, as well as the private and civil society sectors to use these formats to transmit information.
- There should be more opportunities and platforms for children to hold leadership accountable, as it is our right as citizens in a democratic country. This should include appointing formalising the Children's Parliament and ensuring that all local council have Junior Councils.
- We should have access to information to empower us and enable us to make informed decisions about our own lives, and to participate in public life and defend our rights.
- We require access to information that is beneficial to us; that can help us build a brighter future not only for ourselves, but for the Namibian nation as a whole.
- We have the right to information that is informative and empowering, not information which promotes ignorance and unhealthy behaviour (e.g. with regard to alcohol, rules prohibiting the sale to children doesn't teach children about the dangers of alcohol, or how to consume it responsibly when they're older).
- We want the full story, not half the story, or biased or distorted information. We want current, relevant, accurate, useful information.
- There should be more child-friendly publications catering specifically to the information needs of children. They should be written by or with children, for children, encouraging youth entrepreneurship and youth innovation.
- The media should refrain from publishing information that victimises and unnecessarily classifies children. The media should print positive, empowering stories about children, without unreasonably differentiating between or discriminating against us based on race, gender, religion, disability, poverty or sexual orientation. We want an enabling environment to allow children greater access to information, allowing children to prosper, develop intellectually and academically, and to generally broaden our knowledge. Being informed of developments in our communities allows us to become more involved in those communities and contribute to society.
- Information should also, where possible, come in the form of or be accompanied by images and visuals, as these have been proven to stimulate young, developing minds.
- Public information should be available at no cost to children, especially information that contributes to the long-term empowerment of children.
- We live in an information age that requires access to information and communication technologies (ICTs). Government has an obligation to ensure equitable access to ICTs for children.
- The media should disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to children. The government should wherever reasonably possible facilitate and encourage access to such information by children and youth.
- The government has the duty to make publicly available information about educational policies and assessments of their impacts, school performance data, and budgets for education at all government levels. The government also has a positive obligation to provide information about individual schools, including their admission policies and school governance and management.
- Governments, civil society, education institutions, and the media should promote media and information literacy, to ensure that children can understand and take advantage of new technologies, and to be able to participate intelligently and actively in public matters, and enforce their right of access to information.

Key Areas of Concern:

EDUCATION & HEALTH

Considering the importance of access to information for the provision of quality education and health services:

- Government must avail information on educational policies and practices, such as the Teacher's Code of Conduct, school governance and performance data, as well as regional and national budgets for education. We also want to know what the consequences of actions that go against policy are. How, for example, are teachers held accountable when they violate their Code of Conduct?
- We all have dreams for a better future, but we don't know how to achieve them. This is why we call for career guidance that is in tune with contemporary employment patterns, and considers our revolving capacity as learners.
- We also require information child-friendly health services, how to keep our bodies healthy, and maintain hygiene standards. Children with disabilities also need such information that is designed to cater to their needs.
- Teenage pregnancy negatively affects the health and education of many young citizens, we thus call for sex education that is realistic and straightforward. We are told we must condomise, but we are not shown how to use a condom or femidom.
- The suicide rate among teenagers is high in Namibia because we deal with many challenges such as poverty, sexual and domestic violence. We thus call for information that focuses on the mental and emotional health of children, and how we can maintain it despite the challenges we face daily.

CIVIL LIBERTIES & RESPONSIBILITIES

Emphasising that access to information is an integral part of the fundamental human right of freedom of expression, essential for the recognition and achievement of every person's civil, political and socio-economic rights, and as a mechanism to promote democratic accountability, good governance:

- We call for the Constitution of Namibia to be taught in school, in particular Chapter 3. In Social Studies we are told we have rights, but it is not explained in detail, neither are we informed how to put our rights and responsibilities in practice.
- In order to abide to the country's laws and regulations, we need access to information to make educated decisions before we act on something that could forever change our lives.
- Information on our surroundings and how we as children fit in is essential. For example, shebeens are a major part of our lives because the noise and number of people frequenting them affects our family and study time. We need information on policies and laws that apply to them, such as what time they supposed to close, to hold them accountable when they do not abide by prescribed laws.
- Children are citizens too, and we need representatives who can stand up and speak out for us. We therefore need access to information on how to create a critical mass of child activists. The media should also tell the stories of those children who are already serving as leaders and activists in their communities to inspire other children to bring positive change.
- We also need information on when our identity should be protected and when it can be made public. Sometimes the media exposes the identity of children when they've been victims of a crime or committed a crime themselves, and this can lead to victimisation.
- We are the custodians of our Planet Earth, it is our responsibility to protect and take care of it, as it does us. In order to do that we need access to information on how our natural resources are managed. Government and the private sector should proactively publish all information including policies, impact assessments, agreements, subsidies, licenses, permits and revenues relating to the exploitation of our natural resources. We also require information on how to protect and care for our environment so that future generations can also enjoy the natural beauty of our land of wide open spaces.

SAFETY & SECURITY

Every child deserves the best possible life, and a secure, safe and happy childhood is the foundation.

- We need information on how to keep ourselves safe and secure when shopping or in a public place; when moving to a new neighbourhood; when going to and from school; when using the internet, and how to protect ourselves from cyber bullying. This information should form part of our life skills curriculum in school.
- We also need to know if children can be arrested, and if so, under what conditions. If we are arrested and have to go to court, we need to understand the role of children's representatives in court, and who they are.

GOVERNANCE

- Reaffirming that access to information is the right of all natural and legal persons, which consists of the right to seek, access and receive information from public bodies and private bodies performing a public function and the duty of the state to provide such information:
- We call on public and private bodies to not only provide us with information, but to also consult with us on policies, regulations and activities that directly or indirectly affect us. We don't have to agree, but we will at least have the opportunity to agree to disagree.
- We also need access to information to hold those responsible for implementation accountable.
- We call on government and civil society to create more child-lead platforms so that we develop leadership skills and prepare ourselves for national leadership roles as adults.
- We call on the National Assembly to provide information on sittings and motions to be debated and when, and how we can be part of these debates. We further call on the National Assembly to formalise the Children's Parliament and provide it with more support, as this body's full potential is not harnessed at present. We also need information on how children can be part of the Children's Parliament and what its functions are.
- We call on all local councils to provide information on Junior Councils, its role and how children can be a part of it.

CALL TO ACTION

In light of the above, the children of Namibia call on:

Government of the Republic of Namibia: The more secretive a government, the more corrupt it is. We need to stay informed regarding the governance of our beloved Namibia. We call on government to be transparent and inclusive regarding its actions. Nothing About Us, Without Us.

Civil Society to:

- Engage with government in developing, enhancing and implementing children-specific ATI laws and policies;
- Monitor progress on the implementation of children-specific ATI laws and policies;
- Create awareness on children and ATI, and provide assistance to facilitate information access by children;
- Make the best use of access to information mechanisms to monitor governments' fulfilment of commitments to further children's rights, to demand the enhanced delivery of services targeted at children and to ensure that the public funds they are entitled to actually reach them.

- Promote September 28 as both African and International Right to Information Day and Day of the Namibian Child and, in particular, carry out activities on that date every year to advance the recognition, awareness and enjoyment of the right of access to information by children.

Media to:

- Respect editorial independence, professional ethics and journalism standards in their provision of information for or concerning children;
- Refrain from publishing information that victimises and unnecessarily classifies children. The media should print positive, empowering stories about children, without unreasonably differentiating between or discriminating against race, gender, religion, disability, poverty or sexual orientation. We are all children, and all have the same rights. We do not want to be discriminated, belittled and disrespected.
- Publish more stories focused on issues relevant to children, about children and featuring the voices, perspectives and opinions of children.
- Disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to children. Governments should facilitate the exchange and dissemination of such information and material from a diversity of cultural, national and international sources as well as the production and dissemination of information specifically for children and youth and wherever reasonably possible facilitate and encourage access to such information by children and youth.
- Respect and promote equality, and provide child representation within their information output;
- Promote the widest possible access to their information output, bearing in mind the methods most accessible to children;
- Enhance mechanisms for children to produce their own media content, and ensure that our voices are heard through the media.

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