



KOMISIONERI PËR TË DREJTËN
E INFORMIMIT DHE MBROJTJEN
E TË DHËNAVE PERSONALE

ALBANIA

ICIC XV

XV INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF INFORMATION COMMISSIONERS

CONFERENCE REPORT

Empowering Individuals through Access to Information:
Ensuring Transparency and Inclusivity
in an Interconnected World

3 - 5 June 2024
Tirana - Albania

ALBANIA
ICIC XV

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XV INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF INFORMATION COMMISSIONERS

Introduction

The XV Edition of the International Conference of Information Commissioners (ICIC) stands as a pivotal event on the global stage, uniting the most influential public officials, leaders, experts, and academics in the field of access to public information. This year, the conference delved into the theme: "Empowering individuals through Access to Information: Ensuring Transparency and Inclusivity in an Interconnected World," a topic that holds profound relevance in our current era. The XV Edition of the ICIC was hosted by the Information and Data Protection Commissioner of Albania. The significance of hosting a conference of this magnitude is not only to reiterate our dedication to transparency and accountability, but also to underscore the urgent need for international cooperation and citizen participation as the bedrock for constructing more just and democratic societies.

The brand identity of the XV ICIC was inspired by key parts of the Vjosa river. The crystal waters of Vjosa embodies transparency which is an essential element of the river contributing to its rich ecosystem which represents diversity and inclusivity.

The ICIC is a forum that offers a platform for exchanging knowledge, experiences, and best practices between information commissioners and guarantor bodies that safeguard the right to access public information worldwide. Our annual meeting is vital to strengthen the regulatory and operational frameworks that regulate access to information and to ensure that they adapt to the constant changes and challenges posed by the digital era. The conference allows for the discussion of the latest trends and developments in the field of transparency. It promotes the creation of strategic alliances and collaborative networks essential for effectively implementing access to information policies.

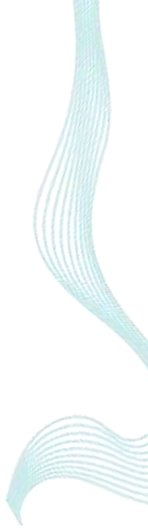
In the Digital Age, international cooperation is not just a buzzword, but an essential element to guarantee access to public information. In these times, geographical borders are no longer an obstacle to the transmission of information and knowledge, thus mutual support allows countries to learn from each other, share resources and face common challenges together. The ICIC, by bringing together representatives from various countries and regions, is not just a platform, but a catalyst for this exchange and promotes the harmonization of standards and practices that can significantly improve transparency and accountability at a global level. This cooperation is not just a nice-to-have, but especially crucial in the fight against corruption and in promoting good governance, as it allows for coordinated and effective action that can transcend the individual limitations of each country.

Transparency and access to information are not just tools, but powerful instruments that empower citizens and enable them to actively participate in decision-making. When citizens exercise their right to know, they can foster accountability within societies, demand transparency in the management of public resources, and engage in democratic processes in an informed manner. This citizen empowerment is not just a concept, but a vital force for building inclusive and equitable societies, where all individuals, regardless of their background or status, can influence the decisions that shape their lives. ICIC, by championing these principles, makes a significant contribution to fortifying democracy and ensuring that governments are truly accountable to their citizens, inspiring the audience to actively promote transparency.

The importance of involving people in decision making cannot be underestimated. Citizen participation is a critical component of democratic governance and is essential to ensure that public policies respond to the needs and aspirations of society. When citizens are involved in decision-making, a sense of belonging and commitment arises that can lead to greater social cohesion and a strengthening of trust in public institutions. The ICIC, through its various activities and debates, highlights the importance of this involvement and seeks to foster an environment where citizen participation is a tangible and practical reality.

In our increasingly interconnected world, technology assumes a pivotal role in championing transparency and access to information. Digital tools and open data initiatives have revolutionized the way governments engage with their citizens, opening access to an unprecedented wealth of public information. By addressing these issues in the XV Edition, ICIC underscores the importance of harnessing technology to foster proactive transparency and to ensure that information is readily available and accessible to all. Discussions on how digital tools can enhance transparency and accountability are crucial in ensuring that governments remain responsive and accountable in the digital age, instilling a sense of optimism about the future of information access.

Likewise, the conference highlights the importance of sustainability in open data initiatives. Governments must ensure that these initiatives are not only implemented effectively but also sustainable in the long term and can adapt to society's changing needs. This requires a continued commitment to innovation and improvement of information management systems, as well as the training of public officials and the education of citizens. The ICIC provides a space to discuss these issues and develop strategies to help governments maintain and improve their open data policies over time.



One of the highlights of this edition of the ICIC is its focus on inclusion. Access to information must be universal and guarantee that all citizens, regardless of their economic, social, or geographical situation, can access the information they need. The conference addresses the barriers preventing vulnerable groups from accessing information and seeks solutions promoting greater inclusion and equity. This process includes discussions about how technology is used to reach populations that have traditionally been excluded and how policies and practices can be developed to ensure that all citizens have equal opportunities to access information.

The importance of transparency and access to information in the fight against corruption cannot be underestimated. Corruption undermines trust in public institutions, weakens democracy, and hinders economic and social development. Access to information is an essential tool to prevent and combat corruption, as it allows citizens and the media to investigate and report corrupt practices. By bringing together experts and authorities in this field, the ICIC provides a forum to discuss best practices and strategies to use access to information to combat corruption and promote good governance.

The XV Edition of the ICIC is a vitally important event that highlights the relevance of transparency, access to information, and citizen participation in constructing democratic and fair societies. The conference not only provides a forum for the exchange of knowledge and experiences but also promotes international cooperation and collaboration between countries and regions.

DAY ONE: OPEN SESSION

The open session of the XV Edition of the ICIC was held on 3 and 4 June. The conference welcomed more than 200 participants, including members and Observers of the ICIC, as well as civil society representatives, international Organizations, journalists & media, academia, high public Officials from Albania, etc.

They delved into the debate of empowerment of individuals through access to information addressing various topics of concern and sharing their viewpoints and experiences on these matters.

OPENING REMARKS

The first day of the XV Edition of the International Conference of Information Commissioners kicked off with a series of profoundly inspiring and thoughtful speeches.



The opening started with Mr. Besnik Dervishi, the Information and Data Protection Commissioner of Albania. *In his welcome address, he stressed that “In these modern times, we are surrounded from the technological revolution and the process of digitization. During times of crisis, when the provision of information becomes crucial and can potentially be life-saving, it is imperative for all of us to*

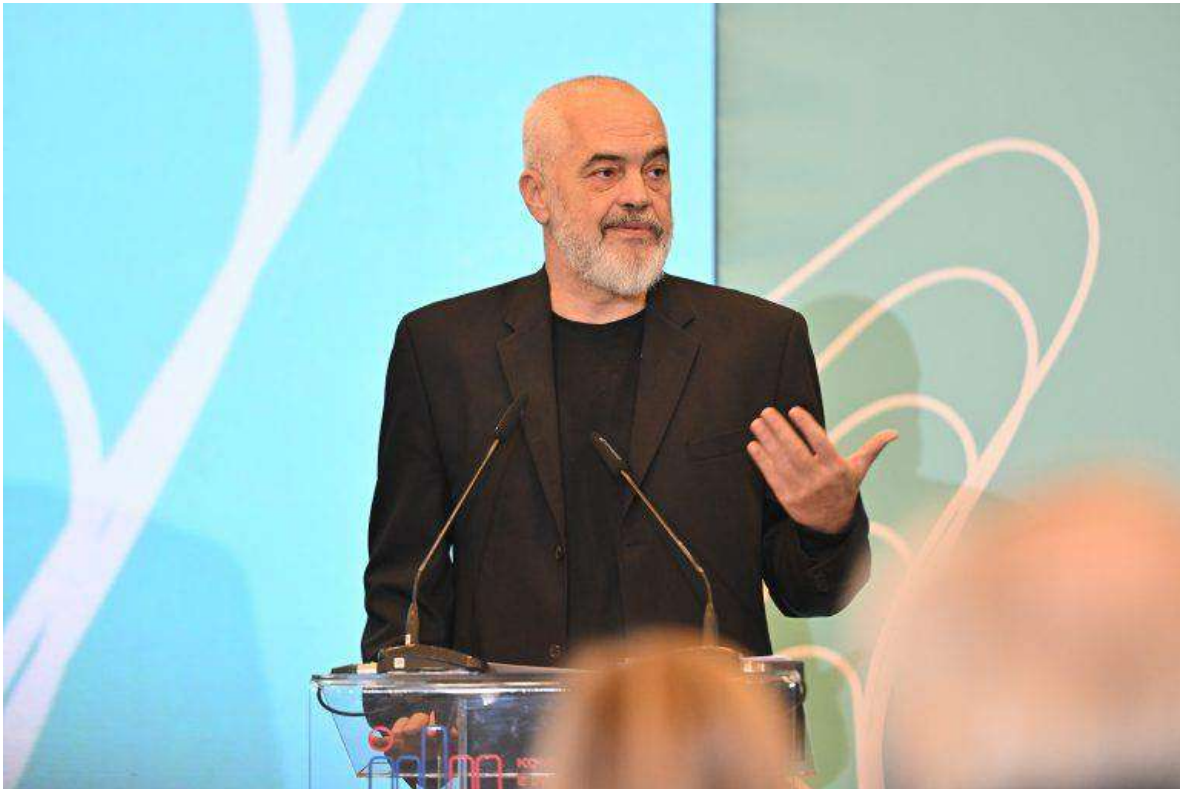
unite and work together to best serve our citizens, especially those who are marginalized.”



Commissioner Dervishi invited Mr. Adrián Alcalá Méndez, Chairman of the National Institute of Transparency, Access to Information and Protection of Personal Data of Mexico (INAI), to take the floor on behalf of the ICIC chair. The Chairman stated that *"the evolution of Albania towards a more open, more democratic and representative society, is a testimony of the transformative power of access to information and transparency"*.

OPENING ADDRESS

The Prime Minister of the Republic of Albania, Edi Rama offered a warm welcome to the ICIC participants: he highlighted that *"the right to information is not merely a democratic instrument, but a prerequisite for the health and development of functional democracies. To not be afraid of the light, but to embrace the light and to work much more closely with institutions such as the Office of the Commissioner, the Ombudsman, to ensure that everyone understands that from the government viewpoint, the dissemination of information and using it to the fullest to bring everything to light is an exercise, a very healthy process and a very effective tool against disinformation and misinformation."*



The attendees were also greeted through a video message by Mr. Tawfik Jelassi, Assistant Director General for Communication and Information at UNESCO, who held that *“this Conference is an important evidence of Albania’s sustainable commitment in terms of upholding the right to information, transparency and inclusiveness in an increasingly globalized world we are living in”*.



These speeches not only welcomed participants from around the world but also underlined the fundamental importance of access to information and how this right can transform lives and societies.

The ceremony began by emphasizing the relevance of the conference and thanking the international delegates for their presence. Likewise, the participants highlighted how access to information is an essential pillar of democracy, allowing citizens to participate in democratic processes in an informed manner and demand accountability from their governments. In this way, the importance of international collaboration was highlighted to share best practices and strengthen information access policies around the world.

The panelists delved into the connection between transparency and democratic development. It was stressed that access to information is not only a right, but a means to achieve other fundamental rights. They pointed out that an informed society is an empowered society, capable of making smarter decisions, demanding greater accountability from its leaders, and fostering a culture of transparency. Emphasis was also placed on the need to continue innovating in the field of transparency and adopting new technologies to make information more accessible and understandable for all.

The speeches converged on several vital points, underscoring the idea that access to information is a powerful tool for citizen empowerment. They all agreed that information has the power to change lives and spoke about how transparency has improved the quality of life of people in their respective countries.

The inauguration also highlighted the importance of international cooperation in promoting access to information. Speakers highlighted that, despite cultural and contextual differences, challenges related to transparency and accountability are universal. They shared their experiences and best practices and emphasized the need to work together to strengthen legal and operational frameworks that ensure access to information everywhere. This collaboration is essential to learn from each other and confront common challenges such as misinformation and institutional resistance to transparency.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Giuseppe Busia, President of the National Anti-Corruption Authority (ANAC), gave a keynote speech at the conference. He offered a comprehensive vision of access to

information from a global perspective, highlighting its relevance in the fight against corruption and promoting transparency and accountability in public institutions.

Busia argued that proactive transparency encourages true accountability. Citizens' ability to obtain accurate and timely information about their governments' activities is essential for monitoring and evaluating public performance. This access strengthens trust between those who govern and the governed, promoting a culture of integrity and ethics in public administration.



The president of the ANAC stressed the importance of information and communication technologies (ICT) in this context. He argued that digital tools are critical to making information more accessible and understandable to all citizens, regardless of their literacy or technical skills. He emphasized the need to develop robust and secure digital infrastructures that can handle large volumes of data and protect user privacy.

To conclude, Busia called for greater international cooperation to strengthen the legal and operational frameworks that guarantee access to information. He urged countries to share best practices and learn from the experiences of others, emphasizing that fighting corruption and promoting transparency are global

challenges that require global solutions. Specifically, Giuseppe Busia offered a broad and deep vision of the importance of access to information worldwide, leaving attendees with guidelines on where to move forward.

The attendees were also addressed by Mr. Darian Pavli, Judge at the European Court of Human Rights based in Strasbourg, who said that *"the fact that the ICIC is held in Tirana testifies the important progress that Albania has made, especially in the last decade, in guaranteeing the right to information and increasing the transparency of the public sector"*.



PANEL SESSION I: EMPOWERING VULNERABLE GROUPS THROUGH ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND TRANSPARENCY

The panel session on "The empowerment of vulnerable groups through access to information and transparency" was one of the focal points at the XV International Conference of Information Commissioners. This panel brought together information commissioners and human rights defenders from civil society, who discussed how access to information can be a powerful tool to improve the living conditions of society's most vulnerable groups.

The discussion began with a unanimous recognition that vulnerable groups, including ethnic minorities, women, children, people with disabilities, and rural

communities, often face significant barriers to accessing information that is essential to practice their rights and improve their well-being. The panelists agreed that lack of access to information perpetuates social and economic exclusion, and that government transparency can mitigate these inequalities.



One of the main points addressed was the need to design access to information policies that are inclusive and consider the diverse needs of these groups. Panelists discussed the importance of translating official documents into multiple languages, using accessible formats for people with visual and hearing disabilities, and distributing information through accessible media to those who live in rural areas or with limited Internet access.

The panelists stressed that empowering vulnerable groups through access to information is a matter of social justice and an investment in sustainable development. By providing all citizens, regardless of origin or situation, with the tools to access information, we can build a more just, equitable, and resilient society. The roundtable concluded with a call to action for governments and international organizations to redouble their efforts in promoting inclusive and effective transparency policies.

PANEL SESSION II: ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEDIA IN PROMOTING ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND TRANSPARENCY

Panel session II entitled "Role of civil society and the media in promoting access to information and transparency" was another XV International Conference of Information Commissioners highlight. This panel brought together representatives of civil society organizations, journalists, and heads of guarantor bodies who discussed the crucial importance of their roles in promoting transparency and access to information.

The discussion began with recognizing the fundamental role that civil society and the media play as intermediaries between the government and citizens. The panelists agreed that these entities are essential to ensure that public information reaches the general population effectively and understandably. In addition, they highlighted the importance of these institutions in monitoring and reporting irregularities and promoting a culture of transparency and accountability.



One of the central points of the debate was the need to strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations so that they can play their role more effectively. Panelists discussed the importance of providing training and resources to these organizations so they can use the digital and open data tools available to research and disseminate information. The panelists also highlighted the need to protect and

promote a safe and enabling environment so that civil society can operate without fear of reprisals.

Regarding the media, the specialists noted that journalists are responsible for interpreting and presenting information in a way that is accessible and relevant to the public. They stressed the importance of robust investigative journalism that can uncover cases of corruption and embezzlement and how this type of journalism depends mainly on access to public information.

Another key aspect discussed was collaboration between civil society, the media and government authorities. Panelists argued that effective collaboration can significantly improve transparency and access to information. Examples were mentioned of successful initiatives where cooperation between these actors has resulted in greater public scrutiny and the implementation of more transparent policies.

In this sense, the panelists made a call to action for civil society and the media to continue playing their role as guardians of transparency and accountability. The panelists emphasized that, in an era of misinformation and global challenges, their work is more important than ever to strengthen democracies and empower citizens. Emphasis was placed on the need for continued support and protection so that these actors can effectively promote access to information and transparency.

PARALLEL SESSION I: PROACTIVE TRANSPARENCY THROUGH DIGITAL TOOLS AND OPEN DATA INITIATIVES

Parallel Session I, "Proactive Transparency through Digital Tools and Open Data Initiatives," was a crucial part of the XV ICIC. This Session explored the various ways in which governments and organizations can leverage digital technologies and open data initiatives to promote transparency proactively.

The discussion began with an explanation of the concept of proactive transparency, which involves the voluntary disclosure of information by public authorities before formal requests are made. Panelists highlighted how this approach not only improves administrative efficiency, but also strengthens public trust in government institutions by making information available in an open and accessible manner.

One of the central themes was the use of digital tools to facilitate access to information. Panelists presented examples of online platforms that allow citizens to

access government data quickly and easily. Success stories were discussed in which the implementation of these tools has led to greater citizen participation and better accountability on the part of authorities.



Open data initiatives were also a key focus of the Session. Panelists detailed the importance of open data as an invaluable resource for innovation and informed decision-making. Best practices for publishing open data were discussed, including the need to ensure quality, interoperability, and regular data updating. Additionally, the importance of making data understandable and usable to a broad audience, not just technical experts, was addressed.

The Session also addressed the importance of international collaboration in proactive transparency. In this vein, the panelists discussed examples of cooperation between countries to share knowledge, tools, and best practices. The speakers emphasized that adopting international standards and participating in global networks can help governments improve their transparency policies and learn from the experiences of others.

PARALLEL SESSION II: STRIKING PROPER BALANCE BETWEEN ATI AND DATA PROTECTION RIGHTS IN THE DIGITAL REALM. HOW CAN WE PROTECT CITIZENS' PERSONAL DATA WHILE MAKING EFFORTS ON ENSURING DIGITAL INFORMATION RIGHTS?

Parallel Session II addressed the complex task of balancing citizens' right to access information with the need to protect personal data in an increasingly digitalized world.

The panelists began the discussion by recognizing the importance of both access to information and the protection of personal data in a democratic society. They highlighted that these rights should not be seen as opposites, but as complementary, and that the challenge lies in finding an appropriate balance that allows both to coexist effectively.



A central theme was the need for robust legal frameworks and regulations that balance both rights. The panelists emphasized the importance of clear laws defining what information should be public and what personal data should be protected. They also highlighted the relevance of effectively implementing these laws, which requires adequate resources and continuous training for those responsible for their application.

Technology and digital tools were another focus of the discussion. Panelists discussed how digital tools can help manage and protect personal data while facilitating access to public information. They also debated examples of open data platforms incorporating anonymization and encryption measures to protect individuals' privacy.

In summary, the Session underlined the importance of finding an appropriate balance between access to information and the protection of personal data through clear legal frameworks, the use of advanced technologies, public education, and international cooperation.

UNESCO PANEL: MID-WAY THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA: MONITORING AND REPORTING ON SDG 16.10.2

The panel organized by UNESCO focused on assessing the progress made and the challenges that remain in achieving the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.10.2.

The panelists, who included human rights experts, government representatives, and members of non-governmental organizations, began by highlighting the importance of SDG 16.10.2 in the context of the 2030 Agenda. This goal promotes transparency and accountability, which is also fundamental for people's empowerment and the creation of just and inclusive societies.



The participants also noted several persistent challenges. Despite existing laws, effective implementation remains an obstacle in many countries. Panelists highlighted that, in contexts where human rights are under threat, access to information can be restricted, negatively affecting people's ability to participate in decision-making.

Another critical point was the importance of monitoring and reporting. Panelists discussed how monitoring progress towards SDG 16.10.2 is essential to

identifying gaps and challenges and ensuring that policies and strategies are effective. UNESCO and other international organizations have developed monitoring frameworks and tools that countries can use to evaluate their progress and report transparently.

Furthermore, the need to strengthen institutional and technical capacities for data collection and analysis was highlighted. Panelists mentioned the importance of having accurate and up-to-date data to make informed decisions and to evaluate the impact of access to information policies. The need to foster international cooperation and the exchange of good practices between countries to overcome common challenges was also discussed.

As we move towards the second half of the 2030 Agenda, it is crucial to intensify actions and address remaining challenges to ensure that all people have access to information and can fully exercise their fundamental rights.

ICIC REGIONAL MEETINGS

Regional network meetings during the conference underlined the importance of cooperation and exchange of experiences to improve access to information around the world. Each network highlighted their specific achievements and challenges and committed to continue working collaboratively to promote transparency and accountability in their respective regions.

AFRICAN NETWORK OF INFORMATION COMMISSIONS

The following issues were discussed: Sierra Leone has submitted a bid to host the 2026 ICIC and the ANIC will support Sierra Leone in organising the conference should their bid be successful. Ghana will host IDUAI 2024 on 1 and 2 October 2024 and since the conference will be held on the African soil, as many members of ANIC as possible are encouraged to attend. ANIC held its Annual General Meeting (AGM) in Johannesburg, South Africa in May 2024 at which the following members were elected to the Executive Committee for two years. South Africa- Chairperson; Ghana- Vice Chairperson; Morocco- Treasurer; Sierra Leone- Additional Member; and Kenya- Additional Member.



At the end of the AGM, an outcome statement was adopted. The theme of the statement is “The role of Access to Information Oversight Bodies/ Commissions in Advancing Information Integrity”. In line with its strategic objective to increase the number of ANIC Members, three potential members were recruited, namely, Zambia (which has already established an oversight body) and Namibia and The Gambia (which have adopted ATI laws and are in the process of establishing oversight bodies). ANIC has developed the Capacity Building Strategy for ANIC Members and the Fundraising Strategy.

ASIAN ACCESS TO INFORMATION ALLIANCE ASSEMBLY

The Asian Access to Information Alliance (AAIA) Assembly marked the second gathering of AAIA founding members and the first inclusion of prospective partners. The primary objectives were to strengthen collaboration, share achievements, and discuss future initiatives. Attendees included founding members from Israel, the Maldives, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka; and prospective partners from Azerbaijan, Nepal, India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, New Zealand and Australia.

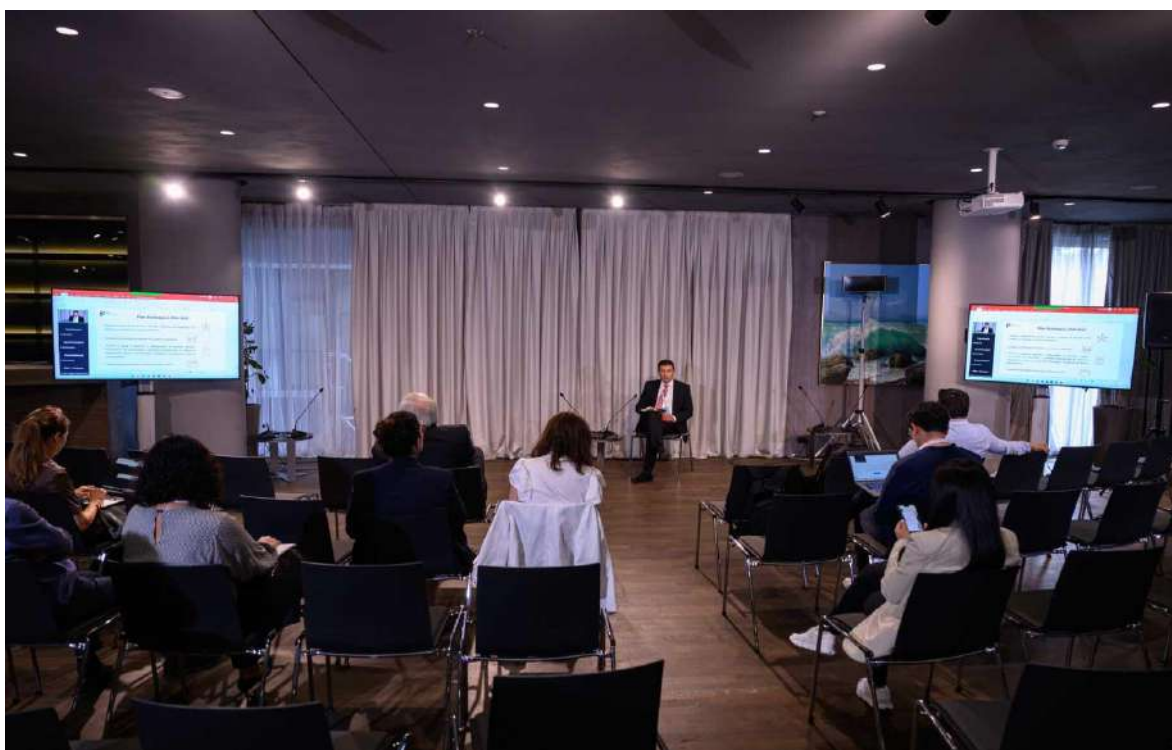


The AAIA founding members proposed expanding the alliance by increasing membership and leveraging virtual discussions, such as the AAIA Forum Series, for greater engagement. Key topics included environmental information, budget transparency, AI and algorithms, and the harmonization of information acquisition norms. Emphasis was placed on collaborating with civil society organizations to address challenges like the impact of data protection laws on RTI and the culture of secrecy in judicial systems. A significant concern raised was the undermining of independent institutions in South Asia, which could potentially reverse regional progress. Prospective government partners proposed initiatives on digital literacy and regional cooperation, while civil society partners focused on collaboration, democratic challenges, and ethical AI regulation. Together, these proposals aim to enhance the AAIA network, foster regional cooperation, and tackle emerging information access challenges

IBERO-AMERICAN TRANSPARENCY AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION NETWORK

At the meeting of the Ibero-American Transparency and Access to Information Network (RTA), the Executive Secretariat presented the proposed strategic plan and the actions to follow in the next three years.

The strategic plan includes the following: Promote the impact of the regional actions developed by the RTA through its links with strategic actors, the inclusion of new members and collaboration with other regional cooperation networks; Promote and support the development and implementation of projects, studies and international standards regarding transparency and access to information, identifying support and accompaniment mechanisms; Consolidate the RTA working groups activities, promoting the development of coordination and monitoring mechanisms for the initiatives that emanate from them; and Promote cooperation actions and deepen the leadership of the RTA in international forums on access to information, transparency, open government, archives, integrity in public life and anti-corruption in order to position it and enhance its ability to establish alliances and replicate good practices in the nations that comprise it.



They highlighted the crucial role of regional cooperation in strengthening institutional capacity. The agreements of the XXVI Regional Meeting were also followed up and they agreed to continue working together to address common challenges and improve accountability in their respective countries.

EUROPEAN ICIC MEMBERS

As part of the regional meetings on the 2nd day of the ICIC, the European members of the ICIC met as well.

The European ICIC members have not yet given themselves a structure. During the meeting, the question of whether a European network should be set up was discussed. In principle, all participants were open and supportive of this idea.



Essential aspects to be clarified are the degree of formalization, the frequency of meetings, the question of whether a secretariat should be set up, and the tasks and possibilities of such a network.

After extensive discussion, Hungary, Spain and Portugal have agreed to work on initial proposals as an informal working group. The discussion is to continue at the ICIC 2025 at the latest.

NORTH AMERICA MEETING

Canada: A positive outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the adaptation to a digital working environment, allowing federal, provincial, and territorial (FPT) information commissioners to connect more effectively. In a vast country spanning six time zones, regular collaboration was a challenge, but since 2020, monthly online meetings of FPT commissioners have become an important platform for support and knowledge sharing. These meetings facilitate the exchange of best practices on

emerging technologies, legislative changes, and other pertinent topics, making it easier to respond to emerging issues. An in-person conference is also held annually. These conferences help identify priorities and advocate for legislative and policy changes, as exemplified by the 2023 resolution calling for improved access to government records and modernization of information management practices. Since 2021, an annual virtual conference for investigators has also been organized, offering a practical and cost-effective way to provide professional development. The 2023 conference saw nearly 300 participants engaging in discussions on topics such as alternative dispute resolution and backlog reduction. Legal teams from various jurisdictions also meet periodically to discuss case law and developments in the field.



United States: OGIS functions as the FOIA Ombudsman for the federal government, offering mediation services to resolve disputes and reviewing agencies' FOIA policies for compliance improvements. The pandemic has heightened concerns about delays in FOIA responses, with significant backlogs in some agencies. In Fiscal Year 2023, the federal government received a record 1.1 million FOIA requests, with the Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Department of Defense, and National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) handling the majority. The most cited FOIA exemptions were privacy-related, specifically Exemptions 6 and 7(C). The National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) successfully eliminated its pandemic-related backlog of veteran records requests through technological enhancements, increased staffing, extended work hours, and digitization agreements with the VA. With the backlog cleared, NPRC now responds to most routine requests within a

week and other requests within 20 days. Additionally, the FOIA Advisory Committee, established by NARA in 2014, recently concluded its 2022-2024 term, voting on a final report with 16 recommendations aimed at improving FOIA administration, staffing, training, and technology.

DAY TWO: OPEN SESSION

ICIC WORKING GROUPS REPORTING

The ICIC working groups met on the second day of the ICIC. These groups focused on specific areas related to access to information and aimed at addressing challenges and develop solutions to promote transparency and the right to information worldwide.



In the Transparency by Design Working Group, strategies were explored to incorporate transparency from the initial phase of designing government policies and practices. The importance of implementing proactive measures that guarantee the openness and accessibility of information from its conception was discussed. Participants shared experiences on implementing "Transparency by design" policies in their respective countries and highlighted the need to integrate transparency principles at all levels of government.

During the Training Group meeting, strategies were addressed to improve the training and professional development of officials in charge of guaranteeing access to information. The results of the needs survey and digital tools were presented. The

importance of providing ongoing and up-to-date training programs on access to information legislation and transparency best practices was discussed. Participants shared experiences about the implementation of training programs in their countries and highlighted the need to adapt these programs to the specific needs of each context.

The Jurisprudence Group analyzed the developments of the legal schemes protecting the right of access to information of the ICIC member countries. Participants discussed emblematic cases and trends in the interpretation of access to information laws and their impact on the protection of citizens' rights. The importance of having solid and coherent regulatory frameworks that strengthen the right of access to information as a fundamental pillar of democracy was highlighted.

The meeting of the Gender and Groups in Situation of Vulnerability Group was a platform for inclusive discussions, addressing the measures necessary to guarantee equitable access to information for all groups in society, including those who are historically marginalized or vulnerable. The importance of incorporating diverse gender approaches in transparency policies and protecting the rights of people with disabilities, among other topics, was discussed. Participants shared their unique experiences and best practices, contributing to the promotion of inclusion and equal access to information.

These working group reporting provided a vital space for the exchange of knowledge and experiences among participants, with the aim of strengthening the implementation and enforcement of the right of access to information.

PANEL SESSION III: FUTURE OF THE ICIC CONFERENCE: WHAT IS NEXT FOR INFORMATION REGULATORS? WHAT ARE OUR COMMON CHALLENGES AND WHERE SHOULD THE ICIC WORK FOCUS IN THE FUTURE STRATEGIC DIRECTION?

The Future of the ICIC panel at the XV ICIC was a crucial space to reflect on the next steps and challenges facing information regulators worldwide. This panel brought together experts, leaders, and representatives of various institutions to outline the ICIC's future strategic direction and address the common challenges faced by organizations guaranteeing the right of access to information.

During this panel, the need to adapt to a constantly changing environment, marked by technological advances, new challenges in terms of transparency, and the emergence of new threats to democracy and access to information, was discussed. The participants emphasized the importance of staying at the forefront of

technological and legislative developments to guarantee the effectiveness of information access mechanisms in an interconnected world.



One of the main topics addressed was the importance of strengthening cooperation and collaboration between information regulators at the national and international levels. The need to share best practices, experiences and resources to address common challenges and promote international standards on transparency and access to information was noted. Likewise, the possibility of establishing formal collaboration mechanisms between information regulators to face cross-border challenges, such as the fight against disinformation and protecting personal data in the digital sphere, was discussed.

Another crucial point was the reflection on emerging challenges, such as protecting privacy in the context of increasing digitalization and the role of information regulators in protecting human rights online. The importance of adopting a comprehensive approach that balances access to information with the protection of privacy and other fundamental rights in the digital environment was outlined.

In addition, the speakers addressed the need to promote citizen participation and the inclusion of vulnerable groups in decision-making processes related to access to information. The importance of adopting inclusive and gender-sensitive

approaches was highlighted to ensure that all people, regardless of their origin or status, can fully exercise their right to access information.

This panel provided a valuable space to reflect on the challenges and opportunities facing information regulators today and delineated a strategic vision for the ICIC's future in an increasingly interconnected and digitalized world. Also, the incorporation of more members from different sectors and interested parties was discussed, as well as the periodicity of the meetings, highlighting the need to strengthen ties between the membership. The formation of working groups on information integrity and links with civil society was also proposed.

SIDE EVENTS WITH STRATEGIC PARTNERS

During side events on the second day of the XV ICIC, ICIC strategic partners hosted panels addressing critical information access and accountability issues. These events provided an important space to discuss key challenges and share experiences and best practices among participants.

Firstly, the Council of Europe held a panel on the "Implementation of the Convention on Access to Official Documents," where they carried out the first baseline assessment of this instrument. This panel focused on analyzing the status of the implementation of the Convention. The progress made to date was also discussed, as well as the challenges and obstacles encountered in the process of applying the Convention. Additionally, these actors explored the strategies and recommendations to improve the effectiveness and compliance of the agreement throughout the region.



Secondly, the Center for Law and Democracy (CLD) presented the workshop "How to Assess the Implementation of ATI Laws" whose objective was to address an overview of the methodology to carry out a depth evaluation of how well access laws are being implemented. This session provided information on how to explore options to collaborate with the CLD to apply this methodology. The CLD Methodology evaluates areas of strength and weakness in the implementation of access to information laws.



The World Bank and The Carter Center organized a side event to explore collaboration with information commissions and government stakeholders involved in proactive transparency systems. The meeting aimed to exchange experiences on using the right to information to empower individuals, groups, and communities, and to discuss the role of information commissions in controlling corruption at the country level. For the World Bank, the main objective of the meeting was to explore ways to strengthen collaboration within the framework of the Anticorruption for Development partnership, especially in the workstream on the role of transparency institutions in countries' accountability systems.

The session also examined the potential role of information commissioners in linking the right to information with democratic principles, identifying challenges, and exploring how multilateral and international institutions can support further engagement. Several information commissioners spoke, sharing their experiences

in promoting accountability, service delivery, and inclusivity. Additionally, the session included small group discussions on integrating these efforts into the mandates of information commissions. Highlighted during the event were the Carter Center's Gender-Sensitive Information Access Program and the World Bank's Global Platform for Anticorruption for Development, showcasing examples of collaborative schemes addressing these issues in coordinated and inclusive ways.



The room was divided into 3 discussion groups addressing these questions. Group 1 focused on funding challenges, anti-corruption efforts, the rule of law, and institutional collaboration. A particular concern for India was ensuring that core mandates are addressed effectively. Group 2 discussed mandate constraints and creative solutions in countries with weaker access to information frameworks, such as Germany. Group 3 highlighted challenges in resource limitations, awareness creation, and proactive disclosure. They found the collaborative approach promising for expanding knowledge on effective strategies and empowering information users.

As an outcome, participants engaged in productive discussions on enhancing the role of information commissioners and explored various collaborative approaches. The event fostered a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities in strengthening transparency and accountability through the right to information.

In summary, the side events organized by the Council of Europe, the Center for Law and Democracy (CLD), the Carter Center and the World Bank provided a

valuable platform for exchanging knowledge and experiences among ICIC participants. These events offered ideas and practical recommendations to address crucial challenges related to access to information, accountability, and inclusion. They highlighted the importance of international cooperation and collaboration between actors to achieve significant progress in these areas.



DAY THREE: CLOSED SESSION

During this day, the regions continued with the presentations of their updates in the progress on different activities. Firstly, the progress in the African region was reported. In this sense, and the Executive Committee members of the African Network of Information Commissions were elected as follows: Chairperson (South Africa); Vice Chairperson (Ghana); Treasurer (Morocco); Member (Sierra Leona); and Member (Kenya). Actions regarding access to information in South Africa, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Kenya and Ghana were also highlighted.

Later, the membership reported about Asia and its advances. In this session, the Asian's digitalization experiences were recounted as an effort to bring access to information closer to citizens through international events and celebrations. However, it's important to note the challenges faced by the region due to the lack of digital services, institutional capacities and awareness of the right of access. This report is not just about achievements but also about the need for support and understanding. The members agreed to share the report with the ICIC.



In the Europe report, it was discussed about issues of access to environmental information as an issue that is currently being implemented. Likewise, we reported on the new additions to laws that were carried out in the Eastern

European region. It's crucial to understand the complexity that cases are acquiring to facilitate access to information, always taking into account the public interest. This report is a call to action, to make our members feel the importance of their role in this process. The members agreed to share the report with the ICIC.

Regarding Latin America, it was mentioned that the XXVI meeting of the Ibero-American Network of Transparency and Access to Information took place a few days ago. Therefore, the actions carried out throughout the year were reported, which include two public statements, one on electoral and democratic issues and the other on access to environmental information. Also, the diagnoses that have been carried out regarding groups in vulnerable conditions, the environment, and proactive and open data.



In the space assigned for North America and the Caribbean, the annual reports of the institutions that belong to the region were presented as well as the areas of opportunity that they have. The digital opportunities opened by the pandemic were discussed to reinforce action as a guarantor of access to information. Also, all the meetings that were held were reported to exchange experiences at the federal level in Canada. In the Caribbean area, the importance of journalists as drivers of access to information was analyzed. The members agreed to share the report with the ICIC.

In the Oceania area, the survey on attitudes towards the right of access to information was presented. This study provides results on citizens' experiences and their connection to the right to know. Likewise, the way in which artificial intelligence is used to open access to information was discussed. The annual meeting of the Asia Pacific region was held regarding the challenges and opportunities facing access to information. The participants talked about the existing relationships between the region's Ombudsmen. The members agreed to share the report with the ICIC.

The INAI of Mexico, presented its report as Chair and Secretariat of the ICIC for the period 2021 – 2024. This report described the main actions and results obtained after three years of intense collaborative work within the ICIC. Among the most notable actions it was mentioned the approval of the Public Statements, the configuration of working groups, as well as the Calls two election processes, as well as an amendment to the Johannesburg Charter.



Also, it was also mentioned the importance of deepening ties with strategic partners such as the OECD, the World Bank, UNESCO, among others. Training was also discussed to strengthen members' institutional schemes. Realized the creation and strengthening of Working Groups.

The topic of the election of the venue for the XVII Edition of the ICIC was discussed, in which the Right of Access to Information Commission of Sierra Leone was announced as the next honorable Host. The Commission representative

expressed his pleasure at the selection and was willing to work to achieve a successful Conference. Subsequently, the declaration "Transparency and the digital era: the role of the information commissioner and citizen empowerment" was presented and endorsed.

At the same time, the selection process for members of the Executive Committee and the Chair and Secretariat of the ICIC took place, in which INAI of Mexico was elected as ICIC Chair and Secretariat and the Office of the Information Commissioner of Australia and the Administrative Justice Commission of Kenya as Executive Committee Members.

Conclusion

Access to public information is a fundamental human right recognized by various regulations and international treaties. However, its practical implementation remains a challenge in many countries. The ICIC plays a crucial role in this context by providing a forum where information commissioners and other relevant actors can discuss obstacles and best practices to overcome these challenges. In this way, existing gaps in the implementation of access to information laws are identified, and practical solutions and recommendations are offered that can be adapted to different national and regional contexts. This collaborative approach is essential to ensure that the right of access to information translates into a concrete reality for all citizens.

The XV ICIC underlined the importance of international cooperation, the adoption of innovative technologies, the empowerment of vulnerable groups, and the balance between data protection and access to information. This Edition was fundamental to promoting more transparent, inclusive, and responsible societies. The conference not only provided a space for the exchange of knowledge and experiences but also established a clear roadmap for future actions and collaborations. The active participation of all entities involved and the commitment to implementing the agreements and strategic plans discussed will be crucial to ensure that the principles of transparency and access to information become fundamental pillars of global governance.

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