BfDI
Federal Commissioner
for Data Protection and
Freedom of Information

ICIC
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF INFORMATION COMMISSIONERS

ICIC Germany 2025

CONFERENCE REPORT

Access to Environmental Information in a Digital Era

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Introduction

The XVI Edition of the ICIC in 2025 focused on the increasing importance of comprehensive and low-threshold access to environmental information with particular focus on digital solutions that ensure a global and cross-border access.

Data on environmental influences and the threats posed by climate change do not end within national borders. Taking this into consideration, the XVI Edition of the ICIC aimed to connect ICIC members, observers and stakeholders, policy makers, academics, media and representatives of civil society on a global scale.

The conference provided a platform to discuss current challenges, innovative solutions and best practices from different countries to improve access to environmental information. An overview on important international legal frameworks and agreements, such as the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) or the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (Escazú Agreement), offered valuable insights for participants.

Furthermore, the conference explored digital solutions to foster transparency in the environmental sector. In addition to examples and best practices of proactive publication of information, the conference highlighted strategies regarding open data and the provision of qualitative and easily accessible environmental data.

Focus was also placed on the importance of access to information for vulnerable groups. Transparency, especially in the environmental sector, can support marginalized groups in holding governments or corporations accountable for actions that harm their health or livelihoods promoting justice and equity.

Finally, the conference also highlighted the important role of civil society and media in enhancing a broad access to environmental data and creating more awareness for environmental issues. The conference program incorporated the expertise and ideas of non-governmental organizations and journalists from the environmental and freedom of information field in several panel discussions.

Source:bundesfoto/bernd lammel

Overview of Panels and Speakers at ICIC XVI

Panel I – "Strengthening and Protecting Access to Information Structure in a Changing Scenario – Is there a Future for ATI?"

Moderation:

Guilherme Canela de Souza Godoi
Director of the Division for Digital Inclusion and Policy and Digital Transformation, and Secretary of the Information for All Programme (IFAP), UNESCO Headquarters, Paris

Panellists:

Krizia Casey P. Avejar
Chief, Communications and Capacity Development Division, Freedom of Information - Program Management Office, Presidential Communications Office of the Philippines

PhD. Julio César Bonilla Gutiérrez
Citizen Commissioner of the Institute for Transparency, Access to Public Information, Personal Data Protection, and Accountability of Mexico City and Coordinator of the Judicial Transparency Group of the Transparency and Access to Information Network

Dr. Ibrahim Seaga Shaw
Chairman and Information Commissioner, Right to Access Information Commission, Sierra Leone

Prof. Dr. Louisa Specht-Riemenschneider
The Federal Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information, Germany

Adv. Lebogang Stroom
Commissioner, Information Regulator, South Africa

Panel II – "Further Development of Access to Information Law with Special Focus on Environmental Information"

Moderation:

Matthias Sauer
Deputy Director-General at the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Climate Action, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety in Germany

Keynote:

Prof. Dr. Thomas Schomerus
University Professor for Public Law, in particular Energy and Environmental Law, Elected Member of the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee

Panellists:

Prof. Dr. Jerzy Jendrośka
Professor at Opole University (Poland), Elected Member and Vice Chair of the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee

Summer Kern
Senior Lawyer at Justice Environment, and ECO Forum NGO Observer to the Bureau to the Aarhus Convention

Prof. Dr. Heloísa Oliveira
Assistant Professor/Research Fellow, University of Lisbon/Lisbon Public Law Research Centre

Prof. Dr. Thomas Schomerus
University Professor for Public Law, in particular Energy and Environmental Law, Elected Member of the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee

Panel III – "Digital Tools and Access to Information as Enablers of Climate Friendly Fishing in the Global South"

Moderation:

Dr. Ibrahim Seaga Shaw
Chairman and Information Commissioner, Right to Access Information Commission, Sierra Leone

Panellists:

Chinonye Austin Ekwujuru
Chief Executive Officer, Basic Rights Watch (BRW), Nigeria

Teresa Temweka Chirwa-Ndanga
Information Commissioner Malawi Human Rights Commission (MHRC)

Dr. Nwamaka Okeke-Ogbuafor
Lecturer, University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK

Panel IV – "Analysis of the Escazú Agreement with Special Focus on Provisions on the Rights of Environmental Defenders in Latin America and the Caribbean"

Moderation and Keynote:

MSc. Luciana Inés Carpinacci
National Director of Transparency Policy Evaluation, Agency for Access to Public Information, Argentina

Panellists:

Dr. Natalia González Bañados
President of the Council for Transparency of Chile

Mijael Kaufman Falchuk
Elected Representative of the Public for the Escazú Agreement and Co-founder of Consciente Colectivo, Argentina

Patricia Madrigal Cordero
Chair of the Support Committee for the Implementation and Compliance of the Escazú Agreement

Joara Marchezini
Project Manager at Nupef Institute and Elected Representative of the Public for the Escazú Agreement

Panel V – "Challenges and Achievements in Implementing the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (Tromsø Convention)"

Moderation:

Toby Mendel
Executive Director, Centre for Law and Democracy

Panellists:

Elona Hoxhaj
Director General, General Directorate on the Right to Information, Information and Data Protection Commissioner, Albania

Helena Jäderblom
President of the Supreme Administrative Court of Sweden, President of the Council of Europe Access Info Group

Tetyana Oleksiyuk
Vice-President of Access Info Group under the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (Tromsø Convention)

Dr. Attila Péterfalvi
President of the Hungarian Authority for Data Protection and Freedom of Information

Panel VI – "Exchange of Experienced Information Commissioners on Challenges and Best Practices"

Moderation:

Caroline Maynard
Information Commissioner of Canada

Panellists:

Sabina Aliyeva
Commissioner for Human Rights (Ombudsman) of the Republic of Azerbaijan

Krenare Sogojeva Dërmaku
Commissioner of the Information and Privacy Agency, Kosovo

Ahmed Ahid Rasheed
Information Commissioner, Information Commissioner's Office, Republic of Maldives

Elizabeth Tydd
Australian Information Commissioner

Panel VII – "The Important Role of Civil Society and Media in the Context of Strengthening the Right of Access to Environmental Information"

Moderation:

Marius Lukosiunas
Advisor for Communication and Information, Section for Universal Access to Information and Digital Inclusion, UNESCO

Panellists:

Anjali Bhardwaj
Founder, SNS (Satark Nagrik Sangathan - Citizens Vigilance Initiative) & Co-Convenor, National Campaign for Peoples' Right to Information

Flutura Kusari
Senior Legal Advisor, European Centre for Press and Media Freedom

AHM Bazlur Rahman
Chief Executive Officer, Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio & Communication

Ida Westphal
FragDenStaat/Climate Helpdesk, Open Knowledge Foundation Deutschland e.V.

Panel VIII – "Access to Information for Vulnerable Groups"

Moderation:

Cibelle Brasil
Director of Monitoring and Supervising of Access to Information, National Secretariat of Access to Information, Office of the Comptroller General, Brazil

Panellists:

Joara Marchezini
Project Manager at Nupef Institute and Elected Representative of the Public for the Escazú Agreement

Kishali Pinto-Jayawardena
Commissioner, RTI Commission of Sri Lanka

María del Rosario Mejía Ayala
Commissioner, Institute for Transparency, Access to Public Information and Protection of Personal Data of the State of Mexico Municipalities (Infoem)

Panel IX – “Access to Environmental Open Data: Platforms, Tools and Best Practices for Digital Innovations”

Moderation:

Elizabeth Tydd
Australian Information Commissioner

Panellists:

Natalia Carfi
Executive Director of the Open Data Charter

Michael Harvey
Information and Privacy Commissioner for BC

Bruno Lasserre
President of the Commission for Access to Administrative Documents of France, Honorary Chair of the Conseil d'Etat

Allen Wang
Chief Strategy Officer of BigObject, Representative of the Asia Open Data Partnership

Panel X – "Strengthening Access to Information in Small Island Developing States (SIDS)"

Moderation:

Marius Lukosiunas
Advisor for Communication and Information, Section for Universal Access to Information and Digital Inclusion, UNESCO

Speakers:

Toby Mendel
Executive Director, Centre for Law and Democracy

Ahmed Ahid Rasheed
Information Commissioner, Information Commissioner’s Office, Republic of Maldives

Panel XI – "How can the ICIC support Civil Society Groups in their Work for more Transparency and Democracy?"

Moderation:

Anjali Bhardwaj
Founder, SNS (Satark Nagrik Sangathan - Citizens Vigilance Initiative) & Co-Convenor, National Campaign for Peoples' Right to Information

Amrita Johri
Information and Research Co-ordinator, SNS (Satark Nagrik Sangathan - Citizens Vigilance Initiative) & Member, National Campaign for Peoples' Right to Information

Panellists:

María Baron
Global Executive Director, Directorio Legislativo, Argentina

Rachel Hanna
Executive Director, Access Info Europe

Caroline Maynard
Information Commissioner of Canada

Marie Whelan
Policy Analyst, Open Governance Unit, Innovative, Digital and Open Government (INDIGO) Division, Public Governance Directorate, OECD

Side Event of the Open Government Partnership – "Expanding Access to Environmental Data through Multi-Stakeholder Collaborations"

Speakers:

Sven Biermann
Executive Director of the Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FiTI)

Natalia Carfi
Executive Director of the Open Data Charter

Sarah Kennedy
Junior Program Officer, Policy & Partnerships, Open Government Partnership

DAY ONE: OPEN SESSION

Opening remarks

The conference was opened by the Federal Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information, **Prof. Dr. Louisa Specht-Riemenschneider**.

At the opening, the host warmly welcomed participants from around the world at the historic Hotel Adlon Kempinski in Berlin. Reflecting on the ICIC's origins, Commissioner Prof. Dr. Specht-Riemenschneider recalled its founding in 2003 in Berlin by 14 freedom of information officers and ombudspersons, noting with pride that the conference had now returned to its birthplace 22 years later.

Acknowledging the global context of uncertainty, conflict, and political challenges, Commissioner Prof. Dr. Specht-Riemenschneider emphasized the importance of international cooperation and dialogue. The central theme "Access to Environmental Information in a Digital Era" was presented as both timely and urgent. Environmental issues such as climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss, the speaker noted, transcend borders and require transparent, data-driven decision-making.

The address highlighted ongoing barriers to access – legal, technological, and social – and underscored the role of digital innovation in improving transparency and cross-border information sharing. Particular attention was given to international legal frameworks like the Aarhus Convention and the Escazú Agreement, seen as key instruments for advancing environmental rights.

Civil society and the media were recognized as essential partners in promoting openness and accountability. Concluding with a call for collaboration, Commissioner Prof. Dr. Specht-Riemenschneider expressed confidence that the conference would generate concrete ideas and partnerships to strengthen global access to environmental information affirming that freedom of information remains the foundation of democracy and sustainable development.

Opening address

The Information and Data Protection Commissioner of Albania, **Besnik Dervishi**, gave an opening speech on behalf of the ICIC Chair/Secretariat.

The former host of the ICIC XV described the ICIC as "not merely a meeting of institutions but a call to action and reflection." The speech emphasized the ICIC's role as a global platform where voices from around the world unite to strengthen transparency and the right of access to information.

Drawing from personal experience, Commissioner Dervishi identified a lack of transparency as one of the main challenges in public administration and stressed that citizens have a fundamental right to be informed about matters affecting their daily lives. In today's digital age, Commissioner Dervishi noted, information has become the most valuable currency, requiring openness and responsibility.

The opening address was concluded by highlighting that the ICIC is not only a place to exchange ideas but to build together – calling for closer cooperation between institutions, civil society, academia, and the media to uphold the right to information as a cornerstone of democracy.

Keynote Speaker

Germany's Parliamentary State Secretary at the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Climate Action, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, **Rita Schwarzelühr-Sutter**, gave a keynote speech emphasizing the central role of access to public information in strengthening democracy and environmental governance. She reaffirmed support for the ICIC's mission to share knowledge, build capacities, and promote global progress in freedom of information – especially crucial in today's uncertain and rapidly changing world.

Focusing on the conference theme, "Access to Environmental Information in a Digital Era," the address underscored that global environmental challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss require transparent, data-driven decision-making and active citizen participation. International frameworks like the Aarhus Convention and the Escazú Agreement were highlighted as essential tools for ensuring access to environmental information, public participation, and justice. A key focus was on proactive publication obligations designed to raise environmental awareness and improve protection efforts.

The speech also showcased digital initiatives in Germany which aim to make environmental data more transparent, user-friendly, and widely accessible.

The speech concluded with a call to further expand digital tools and international cooperation to enhance transparency, strengthen public trust, and enable more effective civic participation in environmental protection.

Source: bundesfoto/bernd lammel

The second keynote was delivered by **Guilherme Canela de Souza Godoi**, Director of the Division for Digital Inclusion and Policy and Digital Transformation, and Secretary of the Information for All Programme (IFAP), UNESCO Headquarters, Paris.

The keynote address, “Guaranteeing the Right of Access to Information in a Turbulent World,” emphasized that in today’s global environment, even stating basic truths can feel “almost revolutionary.” The speaker reflected on the evolution of Freedom of Information (FOI), noting that governments have traditionally preferred secrecy, which made the creation of transparency frameworks a long and challenging process. Over time, however, Access To Information (ATI) legislation has expanded worldwide, supported by international norms, legal developments, and global agendas that promote openness.

Although civic space is narrowing in many regions, public demand for transparency continues to grow. While few governments publicly oppose openness today, practical implementation challenges remain significant. Meaningful access must be straightforward and free from administrative barriers, and stronger oversight mechanisms are needed to ensure that ATI obligations are respected.

A central challenge highlighted in the keynote is the persistent weakness of records management. Civil servants often struggle to locate information, or find that it was never properly documented. Without adequate investment in the systems and structures needed to support ATI, transparency frameworks cannot function. The speaker also stressed the importance of making clear that investment in openness can lead to long-term benefits and more effective governance.

Source: bundesfoto/bernd lammel

Looking ahead, the keynote addressed the growing complexity of information management in an era of rapid technological change. Transparency principles must be integrated into the design of new digital systems, and the expanding influence of major private platforms raises additional questions about responsibility and access.

In closing, the need to build broader awareness of ATI, improve ways of assessing progress, and strengthen efforts to counter misinformation was emphasized. Above all, ATI was presented as a core responsibility of public institutions, one that requires sustained commitment and continuous investment to deliver meaningful public value.

Panel I: Strengthening and Protecting Access to Information Structure in a Changing Scenario – Is there a Future for ATI?

The first panel convened global and regional experts to assess the evolving state of transparency and accountability frameworks worldwide. Participants celebrated notable progress made over recent decades, with many countries enacting robust ATI laws and establishing independent oversight institutions that have strengthened democratic governance and citizen trust.

However, discussions revealed that ATI systems now face mounting challenges. Political interference, restrictive legislation, budget cuts, and the weakening of independent bodies were identified as key threats undermining transparency. Panellists underscored that disinformation and the misuse of digital platforms further complicate the public's ability to access accurate and reliable information.

While digitalization was recognized as a powerful enabler of open data and proactive disclosure, speakers cautioned that without proper safeguards, it could also deepen inequality and limit accessibility. The need for comprehensive legal and policy reforms was emphasized to ensure that ATI rights remain protected and adaptable in rapidly changing political and technological contexts.

Participants shared practical experiences and regional lessons, highlighting innovative approaches to reinforcing transparency mechanisms, such as integrating artificial intelligence responsibly and fostering open government partnerships. Strong collaboration between governments, civil society, and international organizations was seen as essential to building resilient ATI systems.

The session concluded with a call to action for renewed international cooperation and commitment to uphold the public's right to information as a cornerstone of democracy and accountability.

Source: bundesfoto/bernd lammel

Panel II: Further Development of Access to Information Law with Special Focus on Environmental Information

The second panel opened with a keynote by Prof. Dr. Thomas Schomerus, providing a concise overview of the Aarhus Convention and the mandate of the Aarhus Compliance Committee. He traced the Convention's evolution as a cornerstone of environmental democracy and outlined its core objectives: guaranteeing public access to environmental information, enabling participation in decision-making, and ensuring access to justice. Prof. Schomerus also reflected on the Committee's experience in addressing compliance challenges and promoting consistency across national legal systems.

The following panel discussion explored whether existing ATI frameworks remain adequate in today's rapidly changing technological and political environment. Panellists discussed the need for reform and modernization of current legal provisions, particularly regarding how the right of access to information relates to new media and digital communication channels that now define public expectations of transparency and openness.

Drawing on case studies and practical examples, the discussion highlighted where outdated legal frameworks impede effective implementation and where modernization could enhance public trust and administrative efficiency. Panellists noted that informative duties increasingly extend beyond the traditional Aarhus model, creating both opportunities and regulatory challenges.

In conclusion, participants considered how the Aarhus Convention might continue to serve as a model for countries that lack comprehensive ATI regulation. They emphasized that future reforms should integrate transparency, participation, and accountability "by design," ensuring that access to information evolves in step with the digital transformation of governance.

Source: bundesfoto/bernd lammel

Panel III: Digital Tools and Access to Information as Enablers of Climate Friendly Fishing in the Global South

Panel III examined how digital technologies and access to information mechanisms can enhance the adaptive capacity of small-scale fishers (SSFs) in the Global South, who represent over 97% of the world's 120 million fishers and supply most of the region's fish. In his opening remarks, the moderator highlighted the increasing vulnerability of SSFs to climate change and the maladaptive coping strategies that often result, such as intensified fishing efforts, higher fuel use, and rising operational costs, that further deepen environmental and social risks.

Drawing on case studies from across the Global South, panellists discussed the extent to which digital tools, including smartphones and data platforms, are accessible to fishing communities and whether countries possess the infrastructure needed to support their effective use. Participants noted that while such tools can improve access to market information, weather forecasts, and resource management data, significant gaps remain in connectivity, affordability, and technical training.

A further topic concerned the role and capacity of Access to Information Commissions in supporting SSFs. Panellists emphasized that strong institutional structures and collaboration between state bodies and fishing communities are crucial for transparency, accountability, and informed decision-making.

The session concluded that targeted investment in digital infrastructure and institutional capacity is essential to ensure that access to information becomes a driver of climate resilience rather than a source of inequality.

Panel IV: Analysis of the Escazú Agreement with Special Focus on Provisions on the Rights of Environmental Defenders in Latin America and the Caribbean

Panel IV offered an in-depth assessment of the state of environmental democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean, emphasizing the Escazú Agreement as the region's first legally binding instrument to strengthen access to environmental information, public participation, and access to justice. Speakers highlighted the growing body of jurisprudence and guidance developed by transparency authorities in the region, which has consistently affirmed the principles of maximum disclosure, clarified criteria for exceptions, and reinforced procedural guarantees for timely, accessible, and reliable environmental information. These authorities also participate actively in the Escazú framework by supporting implementation efforts, promoting institutional standards, and contributing to regional cooperation on transparency.

Despite broad political commitment, significant challenges persist. The supra-legal nature of the Agreement, coupled with regulatory gaps and uneven institutional capacities, raises uncertainties regarding how its obligations will be interpreted and applied. Transparency requirements may extend to private actors in certain contexts, and expanded definitions of environmental information and public participation could demand substantial adjustments to existing legal and administrative systems. In this environment, judicial interpretation may become decisive where legislative reforms advance slowly.

Panellists stressed that participation must be transformative rather than symbolic and that environmental defenders require effective mechanisms ensuring safety and an enabling environment, as mandated under Article 9 of the Agreement. Implementation remains gradual and uneven, hindered by limited resources, misinformation, and fragmented governance. The session concluded that fully realizing Escazú's long-term goals will require stronger institutions, renewed international cooperation, and a shift toward concrete, people-centred implementation capable of protecting defenders and strengthening public trust.

Source: bundesfoto/bernd lammel

Panel V: Challenges and Achievements in Implementing the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (Tromsø Convention)

Panel V examined the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (Tromsø Convention), the first binding international treaty recognising the right to access official documents. Since entering into force in 2020, the Convention has, for the States Parties, become a key tool for promoting transparency and ensuring alignment of national laws with European standards.

The session opened with an overview of the key legal standards set out in the Convention and its importance within the broader international landscape of access to information. Panellists compared the Convention's mechanisms with other global standards, emphasising its inclusive approach, granting the right of access without discrimination and irrespective of the requester's motives. A focus of the discussion was on the system of oversight, which is rather unique and is central to the effective impact of the Convention.

Discussion then turned to the status of ratification and the obstacles preventing wider adoption. Speakers noted that while an increasing number of States have ratified the Convention, political hesitation, administrative capacity and legislative complexity continue to slow progress, particularly among the more established European democracies. Strategies to encourage non-member States to sign and ratify were also considered, given that they Convention explicitly provides for this, and some audience members expressed an interest in this.

Drawing on national experiences, panellists assessed the progress in terms of implementation among States Parties. They identified recurring challenges such as achieving an appropriate balance between transparency and data protection, and ensuring consistent application across jurisdictions.

The discussion concluded with examples of successful implementation, highlighting best practices that strengthen public trust and institutional accountability. Overall, the panel reaffirmed the Tromsø Convention's significance as a means for strengthening and standardising access to information standards across Europe and, in future, potentially beyond.

Source: bundesfoto/bernd lammel

Panel VI: Exchange of Experienced Information Commissioners on Challenges and Best Practices

Five experienced Information Commissioners from across jurisdictions came together for an open and insightful discussion on the evolution of their roles and the challenges they share. The discussion explored how their initial visions of their mandates have developed over time, shifting from a narrow focus on compliance toward a broader mission of fostering transparency, accountability, and public trust.

Panellists reflected on both unexpected hurdles and rewarding breakthroughs encountered. Many noted that the most surprising aspect of their tenure has been navigating the delicate balance between independence and collaboration, while also adapting to the growing impact of digital transformation in ensuring effective access to information. From these experiences emerged valuable lessons about resilience, adaptability, and the necessity of building strong institutional cultures.

Despite persistent challenges such as limited resources and political resistance, panellists shared notable achievements in raising public awareness, improving disclosure practices, and embedding transparency within government systems. Successful approaches ranged from proactive outreach and partnerships with civil society to innovative use of technology to streamline information requests.

In closing, Commissioners offered thoughtful advice to peers and successors: lead with integrity, remain open to learning, and embrace international cooperation as a cornerstone of progress. The panel reaffirmed the ICIC's commitment to collective knowledge-sharing, recognizing that open dialogue among Commissioners remains one of the most powerful drivers of lasting impact in the global transparency movement.

Panel VII: The important Role of Civil Society and Media in the Context of Strengthening the Right of Access to Environmental Information

Panel VII brought together journalists, representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and transparency advocates for an engaging discussion on the shared mission of upholding accountability and democratic values. Participants highlighted the increasingly complex environment in which NGOs and media professionals operate, marked by political pressure, shrinking civic space, and threats to safety, while reaffirming their commitment to protecting the public's right to know.

The conversation underscored the critical role of investigative journalism, particularly in the environmental sector, where access to information enables exposure of harmful practices and supports evidence-based advocacy. Speakers showcased impactful projects demonstrating how collaboration between NGOs, journalists, and international organizations can amplify transparency and policy reform. These success stories illustrated how joint efforts, such as cross-border investigations and data-sharing initiatives, have led to tangible environmental and social improvements.

Panellists also explored strategies to better communicate the importance of access to information to both the public and decision-makers, emphasizing storytelling, public education, and digital outreach. Recognizing the increasing risks faced by watchdogs, the discussion concluded with calls for stronger visibility, legal protection, and international solidarity for journalists and NGOs targeted for their work.

The session reaffirmed that transparency and democracy are sustained not by institutions alone, but by the courage and cooperation of those who champion truth, accountability, and informed public discourse.

Source: bundesfoto/bernd lammel

DAY TWO: OPEN SESSION

Panel VIII: Access to Information for Vulnerable Groups

Organized by the Office of the Comptroller General of the Union of Brazil, the panel on Access to Environmental Information for Vulnerable Groups offered a compelling exploration of the intersection between transparency, climate justice, and human rights. Bringing together experts from government institutions, international organizations, and civil society, the discussion centred on how information can empower communities most affected by environmental crises and climate change.

Panellists examined the persistent barriers that vulnerable groups face in obtaining reliable environmental information, ranging from limited digital access and low literacy levels to institutional opacity. Yet, amid these challenges, several successful initiatives were highlighted. Examples included community-based alert systems, participatory monitoring platforms, and partnerships between public agencies and local organizations that translate technical data into accessible formats for at-risk populations.

The protection of environmental defenders emerged as a key concern. Speakers stressed the urgent need for stronger legal safeguards, rapid response mechanisms, and international cooperation to ensure the safety of those who expose environmental harm and advocate for accountability.

Finally, the panel celebrated stories of resilience in which marginalized communities overcame barriers to access information and assert their rights to clean water, land, and health. These cases underscored that meaningful transparency is achieved not only through data release but through inclusive, rights-based communication. The session concluded with a shared commitment to ensuring that access to environmental information becomes a tool for empowerment, protection, and sustainable development.

Source: bundesfoto/bernd lammel

Panel IX: Access to Environmental Open Data: Platforms, Tools and Best Practices for Digital Innovations

Panel IX convened experts from different fields to discuss how transparent, accessible data can drive meaningful climate action, biodiversity protection, and sustainable development. Participants emphasized that open environmental data has become an indispensable tool for evidence-based policymaking, citizen engagement, and accountability in addressing global environmental challenges.

Speakers showcased innovative platforms and initiatives, demonstrating how open data can empower communities, enhance early warning systems, and strengthen cross-sector collaboration.

At the same time, the panel acknowledged persistent barriers, including fragmented data systems, inconsistent quality standards, and limited technical capacity in many regions. Legal restrictions and insufficient interoperability between platforms were also cited as major obstacles to maximizing the potential of environmental data.

Discussions highlighted the critical role of governments in ensuring transparency through proactive disclosure, while international organizations and private sector actors were recognized as key partners in developing open standards and funding technological innovation. Looking ahead, panellists called for stronger policy frameworks, investment in capacity building, and continued technological advancement to make environmental data more usable and impactful.

The session concluded with a shared understanding that open data is not merely a technical asset, but a cornerstone of inclusive and informed environmental governance, essential for shaping a sustainable future.

Source: bundesfoto/bernd lammel

Panel X: Strengthening Access to Information in Small Island Developing States (SIDS)

The session on the Model Law on Access to Information for Small Island Developing States (SIDS), referenced a significant milestone in advancing transparency and good governance across SIDS. Developed by the Centre for Law and Democracy at UNESCO's request, the Model Law builds on the Principles on Right to Information for Small Island Developing States.

Participants at the session discussed the Model Law's practical and adaptable approach to addressing the capacity and resource constraints that many SIDS face in implementing Right to Information (RTI) frameworks. The discussion highlighted its 25 sections, which encompass the scope and application of RTI laws, request and response procedures, exceptions, oversight mechanisms, sanctions, and promotional measures for awareness and capacity-building.

Drawing from earlier consultations held in Micronesia, Fiji, and Seychelles, participants reflected on regional challenges such as limited institutional capacity, balancing transparency with data protection, and the need for strong oversight bodies. Experts emphasized the importance of aligning RTI implementation with broader governance priorities and ensuring that access to information supports sustainable development and citizen participation.

The session successfully raised awareness among information commissioners, policymakers, and civil society representatives, who offered constructive feedback for refining the Model Law. UNESCO announced plans for further regional consultations, particularly in the Caribbean, before finalizing and publishing the Model Law to support the wider adoption of access to information legislation across all SIDS.

Source: bundesfoto/bernd lammel

Panel XI: How can the ICIC support Civil Society Groups in their work for more Transparency and Democracy?

The last panel session brought together NGOs, oversight bodies, and international partners for an engaging and solution-oriented exchange. The discussion reaffirmed ICIC's commitment to empowering NGOs as vital actors in promoting open governance, access to information, and freedom of expression.

Participants noted that NGOs continue to face significant obstacles, including political resistance, limited funding, and shrinking civic space. Despite these challenges, inspiring examples were shared where close cooperation between NGOs and state institutions led to tangible improvements in transparency and public trust. Speakers emphasized that regular, structured dialogue between civil society and government bodies is essential, particularly in times of global uncertainty and democratic backsliding.

The role of international partnerships and networks emerged as a key theme, with participants highlighting how cross-border cooperation and peer learning can strengthen advocacy and amplify impact. Oversight bodies discussed ways to support NGOs through knowledge-sharing, and protection mechanisms, while maintaining neutrality and institutional integrity.

Meaningful collaboration, panellists agreed, requires mutual respect, sustained engagement, and an understanding of local contexts. The ICIC was encouraged to provide strategic, long-term support for civil society, fostering spaces for exchange and joint action.

The session concluded with a strong call for continued partnership between information commissions and NGOs to ensure that transparency and accountability remain at the heart of democratic governance.

Source: bundesfoto/bernd lammel

Side Event of the Open Government Partnership: Expanding Access to Environmental Data through Multi Stakeholder Collaborations

Improving access to environmental information has been a popular area of work by members of the Open Government Partnership (OGP), which now includes 78 countries and 150 subnational members. In this session, participants learned why and how government and civil society have co-created, through their domestic multi stakeholder OGP process, actions that expand and improve access to environmental information. The session highlighted specific country examples and opportunities for participants to engage in open government activities.

Source: bundesfoto/bernd lammel

ICIC regional meetings

African Network of Information Commissions

The ICIC Regional Meeting of the African Network of Information Commissions (ANIC) took place in the closed session of the Conference. The countries present were South Africa (Chair and permanent secretariat), Sierra Leone, Ghana, Malawi, Kenya, and Liberia which extended its interest to be a member of ANIC. South Sudan and Togo were not present in the meeting.

The following issues were discussed: Sierra Leone on hosting the ICIC XVII Conference in 2026 under the theme “Information integrity in the digital age”, the draft minutes of the previous Annual General Meeting (AGM), the report on ANIC AGM in Morocco held in May 2025, the request on the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (CETS No. 205), also known as the Tromsø Convention, to be extended to ANIC members, updating of the ANIC website and the UNESCO project on records management.

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Asian Access to Information Alliance Assembly (AAIA)

The Asian Access to Information Alliance (AAIA) convened to reaffirm regional solidarity and strengthen collaboration among oversight bodies across Asia. Founding members from Israel (online), Maldives, Philippines, and Sri Lanka shared updates on recent achievements, including advancements in digital ATI platforms, the resolution of high-volume case backlogs, and expanded capacity-building initiatives designed to improve proactive disclosure and institutional transparency. These updates were accompanied by reflections on shared challenges such as staffing limitations, financial constraints, and institutional sustainability, which continue to affect coordination and long-term momentum. The Assembly also revisited the alliance's membership structure, recognizing the value of formalizing participation and exploring the possibility of expanding partnerships, including civil society organizations.

Observers from Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Nepal, and representatives from Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) signalled renewed interest in joining the alliance, reflecting the AAIA's growing relevance as a regional cooperation platform. The session acknowledged the need for a more sustainable coordination mechanism and agreed to explore shared facilitation of future activities, including online forums and regional engagements. Members also noted the value of leveraging regional and international events to sustain engagement and advance ATI dialogue across Asia. The Assembly closed with a collective commitment to revitalize coordination and reinforce the AAIA's role as a platform for mutual support and transparency in the region.

Ibero-American Transparency and Access to Information Network

According to the schedule of the “International Conference of Information Commissioners (ICIC)” in Berlin, the Regional Meeting of the Transparency and Access to Information Networking (RTA) took place in the afternoon on June 24, 2025, with participation of several RTA members.

Firstly, the members of the Directive Council offered their greetings: The Office of the Comptroller General of the State of São Paulo - Brazil (Executive Secretariat of RTA), Council for Transparency of Chile – CPLT (Council Member), Office of the Comptroller General of the Union - Brazil (Council Member) and General Directorate of Ethics and Government Integrity of the Dominican Republic (Presidency RTA).

The Presidency of RTA chaired the meeting, presenting some issues related to the RTA website, mainly because of the dissolution of the National Institute for Transparency, Access to Information and Personal Data Protection of Mexico (INAI), the organization previously responsible for the administration of the website, in condition of the Executive Secretariat of RTA. The Presidency also presented possible solutions to this issue, including some immediate measures to restore the original page or the creation of a new governmental website.

When the floor was opened for comments from the members present, several observations and considerations were shared. It was agreed that the Executive Secretariat would send information to all members of RTA regarding the proposed alternatives.

Moreover, members requested the possibility of returning to two in-person meetings per year, a suggestion to be considered at the next RTA meeting.

Furthermore, support for all Working Groups of RTA was emphasized. Ongoing initiatives were presented, for instance the awareness campaign “Your information, your right”, promoted by Working Group on Vulnerable People. The importance of cross-cutting approaches to strengthen groups and support was highlighted, as well as efforts to consolidate results under the responsibility of the Office of the Comptroller General of the State of São Paulo – Brazil, acting as the Executive Secretariat of RTA.

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European Network for Transparency and Right to Information

The European ICIC members established the European Network for Transparency and Right to Information (ENTRI) as a voluntary and inclusive international network at European level, creating a strong voice for more transparency and freedom of information.

The Network aims to provide a platform to promote best practices, share knowledge, and collaborate on initiatives that enhance transparency in governance and access to information in addition to the informal meetings and technical workshops since 2018.

The German Federal Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information has taken over the chairmanship of the new network for the next three years. The Executive Committee is composed of the French Commission d'accès aux documents administratifs, the Council for Transparency and Good Governance of Spain, the Information and Privacy Agency of Kosovo, the Scottish Information Commissioner and the Commission on Access to Administrative Information of Portugal.

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DAY THREE: CLOSED SESSION

The closed session of the ICIC XVI commenced with opening remarks by the BfDI Deputy Commissioner Andreas Hartl, on behalf of the Office of Federal Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information of Germany, and Mr. Besnik Dervishi, Information and Data Protection Commissioner of Albania, on behalf of the ICIC Chair-Secretariat.

Deputy Commissioner Hartl thanked all delegates from around the world for their contribution throughout two intensive open days. Commissioner Dervishi in the capacity as ICIC Chair, showed appreciation to all participants for their engagement and commitment to the work of the ICIC, while he thanked the whole ICIC members for entrusting IDP Albania to take over the lead of the ICIC for the past months.

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Regional updates

The tour de table on regional updates featured contributions from all six ICIC regional networks. Each representative outlined recent achievements, challenges, and developments within their respective regions.

In view of the **African** region latest developments, it was highlighted that IDUAI 2024 took place in Ghana under the auspices of UNESCO. Several other awareness and training activities took place across the region while digitization is being embraced through various initiatives. Efforts have been made to further strengthen and consolidate information regulators' institutional frameworks while it has been noted that Sierra Leone will be the host for the XVII Edition of the International Conference of Information Commissioners in 2027. Moreover, yet there have been challenges in implementing ATI laws in terms of litigation faced by the Commissions, non-compliance practices, lack of funding and budgetary constraints, and shortages in human resources in order to carry out the core functions of institutional activities.

In **Asia**, several activities were organized aiming at promoting ATI which took place in 2024 – 2025. Training events targeting information officers have been conducted to raise awareness. A rising interest has been observed in ATI requests for information with public bodies. Collaboration with national agencies, Civil Society Organisations, and other stakeholders has been established in order to ensure inclusiveness and engagement from all. Ongoing efforts have been made in lobbying for comprehensive ATI laws and considerable commitments are in place in order to strengthen access to information in the digital age. While in some countries information regulators have had expanded institutional powers, yet funding constraints and a need for sustained stakeholder support has been noted. Some priorities are centred at improving public awareness and addressing resources and capacity gaps amongst others.

Information regulatory authorities of **Europe** met in Berlin to formally establish the European Network for Transparency and Right to Information (ENTRI). Accordingly, The Charter which will serve as the governance framework was adopted, whereas the BfDI of Germany has taken over the Chairmanship of the network for the next three years. In certain European countries, initiatives to strengthen ATI legal frameworks are underway while some other regulators are reviewing their current laws for potential improvements. An increased number of complaints lodged with ATI oversight bodies has been highlighted while different opportunities relying on technology and AI tools are being explored which can help oversight bodies perform better. Information regulators have paid efforts to raise awareness with the public and other stakeholders by means of dissemination events, workshops and similar events, while also engaging in various projects promoting access to information.

The **Latin American** regional report highlights the vital role of the Network for Transparency and Access to Information (RTA) as a permanent space for dialogue and cooperation among Ibero-American oversight bodies, since its founding in 2011 with the World Bank's support. During its XXVIII Meeting in the Dominican Republic, the RTA approved its 2024–2027 Strategic Plan, aligned with the SDGs and international standards. The plan focuses on strengthening regional impact through strategic partnerships and new members, developing international standards on transparency, AI governance, and digital transparency, and consolidating thematic working groups. Key commitments include advancing environmental democracy, ensuring equal access to environmental information, protecting human rights defenders, and reinforcing the link between transparency and inclusive development. The RTA also aims to boost communication strategies, build digital repositories of good practices, and coordinate with global organizations such as UNESCO, OAS, IDB, and OECD.

North America and Caribbean recent developments highlighted that Canada's Information Commissioners and Ombudsman issued a joint resolution to call for enhanced transparency in government operations. Considering transparency when designing new systems in governance models has been highlighted. In the United States, FOIA requests surged by 25% over the previous year, surpassing 1.5 million for the first time, with the Department of Homeland Security receiving and processing the highest number. In the Caribbean, legislative amendments have occurred while budgetary concerns are yet persisting. Public awareness marks a high percentage of 87 % respondents to an ATI survey, where they said that access to information is important to them. In Yukon, five independent Legislative Officers follow a set legal process for budget approval through the Members' Services Board. In 2024–2025, this process was bypassed when the executive branch reviewed and altered their budgets, leading to a court case that upheld the government's authority under the Financial Administration Act, raising serious concerns about the fiscal independence of oversight bodies.

Updates from **Oceania** emphasized that on April 2025 at the meeting of AIAC, members agreed to a project to examine the statutory mechanisms in place to preserve and promote the independence and integrity of the entities responsible for oversight of information access laws in the region. AIAC members joined members of the United Nations to celebrate the International Day on Universal Access to Information (IDUAI). The 2023 Cross-jurisdictional Information Access Survey found that 91% of Australians value the right to access government information, though fewer than a third had exercised that right in the past three years. In New Zealand, a recent report confirmed the Official Information Act remains sound, but delays and cultural issues hinder its effectiveness. Efforts now focus on improving timeliness, promoting good practices, using technology, and supporting regional right to information training.

Administrative updates

The Secretariat presented the key developments related to the 2024–2027 Strategic Priorities, which were shaped through discussions at the 2024 Tirana Conference and a member-wide survey. The three main priorities guiding ICIC's future are: strengthening the organization's capacity, expanding and consolidating its membership, and revitalizing the activities of its Working Groups. Both INAI of Mexico and later, IDP Albania as interim Chair-Secretariat, led the implementation of these goals, organizing **3** Executive Committee meetings, admitting one new member and three observers to the ICIC, and actively managing the transition period of the Chair-Secretariat with efficiency and continuity.

In its role as interim Secretariat, IDP Albania coordinated various initiatives aligned with the strategic priorities. These included launching calls for the next ICIC Chair-Secretariat for 2025 – 2027 and for hosting the 2027 ICIC conference, maintaining and updating ICIC social media, and by exploring opportunities to extend global cooperation through new partnerships. Notably, a new Working Group on Information Integrity was established under the auspices of the ICIC Secretariat, co-chaired by South Africa and Kosovo. Across the existing Working Groups, eight virtual meetings were held, reflecting growing engagement and collaboration among working group members.

Efforts were also made to improve ICIC's digital presence. The Secretariat is in the final stages of migrating the ICIC website to a new hosting platform in Albania, aiming to enhance its usability and functionality for members and the public. Finally, after a competitive selection process with four strong applications, the Office of the Information Commissioner of Canada was announced as the host of the XVIII ICIC Conference in 2027. In her speech, Commissioner Maynard expressed her gratitude and excitement in hosting the ICIC conference.

ICIC Working Groups

Working group coordinators delivered presentations and updates for the work carried out:

The Access to Information (ATI) Working Group presented the Berlin Principles on the Protection and Promotion of Access to Information Commissioners. These principles emphasize the vital role of independent oversight institutions in guaranteeing the right of access to information and outline core standards related to their establishment, operational independence, resources and powers. Key principles include the legal foundation and transparent appointment of Commissioners, protection from undue interference, sufficient resourcing, and the authority to investigate, recommend, and raise public awareness. An annex on best practices complements the principles, promoting transparency, functional immunity, and institutional accountability. The Berlin ATI Principles mark a significant step toward strengthening global standards for access to information oversight bodies.

The Law Cases and Training working groups, coordinated by IDP Albania, presented updates on case study repositories and other developments. Following the withdrawal of INAI, the Interim Chair-Secretariat held by IDP Albania assumed responsibility for coordinating the Training and Law Cases Working Groups. To ensure continuity, a coordination meeting was held with the members of each respective working group, and a call was made for the submission of relevant ATI case studies for the Law Cases Working Group. Sixteen members contributed with their relevant cases, which were shared for review. The future work of both working groups will be considered and decided upon in consultation with the respective members.

The Working Group on Gender and People in Vulnerable Situations presented the Berlin Guidelines for the Promotion of the Right to Information to Groups in Situations of Vulnerability. The guidelines recognize that structural and intersectional barriers often prevent marginalized groups, such as women, children, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, and migrants from fully exercising their right to information. They provide a framework for ICIC members to develop inclusive policies through improved accessibility, community empowerment, targeted outreach, and inclusive technologies. The guidelines also emphasize the importance of regular monitoring and evaluation, encouraging member institutions to adapt these practices within their national legal and institutional contexts to ensure equitable access for all.

The newly established **Working Group on Information Integrity** co-chaired by the Information and Privacy Agency of Kosovo and the Information Regulator of South Africa, introduced their activity since its creation. The Information Integrity WG will serve as a platform to coordinate global efforts that support access to accurate and credible information, particularly as a response to the growing challenges of misinformation and disinformation. One of its main objectives is to strengthen the role of access to information commissions in promoting proactive disclosure as a preventive tool against disinformation. Additionally, the group will explore how generative AI affects information integrity and promote partnerships to enhance institutional understanding and resilience. The group's key deliverable for its first year is the development and publication of a policy paper outlining the role of information authorities in supporting and protecting information integrity.

XVI ICIC Public Statement

As it has been a practice in recent conferences, a draft Public Statement was introduced by IDP Albania. Following discussions and input from ICIC members, some amendments and addenda were proposed. After a consensus process and post-conference circulation, the statement was approved. Under the title *"Securing the Right to Environmental Information in a Digital World,"* the Statement reaffirms the universal right of access to information, with a specific focus on environmental transparency in the context of digital transformation. It emphasizes inclusiveness, proactive disclosure, and transparency-by-design, while calling for stronger legal frameworks, independent oversight bodies, and collaborative global action focusing in environmental transparency.

Election of the ICIC Chair-Secretariat (2025–2027)

Under the lead of IDP Albania as the authority in charge of the ICIC as Chair and Secretariat on an interim basis, as agreed in the most recent ICIC Executive Committee meeting in 2024, a call to elect a new Chair and Secretariat for 2025 – 2027 was launched in January 2025. The BfDI as host authority made a summary over the election process and announced the Office of the Information and Data Protection Commissioner of Albania as the Authority elected to occupy the Chair and Secretariat for 2025 – 2027 term. IDP Albania was unanimously elected by the ICIC members present in Berlin and confirmed by the majority of votes received electronically prior to the conference. The decision reflects a strong level of trust and recognition to IDP Albania's leadership during the interim period. Commissioner Dervishi expressed gratitude for the trust put in IDP Albania and emphasized that "*It is a great honor and a responsibility that we accept with dedication and humbleness*".

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Finally, the closed session concluded with final remarks from both **Commissioner Besnik Dervishi** and **Prof. Dr. Louisa Specht-Riemenschneider**, whom acknowledged the constructive dialogue throughout the conference days and the productive discussions and ideas that will help to strengthen partnerships across ICIC members.

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Conclusions

The XVI ICIC Conference in Berlin marked a significant milestone for the international community of information commissioners, convened under the timely and important theme: “Access to Environmental Information in a Digital Era”.

Over the course of the open and closed session days, the conference successfully brought together regulators, experts, and civil society stakeholders from across the globe to address one of the most pressing challenges of our time: how to ensure meaningful and equitable access to environmental information amidst rapid digital transformation.

Participants reflected on the growing importance of transparency in environmental governance, especially by addressing the impacts of this crucial topic on communities worldwide. It was emphasized that the public’s right to know is a cornerstone of effective environmental protection, democratic accountability and sustainable development.

Discussions also acknowledged the dual role of digitalization, as both an enabler and a potential barrier to accessing environmental data. While technological tools offer unprecedented opportunities for openness and citizen engagement, they also risk deepening existing inequalities if not accompanied by inclusive digital policies and strong regulatory oversight.

In conclusion, the Berlin Conference reinforced that access to environmental information is not only a legal right but a moral imperative in the fight for a more just, informed, and sustainable future. Through collective action and shared commitments, ICIC members pledged to continue driving progress, supporting innovation, and upholding the principles of openness in the digital age.

Acknowledgments

Appreciation and very special thanks go to our host, the BfDI of Germany, for making possible our gathering in Berlin for the XVI Edition of the International Conference of Information Commissioners, and for organizing such a successful event.

The hard work and dedication of the ICIC Executive Committee, the Planning Committee for the XVI Edition, as well as the ICIC members and working groups, cannot go unnoticed. Their invaluable contributions, initiatives, and input throughout the planning process have been essential in shaping the content and overall development of this conference.

We also recognize our ICIC partners and stakeholders, who continuously enrich our work with valuable ideas and promote excellent initiatives in advancing transparency and access to information. They are indispensable actors, playing a significant role in shaping better transparency policies for the future.