

STATEMENT BY THE UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR
COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC INFORMATION
AT THE OPENING OF THE THIRTY-SIXTH SESSION
OF THE COMMITTEE ON INFORMATION
MONDAY, 28 APRIL 2014, 10:00 A.M.

Madam Chairperson,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to address the annual session of the Committee on Information as you begin deliberations on “Questions relating to information.”

This annual session of the Committee, now in its 36th year, is an occasion for Member States to share with the Department of Public Information (DPI) your views on public information priorities, and for the Department to inform you about our strategic directions. It is also an opportunity for both of us to review what has been done, what still needs to be done, and, above all, how best to realize our common goals.

During the past 12 months, I have had many occasions to interact with you – sometimes bilaterally, sometimes in groups – to listen to your comments about our work, our joint successes, as well as about where we can do better. We have also had the opportunity to discuss the recurring challenges associated with expanding mandates, dwindling resources and competing priorities.

These discussions, most recently in advance of this year’s session of the Committee on Information, have helped us to sharpen our objectives and options with regard to United Nations’ public information policies and programmes.

Through this continuous dialogue, the Department has forged a partnership with this Committee that serves as a cornerstone in our efforts to provide and disseminate accurate,

timely and coherent information in ways that respond to the mandates given to us by Member States and that meet the requirements of today's communications environment.

I am particularly thankful to the Chairperson of the Committee, Ambassador Lyutha Al-Mughairy, for her pragmatic leadership and constant encouragement, and to our key negotiating partners, the Group of 77 and China, and the European Union, as well as to the other members of the Committee, for your continued support and understanding.

Madam Chairperson,

The General Assembly, in its resolutions A/RES/68/86, requested the Secretary-General to report to the 36th session of the Committee on Information on the activities of the Department and on the implementation of its recommendations on questions relating to public information. Through consultations with the Bureau of the Committee, it was decided that the information requested in that resolution would be grouped into the three reports listed in your agenda. These reports, organized according to our sub-programmes, provide an overview of the work and directions of the Department.

Also available for your review is the proposed strategic framework for the period 2016-2017 (A/69/6) and A/69/6 (Prog.24) Corr.1, which provides the biennial programme plan for the three sub-programmes of the Department.

I look forward in the course of the coming days to discuss with you the substantive work of the Department and its myriad activities, many of which are reflected in the reports before you.

I would like to take this particular opportunity to share with you the five elements that are, I believe, vital to the goals and approach of this Department. These derive from the mandates you have given us, and the directions the Secretary-General has given me.

The first is leadership. You have placed public information and communications at the heart of the strategic management of the United Nations. For us to realise this expectation, we must lead in developing with other departments and offices and executing with them our communications to the global public – the national public in each of your

States – to tell them better what we are doing, what we hope to do, and what is necessary to reach our goals. One area where we are doing this now is with UN communications on the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the post-2015 development agenda.

The second element of our approach is understanding. By promoting transparency, the Department seeks to build international support for the activities of the Organization, as charged by you. We must be heard, seen, read and understood. Our means of communication must keep pace with our times, using new modes and tools while staying true to traditional means, like radio, television and print. These tools are complementary rather than contradictory or competitive, and we must deploy them in ways that are right for and meet the needs of local audiences. Similarly, we must reach out in languages that are immediate and local. Here, in response to the Committee, the Department is pleased to present our approach on the use of social media in our work, as contained in the Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of our strategic communications services.

The third element is conversation. Communications, as we know, is not a one-way process. Only through informed discussions about UN issues can consensus be built in support of the actions determined by you, the Member States, and the Secretariat. Such outreach would involve all the natural allies of this Department – among which are the media, civil society organizations, academic institutions and the creative community. It would also build upon what this Committee has eloquently described as the “capability of the public, private or other media.” This would allow us to harness the spontaneity of social media, on the one hand, and benefit from the advantages of established media on the other.

The fourth element is knowledge. This Department will continue to foster awareness of the history, the achievements, and the potential of the United Nations. As you will see later today, we have a rich repository of record which is our shared responsibility to preserve. We shall seek your support in doing so. Equally, our role as a convening power of non-governmental deliberations, scholarly seminars and issue-specific events, among others, offers opportunities for creative action built on knowledge.

The fifth element is partnership. There is a natural partnership between Member States and the Department in our common interest to demonstrate the relevance of the United Nations to the public. At the same time, when there is a convergence between what we are

doing or seeking to do and the activities of civil society, partnerships emerge that expand, but are never a substitute for, those with Member States. I mention our work towards the 65th Annual UN DPI/NGO Conference this August in New York, which will bring together a vast diversity of civil society representatives, constituencies and campaigns on the post-2015 development agenda.

Madam Chairperson,

Leadership, understanding, conversation, knowledge and partnership. These are the five strategic elements to our Department's approach. We have sought to apply these directions in all that we do, and to put them into practice. Our portfolio is wide, from the post-2015 development agenda, climate change and the needs of small island developing States, to our programme on the Question of Palestine and our outreach activities about the Holocaust, and the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade.

Our assets are also extraordinarily diverse, from the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, the custodian of UN history and knowledge, to the global network of more than 60 UN Information Centres.

These UN Information Centres, many of which were the first UN presence in your country, date back to the earliest days of the Organization. They play an indispensable role, despite often having to operate under difficult circumstances.

By listening to and understanding the concerns and needs of the populations where they serve, they are able to better inform the work of the United Nations. They coordinate UN system communications at the country level. They serve as the public face of the UN in their communities. And they are also best placed to work closely with civil society.

One critical area where the Department is putting into practice its strategic vision is in our work in and for Africa. I had the privilege last month to visit Nairobi, Kenya, and Abuja, Nigeria. I was struck by the commitment and energy of the many young entrepreneurs, NGO representatives, journalists, artists, educators and students that I met to contribute meaningfully to the improvement of peoples' lives and their futures. I went to identify new partners to help tell the UN story, and expand our cooperation.

In Abuja, I took part in the United Nations' Regional Coordination Mechanism for Africa. The purpose was to strengthen our Department's cooperation with the African Union and the NEPAD Agency, and to bring to bear the full range of platforms and approaches of the Department to our work in Africa in the context of the African Union's Agenda 2063.

In our meetings with the AU Commission Chairperson, Madam Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, and the NEPAD Chief Executive Officer, Mr. Ibrahim Mayaki, we discussed how to better serve the people of Africa, by placing DPI's expertise and capacity at the service of our joint communications. Our key partners in these efforts are the Office of the Special Advisor on Africa and the Economic Commission for Africa. I am convinced that we can do more through partnership and more understandable and relevant messages in a language that is accessible. We can do this with words, and with more visual messages and images that speak in all languages.

Our commitment to Africa is shared across the Department. The United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI) initiative and our collaboration with NGOs allow us access to reach faculty, students, and civil society in support of the goals and principles of the UN and the AU. Our creative community outreach worldwide offers opportunities to reach new audiences in Africa through placing our messages in television, films and cartoons. And our work with young people and with the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth continues to expand and deepen – not only in Africa but globally.

In the area of peace and security, the Department uses all of its assets to support peace efforts in Africa. Since the start of this year, we have sent public information officers to the Central African Republic to support the UN political mission that operated there. They played crucial roles in disseminating messages of peace and reconciliation in local languages, including Sango, at a time of deep tension and violence in the country. We are deploying additional communications colleagues as the peacekeeping mission takes shape. As an illustration of how we are able to take advantage of our numerous platforms and partners, we shared a recent op-ed column by the Secretary-General on his visit to the Central African Republic with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, UN Messengers of Peace Lang Lang and Charlize Theron and celebrity advocates who then posted it to their large networks of supporters on social media.

Our support to the Central African Republic extends to rebuilding their knowledge base. In response to a request from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for core UN publications and documents, including maps, treaties and resolutions – many of which were destroyed or lost during the conflict – the Dag Hammarskjöld Library has collected two boxes of print publications and prepared electronic copies of UN documents. These vital materials, including copies of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, will be handed over to the Government to help them in carrying out their responsibilities. For all delegates, meanwhile, the Library has prepared a useful research guide on the work of the UN in the Central African Republic.

Through our multi-platform publications, including *Africa Renewal*, and our UN News Centre and UN Radio, the Department uses all of our means to produce, promote and disseminate UN content on economic and social development; human rights; and peace and security matters of concern to Africa.

Our partnership extends further. Earlier this month, the world commemorated in Kigali the 20th anniversary of the Rwanda genocide, one of the darkest chapters in human history. The Secretary-General was among those taking part in the official commemoration there. At UN Headquarters, DPI worked closely with the Permanent Mission of Rwanda to organize a series of events – including a panel discussion with former UN peacekeeping commander Senator Roméo Dallaire, the New York launch of Rwanda's Kwibuka20 campaign, the annual memorial ceremony, and the opening of a special exhibit of photographs and survivor testimonies.

Our efforts on Africa are an example of the coordinated and integrated approach that the Department brings to all of the substantive areas of its work. It is an illustration of how we use all of the means and tools – at Headquarters and at the country-level – available to the Department to maximize our impact.

Madame Chairperson,

This year, the Group of 77 and China turns 50, an occasion DPI will help to mark. The centrepiece of our support to this important milestone will be a special issue of *UN*

Chronicle, containing reflections on the G-77's beginning and its continuing importance today. In addition to the English and French editions in print and online, this issue will also be translated into Spanish for posting on the magazine's website and be made available on Apple devices, Kindles, BlackBerrys and as a stand-alone app.

The Department's various news and media platforms will cover, in multiple languages, the Group's anniversary summit that will take place in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, in June. DPI will also highlight the activities of the G-77 over the past 50 years, including by providing some 150 images from UN Photo's archives for a special exhibit.

Next year, the United Nations will see action on the Millennium Development Goals, the post-2015 development agenda, and climate change. It will also see the observance of the 70th anniversary of the United Nations itself. We are developing an exciting and engaging programme for the anniversary that will involve partnerships with you and the general public, as well as with UN system partners and civil society. Ahead of us is a wonderful opportunity to mark this historic occasion together. We look forward to your thoughts, proposals and plans for how we can jointly celebrate.

Madam Chairperson,

Let me now turn to a topic that has been the focus of recent conversations in the Committee and across the Secretariat. All Member States, regardless of their group affiliation, have told us of the importance they attach to linguistic parity in the work of the UN. In fact, some Member States used the term equity to signal the importance they attach to multilingualism.

As the Secretary-General's Coordinator for Multilingualism, it is my responsibility to promote multilingualism across the Secretariat. I am among the first to admit that linguistic parity remains a goal, rather than a reality. As the distinguished Chairperson noted, the reason why we have so far been unable to fully implement the mandate on multilingualism is not a lack of commitment but, rather, a lack of sufficient resources.

Nevertheless, DPI has made noticeable progress, often through partnerships with Member States, as well as with universities, media houses, and telecommunications companies, to translate UN information and our many different news and information products in the six official languages and beyond. Just today, for example, the website for UN Academic Impact goes live in all six languages.

In the past year, we have been able to ensure that all plenary meetings of the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council are webcast live in all six languages. And we have also helped other UN offices and departments, too, ensuring for example that the website of the Office of the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict is now available in all six languages.

We are always trying to do more, in terms of translation and in terms of creating content in the original language. And we are constantly reminding and urging departments and offices across the Secretariat to do the same. We seek your continued support in this regard. Our network of UN Information Centres play a frontline role in reaching people in their own languages. Last year, UNICs translated and distributed UN material in more than 45 languages. This is all made possible thanks to the Department's core asset – its multilingual staff.

The Department has held informal discussions with Member State delegations to explore options to implement language parity in the issuance of press releases, as requested by this Committee. Our proposal towards this request is contained in the Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of our news services. We look forward to your guidance.

Madam Chairperson and distinguished delegates,

Aware of our mission to bring the UN story to the largest number of people, the Department of Public Information has continued to work on enhancing our effectiveness and on expanding the reach of a wide array of our services and related products. While maintaining a strong focus on traditional means of communication, we are capitalizing on opportunities presented by new information and communications technologies. This has enabled the Department to reach a wider, more diverse, and younger, audience.

Yet the Department cannot accomplish this task alone. We need your active support, participation and partnership. As members of the Committee on Information, you have always extended this support to the Department. We count on our partnership with you to get better equipped, better prepared, and better skilled for the challenges we all face.

Madame Chairperson,

I am looking forward to our conversations over the next two weeks. I also welcome the engagement of Member States in next week's commemoration of World Press Freedom Day, which this year focuses on the links between freedom of expression and the post-2015 development agenda. The Department of Public Information is a staunch supporter of press freedom and an independent media. We support these goals practically, through our network of UN Information Centres and via the UN's many peacekeeping missions. In close collaboration with UNESCO, we are also working to draw attention to the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.

In closing, I would like to mention that we look forward to sharing with the Committee this afternoon a sample of the remarkable UN audiovisual archives and records held by the Department on behalf of the Organization. These materials represent the shared history of the United Nations – and of each Member State as well – in a larger context. For Member States, looking at archives is like an earlier version of Googling yourself. In that search, you can discover the history of your country, and the Department of Public Information looks forward to helping you blend your story with that of the United Nations.

We look forward to seeing all of you at the interactive session.

Thank you.
