**Communiqué issued at the end of a 2-Day Workshop for Freedom of Information (FOI) Desk Officers of Public Institutions on the Establishment of an Online Engagement Platform**

**Introduction:**

The International Press Centre (IPC) in collaboration with Media Rights Agenda (MRA) and the Freedom of Information Unit of the Federal Ministry of Justice held a two-day workshop for FOI Desk Officers of Public Institutions on the establishment of a Freedom of Information online engagement Platform.

The aim of the workshop was to build a collaborative mechanism among the FOI Desk Officers to deepen strategies for ensuring effective implementation of the FOI Act as well as ensuring improved compliance with proactive publications and others obligations of Public Institutions under the FOI Act. It took place in Abuja on Tuesday, February 1 and Wednesday, February 2, 2022.

The event had in attendance over 60 participants drawn from among FOI Desk Officers of Federal Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) in Abuja. Workshop sessions comprised of a mixture of plenary presentations and discussions, group work in breakout sessions, report back in plenary and video documentary viewing.

The highpoint of the workshop was an agreement to establish an online Freedom of Information Platform for FOI Desk Officers to facilitate collaboration and information and experience sharing in order to enhance the effective implementation of the FOI Act.

The workshop, with the theme, “Facilitating Shared Learning, Experience Sharing and Best Practice Application in the Implementation of the Freedom of Information Act, 2011” was funded by the European Union (EU) and was implemented under Component 4b: Support to the media of the EU Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU-SDGN) Project.

A welcome remark was received from Mr. Lanre Arogundade, Executive Director, International Press Centre (IPC), who was represented by Ms Stella Nwofia, Programme Manager, IPC while Mr. Edetaen Ojo, Executive Director of Media Rights Agenda (MRA), who chaired the opening session gave the opening remarks. Goodwill messages were received from Mr. Clement Boutillier, Representative of the European Union Delegation to Nigeria and ECOWAS and Dr. Gloria Ahmed, National Coordinator of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in Nigeria

The keynote address was delivered by Mr. Abubakar Malami (SAN), Honourable Attorney-General of the Federation and Minister of Justice, who was represented by Mr. Gowon Ichibor, Head of the Freedom of Information Unit at the Federal Ministry of Justice.

**Observations:**

Participants acknowledged the crucial role of access to information in a democracy, observing that for democracy to thrive, there is need for transparency and accountability. In addition, the participants observed that:

* The poor state of record-keeping in public institutions constitutes a serious obstacle to the effective implementation of the FOI Act as good record keeping and management are an essential foundation for an access to information regime.
* FOI Desk Officers of public institutions are critically important in the efficient and effective implementation of the FOI Act and such, their positive attitude and understanding of the Act can make a major difference in ensuring that the Law achieves its objectives.
* The effective implementation and enforcement of the FOI Act in all public institutions can enhance the legitimacy in the government as it will ensure transparent and accountable governance and result in citizen trust for government.
* There remains widespread lack of understanding of the FOI Act among many chief executives of public institutions who also do not fully appreciate the role that openness and transparency play in bringing about and sustaining an enduring democratic way of life.
* Many public officers do not still understand the primacy of the FOI Act in relation to other instruments such as the Federal the Civil Service Rules, the Official Secrets Acts, the provisions of the Criminal Code and the Penal Code, as well as all other such policies and legislation that seek to prevent the disclosure of information.
* Many public institutions do not appreciate the role that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) play in all aspects of freedom of information implementation as well as in facilitating and fostering access to information in general.
* The lack or inadequate application of digital record keeping tools by public institutions in their information and record gathering and management activities impose an unnecessary burden on Desk Officers as it undermines their effectiveness in implementing or overseeing the implementation of the FOI Act.

**Recommendations:**

Following the presentations and discussions, the workshop recommended the following:

* Public institutions and FOI Desk Officers should build their capacities to apply and deploy ICTs in creating, collecting, processing, storing, managing, retrieving, presenting, transferring, transmitting, and distributing information and records and routinely use such tools to improve the implementation of the FOI Act across board.
* In accordance with the mandatory provisions of the FOI Act, public institutions should undertake continuous training of their officials, particularly those who play critical roles in the information ecosystem, in order to enhance their efficiency and thereby the effective implementation of the FOI Act.
* Public institutions should ensure that they make budgetary provisions for the training of all their personnel and for the overall implementation of the FOI Act.
* The Attorney-General of the Federation, as part of his oversight responsibility in the implementation of the FOI Act, should provide a framework for the use of ICTs by public institutions and the digitalization of information and records across Ministries, Departments and Agencies of Government.
* Public institutions should digitise all information and records in their custody in order to make it easy for them to find requested records and information and make them available to the requesters within the timeframe stipulated in the FOI Act as well as to enhance their overall efficiency and effectiveness.
* Public institutions should refrain from hiding under the Official Secrets Act or the Federal Public Service Rules or other such instruments to deny members of the public their rights of access to information as the FOI Act is superior to such laws and policy documents.
* As the Federal Government institution charged with promoting and publicizing the activities of Governments, including its laws and policies, the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture should actively promote the FOI Act in order to create awareness and sensitize the public about the Law and how to use it across various segments of the Nigerian population. It should do this along with other relevant institutions under its supervision such as the National Orientation Agency (NOA), the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN),

**Conclusion:**

The workshop concluded that public’s right of access to information as obligated by the FOI Act is vital to ensuring transparency and accountability in governance and deepening democratic practice in Nigeria and that it is therefore imperative that the right is fully respected and upheld in accordance with the provisions of the FOI Act.

Towards this end, the participants agreed that an online platform should be established for sharing ideas among FOI Desk Officers and interfacing with the public.

**Appreciation:**

The participants thanked the organisers and the European Union Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU-SDGN) Project for supporting the workshop.

Signed: (For and behalf of the participants).

International Press Centre (IPC) and Media Rights Agenda (MRA)