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### "Libraries - A voyage of discovery"

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### **Partnership to advance library and information service**

**Alex Byrne**

IFLA President 2005-2007

Colleagues and friends, I am deeply honoured and humbled to stand before you as the incoming President of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. It is the highest possible honour and privilege to have been elected to the leadership of our global professional organisation and to represent such an outstanding body of colleagues throughout the world. But is also very humbling to take on the responsibility of guiding the Federation in its important work for its members, the profession and society.

I am very conscious that I stand on the shoulders of giants as Newton put it. Of the many great IFLA Presidents, including our immediate past President Kay Raseroka, I will single out only two, the Swiss Marcel Godet and the Norwegian Wilhelm Munthe. Godet was President through the dreadful years from 1936 to 1947 and kept IFLA going through the divisions and terror of the Second World War. On the eve of that war, he reminded IFLA conference delegates that libraries must be places of free inquiry and that librarians must always work “à humaniser l’homme [to humanise humanity]” (IFLA 1939, p. 11). After he assumed the presidency following the war, Munthe turned to the increasing international distrust evident as the Cold War developed and asked what was happening to freedom:

The freedom from fear has totally vanished, and the freedoms of thought, of speech, of reading - which we librarians are mostly interested in - are gradually vanishing in one country after another ... we must prepare for the worst, but we must also work for the best. And perhaps never have we librarians had a greater opportunity to make positive contribution ... (IFLA 1948, p. 11)

Sadly, sixty years later we might say the same in a world in which division between peoples is being fomented, distrust and fear are growing, and freedoms of thought, speech and access to information are being curtailed. We must unite against the marriage of ignorance and intolerance and their twin children, terror and state control. We must continue to proclaim the human right to know, the crucial importance of freedom of opinion, freedom of expression and communication and freedom of information. They are fundamental rights and they lie at the core of our profession.

Together with library associations and institutions, IFLA is actively working on the big issues for society which are relevant to library and information practice. We have engaged wholeheartedly with the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and have become an influential voice in the deliberations of the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) and other fora dealing with major legal matters which affect our practice and our commitment to access to information. Despite limited resources, IFLA/FAIFE has become an influential and respected advocate for intellectual freedom including opposition to the restrictions imposed in response to fear of terrorism. Through these strategies and in many other ways, IFLA is demonstrating the relevance of libraries and information services to both the daily life and the major concerns of society, our first pillar.

This work is advanced through the professional dialogue which we enjoy through IFLA and our associations. The fact that colleagues from some 140 countries come together annually at this Congress to share experience and pursue collaborative projects and programs is testimony to the strength of our profession. Through that interaction and collaboration we have developed a most impressive body of standards and guidelines which underpin our work. We also promote the advancement of library and information service throughout the world with particular emphasis on underdeveloped regions and ways of addressing the special needs of the most vulnerable including those with disabilities, children, women, minorities and Indigenous peoples. With the creation of the IFLA Relief and Development Partnership we have established a mechanism to provide modest assistance to those colleagues who have suffered or are in regions prone to disasters. This many layered work which is pursued by our sections and core activities immeasurably strengthens the profession, our second pillar.

IFLA can promote and facilitate this work for society and for the profession because of the strength of our membership. As a membership organisation, we need to deliver value to our 1700 plus members from 154 countries and the extended constituency of the hundreds of thousands who belong to our association members or work in our member institutions. We do that through pursuing the programs and projects of relevance to society and the profession but also by providing direct services to members through IFLA HQ, the regional offices, *IFLA Journal* and, most significantly, IFLAnet. But, perhaps the most important benefit for our members is the opportunity for dialogue and cooperation that the Federation provides: this is a process to which we all contribute and from which we all benefit much, much more than each of us contributes. This third pillar, our members, is the core of IFLA's strength.

As an engineer by training, I know that strength derives from interrelationship, from assembling the right elements and joining them in effective combinations. This is partnership. It is demonstrated throughout IFLA in the work of the sections and core activities, in the ways in which colleagues from throughout the world come together to work on important matters. It is also to be seen in our work with library associations which has been especially visible in regard to WSIS and the work of CLM. Our collaborative work is much strengthened by our longstanding partnership with many corporate partners and with our suppliers who we see in the Congress exhibition year after year.

But our partnerships extend beyond the Federation, as for example in our most important relationship with the Conference of Directors of National Libraries (CDNL) which is demonstrated through the IFLA CDNL Alliance for Bibliographic Standards and in the Committee of the Blue Shield which links us with the peak bodies for the other memory institutions – the International Council of Archives, the International Council of Museums and the International Committee on Monuments and Sites. The importance of collaboration is also visible in our 57 year old partnership with UNESCO and our growing relationships with other international governmental and non-governmental organisations. In the WSIS processes we have worked very closely with many NGOs representing civil society and much of our effectiveness can be traced to those relationships which have been fostered.

To be strong partner, the Federation needs to be strong. That means that we need to make IFLA more efficient and robust, diversify the financial base, increase membership to extend our mandate and reach, develop a more effective advocacy capability. This is summarised in the three pillars model - our focus on society, the profession and members. It is very important that we keep doing the things which strengthen our profession including bibliographic standards, preservation and conservation, ALP and the work of the IFLA Sections. But it is also vital that we demonstrate our relevance to society by engaging more directly and visibly with the needs of society including universal and unrestricted access to information to promote community building and strengthening, linguistic and cultural diversity, health and education, research and freedom. IFLA can do much at the global level but that needs to be mirrored by action at national and local levels which brings us back to the importance of partnership.

Partnership is thus a key enabler for our work. We must work in partnership within our field, with those in cognate professions, with those with shared interests and with those who are influential. Thus, my presidential theme is *partnership* because we must work to develop even stronger collaboration across the IFLA Sections, with our members and especially the library associations, with other sections of the library and information service community across the world and with our colleagues in archives, museums, publishing, information technology and civil society. By working together we will do great things to assist the global network of library and information services to provide unrestricted access to information and thereby to respond to the needs of humanity including the strongly felt concerns of all peoples for freedom, security and development.

In accepting the great responsibility and honour of being the President of IFLA, I am delighted to be able to welcome my colleague and friend, Claudia Lux, to the position of President-elect. We will work in partnership with each other, with the other members of the Governing Board, with the Secretary General and IFLA staff, with officers and members and with others within and outside librarianship to strengthen the Federation, promote our values

and achieve our goals. As Munthe put it, we have a great opportunity to make positive contribution!

Thank you

**References**

IFLA (1939). Comite International des Bibliothèques 12me Session, La Haye-Amsterdam, 10-12 Juillet 1939 Actes. Comite International des Bibliothèques 12me Session, The Hague and Amsterdam, Martinus Nijhoff.

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