

Acceptance Speech Delivered by Ms. Ellen R. Tise at the 75th IFLA Congress in Milan 2009

Distinguished guests, past IFLA presidents, President-elect Ingrid Parent, members of the IFLA Governing Board, Presidents of Library Associations, Directors of the World's National Libraries, IFLA members and delegates:

It is with considerable humility that I stand here today to assume the position of President of IFLA, your President. The shoulders of those who have gone before me serve as my support and my guide. I thank them all for their leadership which has ensured that our beloved Federation has gone from strength-to-strength. The list of past presidents and officers is a veritable international who's who in our esteemed profession. They have faced a range of challenges – some have toiled in periods of great prosperity; others during times of economic hardship as we are facing today; some have enjoyed times of peace; whereas others have had to face hardships of various kinds. And yet through all of these moments in history IFLA has persevered. Through these all they have endured and through their efforts our association has remained focussed and faithful to the ideals set by those who preceded them.

I would particularly like to recognise Prof Dr Claudia Lux, our immediate past President, who has ably piloted our association through the last two years with some unusual challenges. Despite all of these, under her leadership IFLA has weathered the vicissitudes of the times and emerged a stronger and more vibrant Federation. Claudia, IFLA owes you a great deal of gratitude and thanks you unreservedly for your stewardship.

For those who will serve on the Governing Board, committees and in other official capacities over the next two years, I look forward to working with you as we collectively strive to ensure that the Federation grows, develops and endures as a strong and vibrant association serving all the needs of the library community and also the individuals and societies we seek to serve. To our Secretary General, Jennefer Nicholson and the other staff of IFLA Headquarters, thank you for your continuing service and I look forward to continuing, with you the good work that you have done and continue to do on behalf of our association. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank the Library Association of South Africa, other library associations, institutions, individuals and especially my home institution, Stellenbosch University for their support.

I have chosen as my Presidential theme ***Libraries Driving Access to Knowledge*** – I see this as an all embracing concept that enables us to ensure that libraries remain at the heart of every thought, word and deed that occurs across within and throughout our societies and communities. Without knowledge all effort is nought. Without sound, accurate and reliable knowledge, decisions and actions that we or others take can have disastrous consequential effects for a very long time. Knowledge **is** the key to success.

As knowledge and information professionals we are committed to the belief that we have an obligation to ensure that we provide those who use our services the knowledge and information that enables them to make the right decision, every time, all the time. Associated with this is the ethical responsibility that we must, on every occasion, provide equity in terms of access to information. Equity of access to information is one of IFLA's core values.

Access to information for all on equal terms is an unchallengeable human right. Equitable access for all pivots on the fundamental belief that all people are equal, all are free. An unalienable right of access to information and knowledge is the only way to ensure the development of all. Thus, there must be no short cuts, no settling for less in the provision of access to information.

I truly believe one of the most important ways of achieving this human right is for libraries and librarians to become fully engaged in their communities and societies. The activities and actions of the LIS sector are foundational to the existence of sustainable communities, economic growth and healthy societies. The result of our deeds, actions and services are vital to personal opportunities and well-being. LIS services add value to both individuals and society at large by providing citizens with access to knowledge and information. Not only must we advocate these both passionately and powerfully we must also seek opportunities which enable us to put libraries and library services at the forefront of all community and societal efforts. By this level of engagement we will be helping to make libraries drive access to knowledge. The role of the LIS sector in promoting democratic values and democratizing the search for knowledge cannot be underestimated. Our role as information activists can and must be positive as this is the only way that we as LIS professionals can optimize the full potential of our profession and what it stands for.

One of the things we have not all fully grasped is the strength that is inherent in our profession or the powerful impact that we can each have as LIS professionals. Many of us underestimate our potential and the value that we can make and must contribute to our societies.

One of the comments that was made at the President-elect's brainstorming session at this conference which cannot be repeated too often, is that as a profession we have been and are very good at talking to and among ourselves. We have not been as successful in talking to and with others, particularly those who have the power to help us integrate and embed libraries into the highest levels of decision-making. While there are those who believe that libraries do not get votes and hence do not require support, I believe that if we can demonstrate that through libraries and librarians there can be quantitative and qualitative improvements in health issues, entrepreneurial skills development, environmental protection, poverty alleviation, a reduction in illiteracy, the development of a respect for diversity and all of the other issues that politicians and others in decision making roles hold dear - that not only will we be providing access to knowledge, but we will also be able to demonstrate that libraries and librarians are key to the political process and national development.

While the theme of my year refers to libraries, implicit and inherent in the phrase is the pivotal role that you, and I, as library and information professionals must and can play in making knowledge accessible to all. It is an imperative that we unreservedly have a commitment to and a concern for the public good which must encompass a respect for diversity and espouses the principle of equality and human rights for all. The members of IFLA are but a microcosm of the world's reality - a diversity which is in itself one of IFLA's strengths. It would be remiss of me however not to acknowledge that imbedded in this diversity are uneven opportunities to provide access to knowledge. Not all of us practice in communities and societies where the latest technology is available at our finger tips, where libraries are reasonably or abundantly resourced, or where reliable electrical and broad band services are givens.

Never-the-less, even within those situations, it is still necessary to provide access to knowledge for all. Librarians practicing in such environments need support and

assistance. We should therefore work together and offer guidance and mentorship to professionals whose working realities are not privileged as others. It is through such acts that we will help to make the world a better place and help to realise one of the pillars of IFLA – Information for all and underlying concept of the theme ***Libraries Driving Access to Knowledge***.

Further, the empowerment of our users is inextricably intertwined in ***Libraries Driving Access to Knowledge***. The creation and use of knowledge does not occur in a vacuum – people use knowledge for a variety of reasons – to learn, to grow, to make decisions and for recreational and entertainment purposes, in fact the list is limitless. The crucial role that libraries play in the empowerment of their users is that they are the facilitating agencies to access the information they need. One of the ways in which libraries empower their users is that they, the user, is assured that they are accessing information with the knowledge that the information they receive is as reliable as it can be. That provides the user with a considerable level of comfort and places the library in a strong position as a social service of the highest value.

There is another aspect of my theme to which I would like to turn our thoughts for a few moments – that is the role of libraries and librarians as creators of knowledge. While libraries have traditionally been spaces and places where one can access knowledge that is already available, it is only recently that we have become to recognise our potential in the knowledge creation process.

When a young entrepreneur visits a library as part of his or her investigation for the development of a new product, process or service, seldom is the critical role that the library and librarian played in the resultant end product acknowledged. However, without the information gleaned from the library visit or visits and often the extensive assistance of a librarian or two, the positive outcome of the entrepreneurs work could have been otherwise. But the knowledge creation process is not only with regard to the work of others. When we package and bundle existing information in such a way that an information-seeker is able to have at their fingertips exactly what they need to make a reasoned decision or further their research enquiries, our efforts are not confined to only providing access to knowledge and information, by our actions we have become knowledge creators. In such an instance not only are we driving access to knowledge, we are creators of knowledge and thus become part of the knowledge building process, one of the underpinnings of the knowledge society of which we are an integral dimension.

Over the next two years I, with your help, will seek to ensure the potential of libraries as sources of access to knowledge is better realised. It will not be an easy task, but then few things that are worthwhile are easy to accomplish. I see a bright future for libraries and librarians as we strive to ensure that our service communities are better served, that the full potential of each and every individual is realised and knowledge becomes accessible to all. Libraries, with the help of each of us, can and will drive access to knowledge. It is up to us to make it happen and with your help I know that I will be able to say, yes, (not we can) - we **will** make ***Libraries Drive Access to Knowledge***.

I thank you!