

Opening Address

Future Libraries: Infinite Possibilities

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Minister Yaacob Ibrahim, Ambassador Chan Heng Chee, Mrs Elaine Ng, honoured guests, members of the national organizing committee, and Congress delegates – I join my colleagues in offering you the warmest of welcomes to IFLA’s annual World Library and Information Congress.

It is wonderful to be back in Singapore. As Dr. Ibrahim so eloquently noted in his welcome letter to this Congress, Singapore is a small nation where East meets West, where the traditional co-exists with the modern, and where people of different races and religions live together in harmony. That description is very apt when I think of my visits with IFLA members and librarians around the world who work with patrons from all walks of life, cultures and religions – providing them with efficient and empathetic access to information and expertise.

As you can imagine, as President of IFLA, I have given many keynote speeches – and have been interviewed by local media countless times. I have been referred to by many names - including the “Queen of Librarians” – and even as the “Pope of Librarians!”

Now - not even on my best days do I feel like a Queen or a Pope! But I can tell you I was secretly pleased when during my first visit to Singapore last March, *The Straits Times* referred to me as a “Library Crusader”. That’s a label I can live with!

Because that is how I have seen my role. To be a very visible and active promoter and champion for libraries and the work that they do so well in communities around the world.

To that end, this past year, I particularly focused my activities on the IFLA regions. I went to South Africa, Chile and Argentina, Australia, Malaysia and Singapore, and just last month I was in Brazil and China. All were excellent venues for exploring issues of mutual concern, and planning for future joint activities.

And of course I met with many library associations and colleagues in Europe and North America.

Being from Canada, I chose to have my Presidential Meetings in the Americas. This year, in Mexico City, the theme was *Our Digital Futures*. We addressed the impact of digital developments and how libraries might best serve their communities. Our discussions were far ranging and of course encompassed such key issues as equitable and comprehensive access to information and copyright exceptions and limitations.

Of course, two years is not a long time to achieve what I hoped might come to pass when I took on the job. When I chose my Presidential theme – *Libraries: A Force For Change* – with its principles of inclusion, transformation, collaboration and convergence, I had no idea how people would respond. I hoped and believed this was a theme that I would see play out across the global library stage in very real terms. But measuring success is difficult to quantify.

But I can tell you this – without fear of contradiction. While we can and should rejoice in our linguistic and cultural differences – we should equally rejoice in the similarities we share in the work we do in our chosen profession. It doesn't matter the type or size of library, nor whether it is in a developing or developed country, we all embrace similar professional values and want to provide access to as much information as possible – to as many users as possible. These commonalities are the glue that binds us together.

The libraries I had the privilege to visit were so very different in their physical size and structure, but so similar in what they were trying to accomplish. Two examples come to mind.

In Brisbane, Australia there is a unique service provided by the State Library of Queensland. Called *The Edge* – its aim is to provide young people with the opportunity and inspiration to explore creativity across the spectrum of the arts and sciences. They use the latest technologies in innovative ways to get youth excited about possibilities for their futures.

Then, when I was in South Africa in September for The African Public Libraries Summit, there was a young librarian from Botswana who said her library offers courses in crafts and other practical skills to the women in the community. And one of those women who took advantage of this service told that young librarian how her self-esteem had increased because of the program, and how she felt she could now make a positive contribution to her community.

It's interesting, isn't it? Two very different libraries: One ultra-modern, the other smaller and not so cutting edge when it comes to technology. And yet, the librarians in both had the same approach and similar results when it came to offering unique services to their users and their communities.

If I had to choose which of my visits most exemplified how IFLA and libraries can be an incredible catalytic force for change, it would be my recent visit to Qatar. I was there last November, meeting with the AFLI – the Arab Federation of Libraries and Information. Never before had a current IFLA President been invited to speak to them, and I was asked, “why IFLA had never had a conference there”. And I replied that we had never been asked! So together we decided to rectify the situation by having a regional IFLA conference in Doha.

And that is exactly what took place in June of this year. It was a pretty amazing session with excellent representation from the region. I am told there was passionate discussion and debate. It is just this sort of passion that IFLA events can generate, and that is incredibly satisfying because more often than not, that passion gets taken back to participants' home institutions.

The conference was followed by a two day *Building Strong Library Associations* workshop - attended by representatives from 15 countries in the region.

It was very gratifying to hear that there was great interest expressed in pursuing future projects together. The region is so large, diverse, and important and we are absolutely delighted to have them as partners, sharing information about global library issues that affect us all.

As I reflect on the AFLI experience, and when I think of one of the supporting principles to my theme – convergence – it is evident that it is so much more than sharing of converging technologies. There is the convergence of ideas, of exchanging views and pooling collective knowledge and experience.

In this regard I was recently made aware of the work by noted Singaporean academic and author Kishore Mahbubani. In his book *"The Great Convergence: Asia, The West, and the Logic of One World"*, he makes a very persuasive case that “never before in history has humanity been so interconnected and interdependent.” Economically, socially, and even politically. He notes the rise of the global middle class that brings an unprecedented convergence of interests and perceptions, cultures and values.

Certainly, in our world, libraries are seeing the inevitability and merit in embracing a similar convergence of attitudes, values, and standards. But of course convergence doesn't happen in a vacuum. It needs the active participation of those who can encourage it and those who will benefit. In the case of the former, it becomes increasingly important for library associations and organizations to participate in multi-stakeholder forums and to develop non-traditional alliances. Only by working together will our voices be heard (including the need to speak with one voice) particularly on the international stage.

And this is where IFLA works closely with library associations through our advocacy work.

Copyright protection and limitations, and e-lending issues are but two examples that come to mind when it comes to the need for showing a common front. Our proactive approach – lobbying for copyright exceptions for libraries through international negotiations has been critical. We were so gratified that the Visually Impaired Persons Treaty was recently signed in Morocco by national delegations to the World Intellectual Property Organization.

Of course issues like copyright protection are only one of many that influence our ability to effectively deliver services to our patrons. It is more important than ever that we remain aware of the ever-changing environment libraries will be working under in the years to come.

That is why IFLA embarked on the **Trend Report**, which will be launched during tomorrow's plenary session at 8:30 in the morning. The report is not concerned with what

libraries will look like in a decade's time, but rather focuses on what society might look like - and how libraries may adapt to best meet the evolving needs of their communities.

Since it is the nature of technology to change so rapidly, there will never be a final report. Rather it will be a living resource that will evolve over time. And of course, it will be available online – providing ongoing opportunities for discussion and debate over the next several years.

Finally, since I have referred throughout my talk to the multi-cultural and multi-lingual world we live in, I did want to mention what we are doing at IFLA to bridge linguistic divides that can put distance between and among a membership that comes from all over the world.

We are continually working on increasing the number of standards, guidelines and other documents made available in IFLA's seven official languages. In a similar fashion we are continuing to develop our multilingual websites. I was delighted to announce the launch of the Spanish version of our website in February of this year, and the French edition in July. The other language versions will follow. Coming from a bilingual country myself, I have been personally committed to this project for the past two years. And I know members of our Board are equally dedicated to this mission as we move forward.

Colleagues, we are living in tumultuous, exciting, and sometimes anxious times. Nobody can predict the future with certainty. But I am convinced that libraries are going to play a pivotal role. In fact, never before have libraries and librarians been in such a key position to help and guide their users to better and more prosperous lives.

Although every generation can say their time was special – it is difficult to imagine a more interesting time to call ourselves “librarians”. It will, as our conference theme suggests, be a time of infinite possibilities.

Some of those possibilities will be discussed at this congress over the next few days. Your agenda is packed. Whether this is your first conference, or your tenth, or more, I know you will go home tired, but inspired by the ideas you have shared, by the new friends you have made, and by the excitement of being with a group of like-minded participants who love what they do, and just want to do it better.

Thank you very much. Have a great conference.

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