

Report to IFLA Council on IFLA/FAIFE

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Two years ago, at the IFLA Council in Copenhagen, we inaugurated the Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression, which I was honoured to be invited to chair and which we know as "IFLA/FAIFE". The Committee, which has representatives from countries across the globe, is fortunate to be ably supported by the IFLA/FAIFE Office in Copenhagen. The Office was made possible by generosity of the Danish library community, the City of Copenhagen and the Danish Government with support from many nations, and the Nordic countries in particular.

As you are aware, the establishment of the IFLA/FAIFE Committee and Office resulted from an initiative two years earlier to establish the ad hoc Committee on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (CAIFE) at the Istanbul Council.

At this point, we should pause to consider the terrible tragedy which has just struck our 1995 hosts in Turkey. Our hearts go out to those who have lost family and friends.

Under the chairmanship of Mr Tony Evans, CAIFE identified the need for an ongoing commitment from IFLA to promote freedom of access to information and freedom of expression with particular emphasis on its implications for libraries and information centres, their clients and those who work in them.

The Committee's mandate is clearly drawn from Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

As information professionals, we grapple with the underlying issues to ensure that our clients, the peoples of the world, may "seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers". We build on the excellent work pursued over many years through IFLA's Divisions, Sections and Core Programmes, but with a focus on human rights, on intellectual freedom and the barriers to free access to information and freedom of expression.

Two years on from Copenhagen, what has been achieved?

We have an operational and very active Office and an active international Committee. We have established relationships with many bodies pursuing related work in libraries and in the human rights arena. We have begun to address some very difficult issues in a number of countries and we have begun to survey the state of free access to information and freedom of expression across the world.

The Committee took a little time to establish as nominations were invited from IFLA national association members throughout the world. However, it held two business meetings at the Amsterdam Conference last year and has a busy program organised for this Conference, commencing with a business meeting this morning. Like other IFLA Committees, it is somewhat hampered by only being able to meet during the annual conference. Fortunately, with email, the Committee can stay in touch and its members have produced a number of country reports which we will publish shortly. As we move into our second full year, the Committee will extend its influence throughout IFLA and the library and information world.

The IFLA/FAIFE Office is staffed by the Director, Mr Jan Ristarp, and by Mr Carsten Frederiksen who are present at this Conference. They have been extremely busy since their appointment, developing an effective presence for IFLA in the international promotion of intellectual freedom. They have established contact with a wide range of international bodies including the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX), Unesco, the Council of Europe, ALA, Article19, Index on Censorship and the Norwegian forum for Freedom of Expression. They have attended and presented at a number of conferences and written many articles. And, they have developed and published, with sponsorship, a pamphlet which is available at this Conference and has been translated into 11 languages. The website they have developed, , has become a vital source of information and resources for those promoting freedom of expression and access to information. It is heavily used, attracting 2,118 user sessions in the month of May 1999, for example.

An IFLA statement on *Libraries and Intellectual Freedom* has been produced and will be discussed during this Council session. When translated into the IFLA languages, and as many others as possible, it will be as influential as the Unesco

Public Library Manifesto. It will assist us and our colleagues to resist limitations on freedom of expression and access to information. It will help us influence policy makers to get behind us and vigorously promote free access to information and freedom of expression.

Many of the Statement's challenges sit comfortably within our normal professional practice but the IFLA Statement goes further, enjoining us to note that "Libraries contribute to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom and help to safeguard basic democratic values and universal civil rights" and that "Libraries shall acquire, organize and disseminate freely and oppose any form of censorship". Those points urge us to resist censorship beyond our own libraries, in the national interest. They encourage us, not only to ensure intellectual freedom in our own libraries, but also to speak out against attempts to limit intellectual freedom in the wider community, as in the current attempts to censor Internet access in many countries.

Issues addressed during the period have been diverse. Some flavour of them is given by the following examples:

- the threat to libraries and librarians in Iran,
- political interference to libraries in France,
- a challenge to a university library in Britain,
- Internet censorship in Australia.

The country reports, to be published soon, confirm that all is not well with the state of freedom of access to information and freedom of expression in the world.

In this part of the world, Southeast Asia, we have been heartened to see the lifting of some restrictions in Indonesia. Formerly banned serials have been permitted to publish. Information, long suppressed, on such issues as the extra-judicial killings in Aceh and Timor Timur has been published. The works of the great Indonesian writer, Pramodiya Ananta Toer, have at long last been published in his own country, many years after their international publication and acclaim. However, despite the tremendous expansion of literacy since Independence, most of the population has little access to the information required to take charge of their lives. Independent information on such issues as the effects of agricultural chemicals, pollution and health is not readily available. Even in the universities, information access is limited, through import restrictions and through lack of purchasing power.

Lack of purchasing power has been a longstanding concern of libraries throughout the region, as in other developing countries. It has been exacerbated since the regional currency crisis of 1997. The concerns, however, run deeper: both local and international commentators express concern about freedom of expression and access to information in the countries of Southeast Asia. In the Philippines, for example, it is concern about suppression of the media. In Singapore, about Internet control. Closer to Bangkok, we see the valiant efforts of our colleagues from Cambodia and Laos to rebuild their shattered libraries. Looking across the long border with Burma, we see unbridled suppression of individual liberty. We see a nation in which the 1974 Constitution and the current Government do not recognise the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In an increasingly interconnected world, information is more than ever crucial. The human right to freedom of expression and free access to information is the foundation of autonomy, both individual and societal. Librarians must defend that right vigorously, ensuring that it is not compromised nor abrogated. While taking a duty of care when appropriate and taking steps to respect individual cultures and individual preferences, we must stand for freedom, in both expression and access to information.

It is to address such matters that IFLA has established the Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression. The Committee and Office will work in partnership with IFLA's other elements to try to ensure the indivisible right:

... to freedom of expression... freedom to hold opinions without interference and [freedom] to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.