

IFLA and the Developing Countries

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Prologue

Thoughts of IFLA and developing countries, when juxtaposed, conjure up a kaleidoscopic and dazzling horizon. Sundry paths and by-ways, roads and highways seem to lead everywhere at once; only the closest scrutiny reveals significant routes for a possible journey.

IFLA, on the one hand, symbolizing the essence of international librarianship, is itself overwhelmed at times by the enormity of its scope.(1) The developing countries, on the other hand, present an even more complex and diverse spectrum. Their varied languages, peoples, traditions, political, geographical, economic and social settings suggest culture shock even for the armchair traveller. To compass this horizon and plot a short but evenly-lit course, along important routes, is the challenge.

The past

IFLA's full and forceful plunge into the developing country library arena in 1971, after many years of token interest(2) and failed efforts(3), is now history and well-documented.(4, 5) Indeed concern for library development in the developing countries has never been lacking, whether on the international scene, with Unesco(6) in the front ranks (often working with and through non-governmental organizations such as IFLA and FID), or on the national scene especially in the United Kingdom and United States.(7) White(8) describes the multi-faceted nature of assistance – financial, material and human resources – which has been channelled through many sources for library development in these areas. These efforts, however, often lacked planning and coordination. It has also been acknowledged that some of these “stereotyped forms of assistance . . .” were unrelated to local conditions and “did not yield the expected results”.(9) The IFLA “breakthrough” at the first Pre-session seminar for librarians from developing countries in 1971, brought new understanding, not only of stages of development and achievements against odds, but also of the nature of their problems which “deserve to be studied from an angle of vision determined by (their) special needs”.(10)

It is to this general task that the Federation, as the leader in the profession, is now addressing itself. And so the past is prologue.

The future

For the future, a dynamic action plan, over and above on-going commendable projects, is indicated. Three basic programme areas seem necessary within such a plan. They involve promotion through (1) information, (2) research and (3) a crucial programme of co-ordination.

The objectives of the Federation are essentially promotional. “*International* understanding, cooperation, discussion, research and development in all fields of library activity” can only be achieved on the basis of fuller knowledge, information and interaction at *national and regional* levels.

Information

Firstly therefore a widespread series of intensive programmes for collecting, analyzing and disseminating information of various kinds is required at several levels. Local librarians and library associations need to collect and study more varied types of information to form the basis of their national library planning in the context of local development planning; their publics and governments need to be better informed on the role which a well planned and integrated library and information system (NATIS) can play in national development. The profession needs information also on national goals and the scale of national priorities in seeking the promotion of library services from their all too often inferior status.

IFLA, working with and through bodies like Unesco, can contribute effectively to these ideals; in particular it might seek new strategies to bring librarians and governmental representatives into *international* dialogue. Deliberate dovetailing of the next NATIS inter-governmental conference with that year’s Council is one possible strategy.

Secondly the profession at large needs easy access to this general store of library science information as it is gathered for discussion, comparative study and co-operative planning regionally and internationally.

Indeed, a substantial literature already exists on librarianship, documentation and related issues from the developing country point of view. It is not, however, readily recognizable being partly hidden in newsletters, symposia, conference papers and addresses or scattered amidst general topics, any of which can be treated from this slant. The unconventional and official report literature is largely unknown. It seems urgently necessary, therefore, to control these resources; a first assignment within the several sections of the new Regional Groups should be an annotated bibliography or state-of-the-art study for the local library and related literature. Parallel analyses of the literature from developed countries could be gradually undertaken while annual reviews might keep this record up-to-date for the developing countries as Soosai(11) suggested. These are but a few of many new possibilities.

Research and Publications

A logical outgrowth of the first process of information gathering at all levels is the identification of areas for in-depth study. Unusual studies, reflecting developing country interests(12) have been done, some as theses, but many areas of needed research remain unexplored.

It is for IFLA to assert leadership in this field by encouraging its member associations to initiate and sponsor local investigations and by itself developing a com-

prehensive Research programme under a new special unit(13), seeking suitable support and links with library schools at the outset. This is virgin territory for the promotion of development. Research on the many facets of the profession in application to developing area needs, deserves full IFLA attention. Possible topics are legion and the regional groups should find little difficulty in proposing priorities from practical experience. Parker's(14) Sevensma Prize essay gives an interesting lead and many more spring from the literature.

The current publication programme could be expanded to include significant selections from the journals of member associations, not otherwise abstracted or indexed and/or contents listings from these, in addition to more regular association news items featured in the journal. If the new regional groups can become more closely linked with (or even one and the same as) existing regional library associations, such as ACURIL in the Caribbean, unnecessary overlapping and duplication would be happily avoided.

Co-ordination

New information and research programmes apart, there are still wider horizons to be explored and bolder challenges to be confronted. The re-ordering of the organization of the profession, the co-ordination of overlapping efforts in many spheres, the reshaping of education programmes, restructuring of co-operation and the bringing of the new library technology within financial reach in all-embracing networks – all these new directions beckon for attention. Stronger ties and joint action committees with Unesco and FID, so often recommended and yet to be achieved, are especially prominent goals. The developing world has more than ordinary interest in IFLA's realization of these aims.

Scattered and piece-meal efforts at assistance to developing countries in their struggles with the familiar problems enumerated by Gardner(15), could be greatly improved by co-ordination. The many international and national governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations and foundations could well provide joint consultative bodies to work with local professionals for co-ordinated projects in library development. IFLA must take the initiative in engineering such joint activities, (as it has done with ICAE) as a natural strengthening and formal outgrowth of existing informal co-operation and consultation with many of the same organizations.

No greater service could be rendered to the library concept, and indirectly to library development, than IFLA's weaving together from the many linking strands – librarianship, archives, documentation, information science and informatics – of one multi-coloured but perfectly blended and integrated whole – a family profession united by common objectives and related complementary characteristics.

Unlike developing countries where they originate and may contribute to a rich diversity, in the less-developed world these divisions(16) are artificial and impoverishing; they can fragment limited resources, distort the professional image

and detract from over-all effectiveness. History(17) notwithstanding, unity is imperative and strenuous efforts must continue towards joint meetings(18) and activities, regionally and internationally.

The multiplicity of regional associations with special slants and overlapping geographic groupings could greatly profit from the "creation of (IFLA) regional offices, permanently staffed, to provide a secretariat and co-ordinating centre."(19) A first secretariat function in co-operation could well be seeking funds for participation in regional meetings involving some of the same personnel with harmonized locations and calendars.

Such a spirit of oneness must be sought for nurturing in the library school cradle and the present loose structure of education for these strands needs closer attention. Attempts at standardizing core content(20) and moreso at harmonizing the plethora of programmes and qualifications,(21) throughout the world, should be accelerated. If we believe in the "one world of librarianship", a new international concept(22) must seep into the future generation of librarians and information specialists now in training everywhere. There are many roads on the international library horizon but drawing closer together with greater understanding, they can all lead to the same haven where every reader's needs are met.

Epilogue

The journey is ended. The day of the computer in libraries everywhere has arrived. In developed and once less-developed countries throughout the world, interlocking systems transmit facsimiles of books and documents to readers anywhere and relay information instantly at the touch of a command button. The world has truly shrunk; the people of all countries have access to the world's store of information through an effective network of international library co-operation promoted and developed by a united family of Associations known as IFLA.

Such a dream fulfilled would fittingly complete this brief excursion into the twin worlds of IFLA and the developing countries.

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