The developing countries and IFLA

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The library problems of the developing countries have received serious attention from IFLA only during the last few years, with the organization of special pre-session seminars at the Liverpool, Grenoble and Washington General Council meetings and the formation of special Working Groups for Developing Countries. These developments have both reflected and encouraged a steady growth in developing country membership of IFLA, and in January 1976, half the Federation's member associations and institutions were located in the Third World.(1)

The growth in Third World membership of IFLA has not, however, been matched by the level of participation of librarians from the developing countries, either in General Council meetings or in the running of IFLA itself. At the Lausanne General Council in 1976, for example, the 39 delegates from developing countries constituted only eight percent of the total attendance; and of some 350 positions on IFLA boards and committees in 1976, only 22 were held by librarians from the Third World.(2)

In an attempt to give developing countries a more effective voice in IFLA, its new Constitution provides for the establishment of a new Division for Regional Activities (DRA) "to promote and coordinate professional work of particular regional relevance, and more specifically to promote the objectives of the Federation in particular regions".(3) Three regional sections have so far been established within the Division, reflecting the areas of interest of the former Working Groups for Developing Countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. Each section will have a regional secretariat under the supervision of an honorary regional secretariat under the supervision of an honorary regional chairman, and the sections will be divided into a total of 14 subregional groups, each of which will also have its own chairman.

It is intended that "the launching of the Regional Development Programme, which has been given very high priority in the last five or six years, should be seen as evidence of the . . . intention to make IFLA a truly world-wide organization".(4) An examination of the present membership of the regional sections, however, raises some doubts as to whether they are meant to represent all countries, or only developing countries, in the various regions, and also reveals how far they still have to go before they can claim world-wide membership even among the developing countries.

Among the 26 countries covered by the Asian region, for example, are two — Greece and Turkey — which are regarded by the United Nations, not only as developed countries, but also as parts of Western Europe.(5) Israel, which is also classified by the UN as a developed country and has recently been admitted to the European regional group in Unesco, is, however, excluded. Seventeen of the 25

least developed of the developing countries(6) are not included in any of the regional groupings — including at least one country, Botswana, whose well-developed national library service is an Associate Member of IFLA. In all, only 61 of the 100 or so members of the so-called 'Group of 77' developing country grouping are at present covered by the regional sections.

IFLA's Medium-Term Programme includes under the heading *Advance towards world-wide membership and activity* most of the general developing country activities of the DRA. The programme for professional activities by type of library and type of activity, however, also includes several proposals specifically relating to developing countries, as well as proposals for international programmes which will affect developed and developing countries alike.(7) There is clearly a considerable risk of lack of coordination and duplication of effort, particularly between the broad regional interests of the DRA and the more precise professional objectives of the other divisions. In the DRA more than in any other division, therefore, "program planning . . . must be done with imagination and care to prevent overlapping, to stimulate new projects and to avoid uncontrolled growth"(8); and the proposals for the establishment and operation of the Division must be examined with care to see if it is likely to be able to perform its difficult geographical and professional coordinating role satisfactorily.

The main difficulties likely to be encountered in the work of the DRA arise largely from its very nature as a regional professional organization. In a recent study of regional library cooperation in the developing countries, the writer pointed out that successful development of the library profession at the regional level is largely dependent on its strength at the national level; yet this is precisely what is so often lacking in the developing countries. It was also suggested that efforts towards regional library cooperation were more likely to be successful if confined to reasonably small geographical areas and limited to countries at similar levels of library development.(9) These conditions are far from being met in the present structure of the DRA. The size and diversity of membership of the present regional sections and of many of the sub-regional groups suggests that they will be able to cooperate effectively only with intense and prolonged professional effort, backed by substantial human and financial resources.

By no stretch of the imagination can the resources at present allocated to the regional programme be said to be substantial. Despite the claim that the programme has been given "very high priority", it is to receive no financial support from the Federation's regular budget, but is instead made entirely dependent on external aid.(10) The dangers of excessive reliance on external funding are well illustrated by the cancellation of the proposed pre-session seminar at Lausanne in 1976, due to the withdrawal of a promised Iranian grant.

For 1976 and 1977, the work of the DRA will be financed by grants totalling some Can.$ 56,400 (about £ 34 thousand) from the Canadian International Development Agency and the Australian National Library. These funds are to be used to finance research and development projects in the regions and "to set up

certain regional offices, and to enable colleagues from the various regions to participate in the seminars and workshops organized by IFLA and Unesco and in other meetings".(11)

The experience of the present regional office for Asia, in its former role as the Secretariat, first of the Working Group for English-Speaking Developing Countries and subsequently of the Regional Working Group for Asia, suggests that, even with additional support from local sources, a substantial proportion of the Division's budget will be required to meet administrative expenses and travelling costs. Between June 1973 and July 1975, 19 percent of the Asian office's budget was spent on staff salaries and other office expenses, 45 percent on travelling and subsistence and only 27 percent on project finance, with a nine percent surplus remaining at the end of the period.(12) With three regional offices to maintain and travelling and subsistence expenses for 17 regional and sub-regional chairmen to meet, it seems likely that the DRA will have an even smaller proportion of its budget available for project finance, and that the actual amount available for this purpose, seen in relation to the needs of the 64 countries covered by the existing regional sections, will be far too small to support projects of any real significance in more than a handful of countries.

Considerations such as these, which lack of space prevents us from examining in more detail at present, must raise serious doubts as to the ability of the DRA and its sections to perform a useful function as a project funding agency in its own right. If the Division is not to be involved in project funding, however, one must then question whether the remaining prospects for regional activitiy, given the limited funds available, can be said to provide the most fruitful means of participation in the work of IFLA for librarians from the developing countries.

It may well be that a more fruitful way of using the money at present allocated to the regional development programme would be to support the direct participation of more librarians from developing countries in the main work of the professional divisions and sections of IFLA — not as token representatives of the Third World, but as professional librarians in their own right.

The librarians from the developed countries who at present form the majority of members of IFLA boards and committees hold their positions, not as representatives of the developed countries, but as individuals with a contribution to make to the work of IFLA based on their own professional experience and ability. No one would suggest that there are not many able and dedicated professional librarians in the developing countries with an equally valuable contribution to make, not in the role of supplicants seeking aid for their own libraries, but as professional leaders contributing to the development of world librarianship. The provision of financial support for full participation in the work of the international professional body by Third World librarians may do far more to enhance their status – and hence the status of librarianship and libraries in general – in their own countries than could ever be achieved under the existing wideranging but underfinanced regional development programme.

Whilst such a course of action is in line with IFLA's long term aim of "making the distinction between more and less developed countries unnecessary"(13), and the regional programme is "not considered to be a permanent solution"(14), IFLA can hardly be expected to drop the programme without giving it a trial. The question therefore remains, as to whether or not some means can be found to make the regional development programme, with all its limitations, more effective.

Perhaps the only way in which, even as an interim measure, the regional programme can expect to achieve useful results is for its efforts to be concentrated on one key professional problem area. In the broadest sense, there seems strong justification for concentrating on the development of the library profession. If IFLA truly "aspires to speak with authority as the voice of the library profession of the whole world"(15), there is perhaps nowhere where that voice more needs to be clearly heard than in the developing countries. All improvements in library service must ultimately depend on the level of professional development, and strong support from IFLA for the development of professional associations and the recognition of professional status could bring real and lasting results.

Even this relatively narrow focus may be too broad for effective action on a world-wide scale, given the limited resources available. Within the general area of professional development, there can be little doubt that the most important single obstacle to effective library development in many developing countries is the lack of educated professional manpower. If all the efforts of the regional development programme were to be applied in this one direction, pressing for increases in the number of library schools and increases in the output of trained librarians and attempting to raise standards of professional education and to encourage library research, the long term benefits could be incalculable.

Without a specific focus of this kind, there is a grave danger that the regional development programme of IFLA, underfinanced as it is, will expend its limited resources on uncoordinated minor projects of such limited value that the funding agencies on which it relies so heavily will eventually withdraw their support. If this happens before steps have been taken to increase developing country participation in the mainstream of IFLA's professional work, the developing countries will find themselves worse off, in relation to IFLA and its programmes, than they are at present.

References

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