WHERE SHALL WE GO FROM HERE?

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After two conference days mainly dedicated to the project of new global library statistics: where shall we go now?

Certainly we should not step back from the vision that standardised, uniform library data could be collected in all countries and would yield an overall picture of what libraries offer and achieve. Even if as yet it is only a vision, the first steps have been taken:

- We have reached consensus between the cooperating groups of IFLA, ISO and UNESCO on a list of relevant library statistics.
- The list is based on the definitions of the international standard ISO 2789 that is already in wide-spread use.
- The test of the “global statistics” in Latin America and the Caribbean demonstrated that many data in the questionnaire could not yet be collected by the countries, but at the same time proved the feasibility of the project by the respectable percentage of data that could be collected.
- There is evidently a broad interest in such new statistics, and several initiatives, e.g. in Southern Asia and in Africa, might start from this conference.

What can we do to get this project farther on the way?

It will not be sufficient to gain the interest of librarians; we must try to interest governments and funding institutions. It does not seem possible that, though libraries of all types certainly need considerable resources, the institutions that give those resources should not want to know the results of their expenditure.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics is certainly the right institution to collect global cultural statistics like library data. But the starting phase of such projects is always time-consuming. The project partners should try to find grants for initiating the new library statistics.

There are regions in the world where it will not be difficult to fill out the questionnaire on a national basis; there are on the other side “white” regions as regards library statistics. It may be useful to engage library associations in “statistically developed” regions in partnership and help.

It will be not only useful, but necessary to develop teaching modules of library statistics for librarians that are responsible for collecting the data.

The discussions during this conference showed that the definitions and procedures described in the global statistics questionnaire might be somewhat enlarged or simplified, but there were nearly no requests for additional measures. It will be expedient to stay with the selected dataset for the next years. The libraries must implement the data into their regular procedures for collecting statistics, as well in
the individual library as in the institution that is responsible on the national basis. Comparison over time and with other countries would be impeded by rapid changes in the dataset.

The project partners for the new statistics were unanimous in restricting the questionnaire to public and academic libraries. Even in case of an effective implementation of the new statistics in all countries, it would be too optimistic to expect that the same or similar data could be collected for the large communities of special and school libraries. But a special survey for national libraries might easily be added.

Library statistics will never cover all libraries in all countries. As many projects have showed, there will always be a need for filling gaps, for grossing the data up in a reasonable way. But based on a uniform questionnaire, the results will yet further comparison and help to show trends in libraries’ role and impact over time.