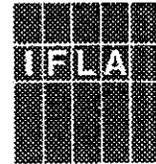**gtz**

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IFLA and WSIS: a common tapestry

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Abstract:

For the past four years IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, has been deeply involved in the preparations for, and now the implementation phase of, the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), from Geneva 2003 to Tunis 2005 and beyond. Why has IFLA, a federation of librarians, committed itself so heavily to the WSIS process? What positions has it taken, what documents has it produced, and what outcomes has it influenced? The common threads and goals that inform IFLA's social pillar and the ongoing WSIS process are identified, and the prospects for building a new kind of information society in Africa are briefly explored.

In Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1998 the Plenipotentiary Conference of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) proposed a World Summit on the Information Society, akin to the other big United Nations summits held in the last decade of the 20th century to set world policy on the environment (Rio de Janeiro 1992), on women (Beijing 1995), and on millennium development goals (New York 2000).

By 2001 it had been decided that this new summit, the WSIS, was to be held in two phases, the first at the level of theory in Geneva in December 2003 to emphasize a declaration of principles and action plan for the coming worldwide information society, and the second in Tunis in November 2005 to work on practical structures and modalities for implementing the action plan. This approach was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly.

But U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan took the unusual step of opening the summit process wider than for any of the previous big U.N. summits. He invited not just governments and international organizations but also the multitude of other stakeholders in the information society to become directly involved: non-governmental and "civil society" organizations concerned

with the mechanics and impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs), as well as representatives of major business interests in the field. This was truly a revolution of public and private participation; no longer would governments and their international agencies alone negotiate while "civil society" held impotent parallel summits. The non-governmental organizations and business could not vote, but they had a foot in the door, a place at the table.

Prominent among the early responders to the call for non-governmental participation in the World Summit on the Information Society was IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. Libraries for thousands of years had been the prime repositories of cultural and institutional memory, sources of community identity and public knowledge, mines of research and engines of social and economic development. Yet the technological thrust of the proposed world summit, with its emphasis upon the economic and social revolution being wrought in the 1990's by growing world access to the tools of computing, the Internet and wireless communication, led to fears that governments would ignore the role of libraries at the heart of the information society.

At the beginning of the 21st century IFLA was undertaking to restructure itself around three pillars that would support all its action: profession, membership, society. The newly defined social pillar bundled together many diverse threads in IFLA's program and policies which were relevant to the character of the world information society, and gave IFLA's participation in the WSIS preparatory process its focus. Indeed, driven by librarian proponents of social responsibility, already at its annual world conference in Glasgow in 2002 IFLA had adopted a Declaration on Libraries, Information Services and Intellectual Freedom, which was basically a manifesto for libraries to become agents of free access to information and freedom of expression in society. As well, IFLA in Glasgow demanded ICT-driven information access for all and the breaking down of the digital divide between information-rich and information-poor peoples, in the IFLA Internet Manifesto.

There followed a year of energetic participation by IFLA representatives as observers in the WSIS Preparatory Committee meetings, or PrepComs, which were negotiating the documents to be presented for endorsement at the Geneva summit. IFLA forged alliances with other non-governmental organisations, identified key points at which draft documents failed to

mention the central role of libraries in the information society, and lobbied for the inclusion of both library services and information rights in the WSIS Declaration of Principles and Action Plan.

Lobbying for librarians' goals became more intense as the crucial PrepCom3 meeting of September 2003 approached. IFLA Council, meeting in Berlin on 8 August 2003, passed the following resolution on the World Summit on the Information Society:

"Whereas the World Summit for the Information Society offers a unique opportunity for the library community to be recognized as the heart of the information society,

And whereas IFLA has already devoted a great amount of work to influence the draft declaration and plan of action of the World Summit for the Information Society,

Therefore be it resolved that library associations and institutions are urged to advocate to their government representatives to the World Summit for the Information Society for libraries as a global public good,

And be it resolved that IFLA calls upon all governments to address the growing gap between the information rich and the information poor, and promote library development programs for poor rural and urban populations, literacy instruction through libraries, and the strengthening of library education programs,

And be it resolved that IFLA urges governments to eliminate fees for basic services broadly construed, assist in developing local content for electronic information services, and provide equitable access to the Internet,

And be it resolved that this resolution be sent to all national library associations and government delegations to the World Summit for the Information Society."

Then IFLA hosted an international preparatory conference of its own, cutely titled *Libraries @ the Heart of the Information Society*, in Geneva in November 2003, just a month prior to the first phase there of the World Summit. The IFLA conference in Geneva drove home the themes of the Berlin resolution to the world's librarians and to members of the various

national governmental delegations, already negotiating behind the scenes to salvage the tottering WSIS PrepCom process.

The first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society took place in Geneva, Switzerland, from 10 to 12 December 2003. Worried by the lack of consensus on some key issues, many heads of government stayed away. But a multifaceted WSIS Declaration of Principles and Action Plan were adopted, and they included many points advocated by IFLA along with other concerned "civil society" groups and those national delegations, such as the New Zealanders and the Danes, who took a strong pro-library position.

As Alex Byrne of IFLA summarised them, the Federation's contributions to the 2003 WSIS outcomes were considerable:

- An inclusive vision of an Information Society in which everyone can create, access, use and share information and knowledge
- Freedom of access to information and freedom of expression
- Cultural and linguistic diversity
- Lifelong literacy
- Support for the disadvantaged and disabled
- Protection of the public domain and balance in intellectual property legislation
- Open access to knowledge, including scientific and technical knowledge
- Preservation of cultural heritage
- Standards to ensure interoperability
- Capacity building and enabling provisions
- Equitable access to the Internet and ICTs   (Byrne, at ALIA 2004)

These were the threads of IFLA concern that were woven throughout the diverse tapestry of the WSIS Principles. They set the tone for a humane and free world information society, rather than one entirely driven by technology and economics.

Originally the intent had been for Geneva to set immediate and long term action goals for the world information society, and for the follow-up meeting in Tunis two years later to examine progress on the shorter-term goals and refine the longer objectives. But shorter-term goals proved difficult to define, and after Geneva major differences of principle remained between

the participants: how should the Internet be controlled, by governments or by the world user community? Should there be a "Digital Solidarity Fund", as proposed by the president of Senegal, to help less developed countries reduce the digital divide between them and the ICT-rich? So the second-phase PrepComs, leading up to the final World Summit on the Information Society in Tunis in November 2005, became exercises both in diplomacy and in devising practical solutions to implement the airy goals of Geneva.

IFLA kept up the pressure. In June 2004 it issued *Promoting the global information commons: A commentary on the library and information implications of the WSIS Declaration of Principles*. Then in February 2005 Alex Byrne made an IFLA statement, again entitled *Promoting the global information commons*, on the floor of Tunis PrepCom2. In it he emphasised the importance of governments, international organisations and civil society organisations partnering to rapidly finance the growth of the information society in less-developed countries, through the provision of more libraries with more Internet access points and more learning and information materials in more languages. He also advocated specific changes to the draft WSIS final document to encourage the achievement of these goals, and invited WSIS delegates to a second IFLA pre-Summit conference, *Libraries: The Information Society in Action*, to be held at the Library of Alexandria in Egypt on 10-11 November 2005, just days before the Tunis World Summit.

On the vexed question of Internet governance, IFLA had taken a position emphasising people's human and information rights, networked information access for the public through libraries, and a multi-stakeholder approach to managing the world wide web that would see governments, civil society and business as partners in running the Internet. No resolution would be reached in the drive to establish a new world Internet authority. But at Tunis PrepCom3, held in Geneva in September 2005, two national delegates with strong connections to the library profession, Winston Roberts of New Zealand, a former IFLA professional co-ordinator, and Hellen Niegaard of Denmark, pushed the insertion of two paragraphs favourable to libraries into the draft final political document on the information society. Debate on financing it continued, however, and a side issue of concern to the civil society actors in the Tunis process became prominent: the question of repression of human rights and information rights in Tunisia, the host country.

From a librarian's perspective, the stage on social outcomes was set for Tunis by the IFLA pre-Summit conference in Alexandria in the second week of November. IFLA in fact held two related meetings in the Library of Alexandria in that wonderful week before WSIS. The first was an invited High-Level Colloquium on Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning on 6-9 November 2005, which produced *Beacons of the Information Society: the Alexandria Proclamation on Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning.* The main pre-Summit conference, on *Libraries: The Information Society in Action,* lasted only two days, 10-11 November, but was full of speakers from around the world reporting best practices and desirable initiatives for bringing the benefits of the information society to the people through libraries. For example, I myself spoke in Alexandria on the political dimension of libraries in the new information age, in my paper "Libraries and the informed body politic: supporting local, parliamentary and direct democracy in the future information society". But the climax of the pre-conference was the unveiling of IFLA's last major contribution to the World Summit, the *Alexandria Manifesto on Libraries, the Information Society in Action.*

I will only quote portions of the *Alexandria Manifesto:*

> "Libraries and information services are essential to the sound operation of the inclusive Information Society. Their impartial operation helps to safeguard universal civil rights. Libraries enable intellectual freedom by providing access to information, ideas and works of imagination in any medium and regardless of frontiers.

> "The unique feature of libraries and information services is that they respond to the particular questions and needs of individuals. They complement the general transmission of knowledge by the media and other means. Libraries are vital to the democratic and open Information Society in which they facilitate well informed citizenry, transparent governance and e-government. They build capacity by promoting information literacy and providing support and training for effective use of digital and other information resources.

> "In these ways, libraries contribute significantly to addressing the digital divide and the information inequality that results from it. Because of the centrality of knowledge to economic progress libraries

are critical to the development agenda and help to realise the Millennium Development Goals, including reduction of poverty....

"To enable access to information by all peoples, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions is committed to the fundamental human rights to know, learn and communicate without restriction.... IFLA and libraries and information services share the common vision of an Information Society for all adopted by the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva in November 2003. That vision promotes an inclusive society in which everyone will be able to create, access, use and share information and knowledge.

"IFLA urges national, regional and local governments as well as international organisations to invest in library and information services as vital elements of their Information Society strategies."

The full text of this document occurs in slightly differing versions, the product of hasty editing, on the IFLA website, www.ifla.org, and on the website of the World Summit on the Information Society, www.itu.int/wsis, where it is one of only five civil society contributions posted as official documents of the Tunis Summit from the 606 non-governmental organisations and 6,241 civil society participants registered. (For the record, the full participation in the Tunis Summit was 19,401 delegates and observers, from 173 governments, the European Union, 92 international organisations, 606 NGOs and civil society entities, 226 business organisations and 642 media organisations.)

The WSIS meetings in Tunis from 16 to 18 November 2005 again failed to produce complete agreement. The final documents, the Tunis Commitment and the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society, were still weakened by the divisions on Internet governance and the Digital Solidarity Fund, essentially accepting the status quo (U.S. management) on the former and adopting a laissez-faire attitude on the latter. IFLA held reporting sessions on its Alexandria pre-conference and Manifesto which attracted about 50 delegates, and Alex Byrne as president of IFLA addressed the plenary session on the final day of the Summit, presenting the Manifesto and committing IFLA to collaboration in the post-WSIS implementation phase.

The final language of paragraph 90 of the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society incorporates IFLA's main concerns into a wish list of desired outcomes for the information society, expressed in dense forests of language that only a bureaucrat could love. It asserts that the nations are committed to "providing equitable access to information and knowledge for all," and "recognizing the role of ICTs for economic growth and development," through meeting development goals that include:

> "*supporting educational, scientific, and cultural institutions*, including libraries, archives and museums, in their role of developing, providing equitable, open and affordable access to, and preserving diverse and varied content, including in digital form, to support informal and formal education, research and innovation; and in particular supporting libraries in their public-service role of providing free and equitable access to information and of improving ICT literacy and community connectivity, particularly in underserved communities."

That was subsection (k).

The whole effort of four years by IFLA on behalf of librarians and civil society within the vast juggernaut of the World Summit on the Information Society came down to this: one dense paragraph full of the buzz-words of library participation in the social goals and cultural outcomes of the ICT revolution.

What does it matter, you say? It matters enormously. It amounts to a charter from the world's governments for libraries and information centres to promote equality and freedom of information, public information literacy and community connectedness, *which are the bases of citizen participation, local and national democracy, economic and political freedoms and human rights.*

It is up to us, as librarians and information managers, to pick up this ball and run with it.

I want to close with some remarks on the prospects for implementation of the World Summit on the Information Society in Africa. The present conference and seminar, hosted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, and co-sponsored by the IFLA Office of Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) and by the

IFLA Government Information and Official Publications Section, are a privileged moment very soon after the World Summit for discerning the ways in which the information society of the future and the African society of the future will unfold under the influence of libraries. We can easily fall back into the bafflegab of information technocracy. Or we can look for a broader vision that will summon the librarians and information managers of this once most backward continent to a new dedication and a new effectiveness in building a new, informed, citizens' Africa.

Africa has a deep history of communal self-government and calamitous suffering, of rich cultures and impoverished leadership, of native empires and foreign conquest. Africa is more vast, varied but consistent than any other continent: not an agglomeration like Asia nor a ruling appendage like Europe, but a single whole, imperial in her leonine heart from the veldt to the Sphinx. Africa has a mentality of information hoarding as a source of power, but Africa is not information poor; she is information rich, and she only needs discover how to master it and share it. Africa is the cradle of humanity and she can become the cradle of a new kind of information society, one in which understanding banishes slaughter, technology is the servant of community, knowledge builds a gentle prosperity, and wisdom springs from the people. Africa is the future.

WEB BIBLIOGRAPHY

All the official Summit documents can be found on the extensive web pages of the World Summit on the Information Society at **http://www.itu.int/wsis**.

All other documents cited are available in the World Summit on the Information Society section of the website of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions at **http://www.ifla.org/III/wsis.html** .