

IFLA – the Global Voice of Libraries

By *Christine Mackenzie*

Snapshot

The incoming president of IFLA, Christine Mackenzie, outlines the role, functions and importance of the International Federation of School Library Associations (IFLA).

A strong and united library field powering literate, informed and participative societies.

This is the vision of the **International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions** (IFLA), the leading international body representing the interests of library and information services and their users. IFLA is the global voice of the library and information profession. Founded in 1927, IFLA has around 1,400 members in 148 countries around the world. It was registered in the Netherlands in 1971 and is based in The Hague, at the Royal Library of The Netherlands. Membership comprises National Associations, International Associations, Institutions, Individual Members and other Organisations.

IFLA aims to promote high standards of provision and delivery of library and information services ...

IFLA aims to promote high standards of provision and delivery of library and information services; encourage widespread understanding of the value of good library and information services; and represent the interests of members throughout the world.

School librarians are active in IFLA – both through individual involvement in the Schools Library Section (Judy O’Connell from Charles Sturt University is a member of the Standing Committee) and also through SLAV’s partnership with the International Association of School Librarianship (IASL) which is a member of IFLA. The Executive Officer of SLAV, Dr Susan La Marca, is the representative of Oceania on IASL.

The purpose of this article is to describe the work of IFLA and how it is reinventing itself to better support the library field and to become a more inclusive and representative association.

My involvement with IFLA began in 2004, when Metropolitan Libraries became a Section. This section had grown out of another organisation called Intamel, whose history went back to 1966 and had been founded by a group of European Library Directors of large urban libraries. I had come to Intamel / Metropolitan Libraries following my involvement with the Bertelsmann Foundation’s International Network of Public Libraries. The Network was established in 1996 and ran until 2004. The purpose of the Network was to think flexibly about the future public library and to develop model solutions to address the issues faced by public libraries across the world. When the Bertelsmann Foundation decided to close down the Library Division, members of the Network were eager to continue their professional relationships and international networks,

and so many joined this new IFLA section. This provided us with the opportunity to continue to meet annually at the section's mid-term meetings to exchange ideas and knowledge and to build and strengthen our network.

I was elected to the IFLA Governing Board for the first time in 2011 – 13; and again in 2015-17 when I became Treasurer. I was nominated as President elect in 2017 and in August this year start my two-year term as President. My involvement with IFLA has been the highlight of my 40-year career in libraries and I have been privileged and honoured to be part of it, especially over the past four years which have been so transformational for IFLA.

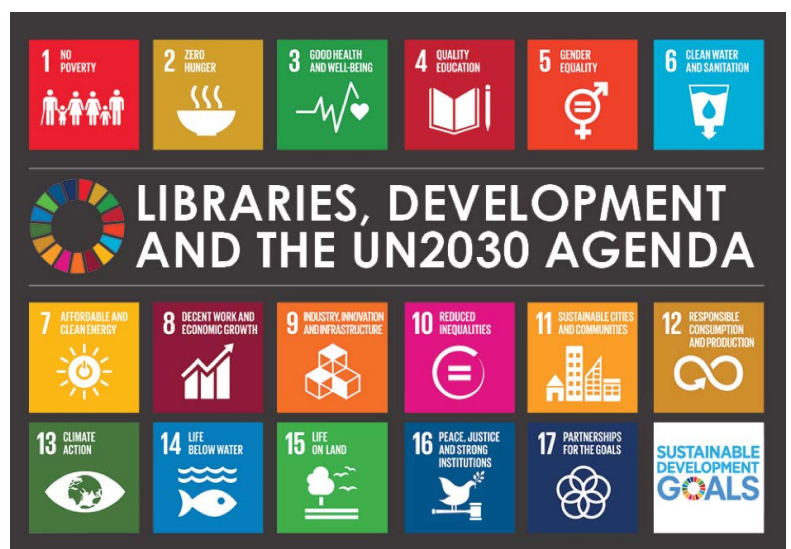
About IFLA

The most important work in IFLA happens in the various groups that make up the organisation. These groups are full of enthusiastic people who share expertise and work to further the profession. There are 60 Sections and Special Interest Groups that represent all facets of librarianship. Over 1,000 people are actively involved in these sections and groups – experts in their field, with great experience and knowledge.

IFLA's administration is based at The Royal Library, the national library of the Netherlands (Koninklijke Bibliotheek) in The Hague. The Secretary General is responsible for the strategic and operational direction and the financial management of the Federation within the policies established by the General Assembly and the Governing Board. At IFLA Headquarters there is an international staff of around 25 people who manage and develop programs for members and for the library and information sector worldwide.

IFLA champions the work of libraries in international fora such as the United Nations, UNESCO, WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organisation), IFFRO (International Federation for Reprographic Rights) and Blue Shield. It advocates for libraries, for access to information, for intellectual freedom and for preservation of intellectual and cultural heritage. It provides standards and guidelines to improve the practice of librarianship and it encourages members to build networks, be innovative and resourceful and to be advocates for libraries.

In recent times there have been three significant things that have impacted on IFLA as an organisation. In 2015 the United Nations 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals were adopted. In 2016 the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Global Libraries Legacy Grant was announced. And in 2017 IFLA's Global Vision Project was launched.



United Nations 2030 Agenda

In September 2015 the 193 Member States of the United Nations adopted Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. There are 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets to achieve this Agenda. The United Nations Secretary General at the time, Ban Ki-moon, said that 'The Global Goals represent a universal, transformative and integrated agenda that heralds a historic turning point for our world.'

IFLA participated in developing the UN 2030 Agenda, and was at the table when the goals were being formulated. Since 2012, we have been advocating for the following to be included in the Agenda:

- Ensuring access to information
- Safeguarding of cultural heritage
- Universal literacy
- Access to information and communication technologies (ICT)

IFLA, and a number of strategic partners, drafted the Lyon Declaration of 2014 which was signed by over 600 organisations. The Declaration called upon United Nations Member States to make an international commitment to ensure that everyone has access to, and is able to understand, use and share the information that is necessary to promote sustainable development and democratic societies. IFLA has been very active in promoting the 2030 Agenda and the important role that libraries play in helping countries achieve their targets.

In order to promote the UN 2030 Agenda, IFLA developed the International Advocacy Programme (IAP) which is a capacity-building program designed to promote and support the role libraries can play in the planning and implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. The program involved a train the trainer program and regional workshops to achieve the objectives of the 2-year program which were to raise the level of awareness of the SDGs for people working in libraries; to promote the important role libraries can play in development by contributing to the UN 2030 Agenda and the SDGs; and to increase the participation of library associations and public library representatives in advocacy work at national and regional levels. The IAP has had a good impact in showing how libraries can drive progress across the entire 2030 Agenda and getting libraries on to national agendas.

Another part of IFLA's advocacy work is the creation of the [**Library Map of the World**](#). This provides basic library statistics and gives country-level data and a worldwide comparison of different library performance metrics by region. There is also a platform providing access to SDG stories demonstrating how libraries in different countries contribute to the SDGs and serve as partners in meeting local development needs. The Library Map of the World was created in partnership with national library associations, national libraries, library support organizations and other institutions. There is an accompanying [**storytelling manual**](#) which was created by members of IFLA's International Leaders Program and IFLA HQ. By telling stories based on solid evidence, we can encourage people – particularly decision-makers – to give us their support. The

aim is to help librarians and library advocates by providing guidance on how to tell compelling stories about library activities, projects and programs, and their impact on communities and people's lives.



<https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/hq/topics/libraries-development/images/sdg-storytelling-manual.png>

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Global Libraries Legacy Grant

The second major impact on IFLA has been the Legacy Grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. After 20 years and an investment of one billion US dollars in public libraries, the Gates Foundation announced that they were closing the Global Libraries program. The Director of Global Libraries, Deborah Jacobs, was requested by Bill and Melinda Gates to develop and implement an exit strategy to leave the field strong. Three partners were chosen - IFLA, TASCHA (Technology & Social Change Group at the University of Washington Information School, Seattle) and the Public Libraries Association of the American Library Association. These three organisations were provided with ten-year grants totalling around \$USD50 million to work together and to individually strengthen the library field.

The Legacy Grant is an incredible gift to IFLA and allows us to dream big and be ambitious about how we can engage, enable, inspire and connect the global library field.

Global Vision Project

Since late 2017, IFLA has been undertaking its Global Visioning Project, initiated and led by Secretary General Gerald Leitner, to better understand how we can address the challenges faced by libraries in an increasingly globalised world. It is a world where many doubt the value and need for libraries and when a frequent response is that libraries are no longer needed now everything is available on the internet; a world that is dominated by Google and Facebook



IFLA Global Vision Kickoff workshop, Athens 2017
<https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/GVMultimedia/1.png>

and Amazon. We wanted to know what librarians thought was important, what values drive them, what challenges they see now and into the future.

This was the beginning of a tremendous exercise in gathering input and responses from librarians around the world. We had responses from 190 (out of 193) UN Member States on all seven continents. There was input from all regions and Asia -Oceania had a strong say. Altogether, respondents had 469,152 years of library experience; there were 9,291 workshop participants at 185 workshops; and 21,772 online voters participated in the survey. As you would expect, public and academic libraries had most input, but we heard from all library types. There was a good range of participation from people who have worked in libraries for a shorter time as well as people who have worked for a long time. The result of all this input (over 750 pages and 600,000 lines of code) is the [**Global Vision Report summary**](#).

And after a year of consultation and input the vision for IFLA and for libraries is:

‘A strong and united library field powering literate, informed and participative societies’

The key finding was that we are united globally in our goals and values. Across regions, library types and length of engagement with libraries we share a deep commitment to the enduring value and role of libraries. Our opportunity is that we must connect global and local actions effectively. We do a lot locally; we do a lot internationally and what we need to do now is to make the connections to knit the two together.

Librarians from around the world identified the following ten highlights and opportunities. Each highlight has a matching opportunity for action.

1. We are dedicated to equal and free access to information and knowledge / We must be champions of intellectual freedom.

This is fundamental to our ethics and our values. And although we all understand and articulate that access to information is the core purpose of libraries, this is not always easy, and the connection between championing intellectual freedom and access to information was not necessarily made by all respondents. IFLA has an advisory committee, Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) and its purpose is to raise awareness of the essential correlation between the library concept of free access to information and the values of intellectual freedom.

We are dedicated to equal and free access to information and knowledge / We must be champions of intellectual freedom.

2. We remain deeply committed to supporting literacy, learning and reading / We must update our traditional roles in the digital age.

Universal literacy is recognised in the vision for the United Nations 2030 Agenda. Libraries have always supported literacy, learning and reading, it is what we do. But as more and more information is only available online, we must support our communities to be digitally literate too.

We must update our traditional roles in the digital age. Libraries provide classes for people who need assistance in the online world. As governments increasingly move their interactions online it is more important than ever that the digital divide is addressed and there is no one left behind.

3. We are focused on serving our communities / We need to understand community needs better and design services for impact.

Libraries are often described as the heart of the community. They are safe and non-judgemental places, welcoming to all. In many societies they are the only non-commercial space where people can go and there is no expectation of buying something. But sometimes librarians are guilty of thinking we know best what our communities need and want. And while we are quite good at counting things, we haven't been so successful in measuring the impact we are having.

4. We embrace digital innovation / We must keep up with ongoing technological change.

Librarians love innovation and I confess when I was a Library CEO, there was nothing more pleasing to hear than we were the first to do something. But it can be a challenge to keep abreast of all the new technologies. Everything changes so quickly and moves so fast. We owe it to ourselves and our communities to know what is happening in the online world.

5. We have leaders who see the need for strong advocacy / We need more and better advocates at all levels.

... we definitely have to advocate for libraries, and this is the role of each and every librarian.

I was on a panel at a seminar last year where we were talking about advocacy, and a member of the audience, after listening to us for a while, asked 'Why do libraries keep having to justify their existence?' He considered that the value of libraries was evident and that we were wasting effort in continually justifying our worth. The value of libraries seems so self-evident to us, and we

know how access to the collections we own and the programs we run support literacy and learning. We know that reading for pleasure is one of the most delightful ways of spending time. We have seen the difference that libraries make to people's lives. We know that, and indeed many of the people who use libraries do too. But many of the important people, the funders, the ones with influence and power don't know, or they knew, and they've forgotten, or they think that the world has changed they think that it is no longer necessary to provide libraries. So, we definitely have to advocate for libraries, and this is the role of each and every librarian.

6. We see funding as one of our biggest challenges / We need to ensure stakeholders understand our value and impact.

If only we had more money...or worse, no we can't do that – we don't have any money. This can be a wonderful excuse for not doing anything. I believe people can make things happen, regardless of their resourcing. I was involved in INELI-Oceania, which was a leadership program

for librarians in Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific. One of our innovators from Fiji is a school librarian. She started a program on her front steps on a Sunday after church, where she brings some books from her school and shares them with the children. The program has been so popular she has gone on to train parents to read to the children. This is having a real impact, and a lack of funding did not stop this librarian from being proactive and innovative. But of course, to do what we need to do we need resources. And we need to convince those with the money that we have value and we make a difference and that libraries are an investment not a cost.

7. We see the need to build collaboration and partnerships / We need to develop a spirit of collaboration.

This one is close to my heart, as this is where I have taken my presidential theme – **Let's work together** - from. This is an invitation to think who you can partner with, who you can work with to increase impact. I think librarians are instinctively collaborative and we just need to think more broadly, perhaps outside our own circles to the wider world. Back in the 1980s when I was working at a public library, I was part of a very active regional network of school and public librarians. We all benefitted from the connections and sharing of information and knowledge and so did the students who used our libraries.

8. We want to be less bureaucratic, inflexible and resistant to change / We need to challenge current structures and behaviours.

I think that as a whole; librarians have embraced change. I remember back to the mid-90s when the internet was gaining momentum and we had to decide, were we going to be for it or against it. And most were for it. But sometimes we get too comfortable in our environment, and the outside world might see us as resistant to change. We need to explain why we are preserving our values, while being open to new ways of doing things. A good example is the current move to abolish overdue fees in public libraries in Victoria – this is a challenge to our funders and requires the courage to say that it is less important to forego revenue than it is to alienate and disenfranchise borrowers.

9. Libraries preserve cultural memory / We are the guardians of the memory of the world.

We can now access the thoughts and wisdom of people who lived hundreds or even more than a thousand years ago because they recorded their knowledge on physical stuff – palm leaves, papyrus, stone, vellum, paper. I wonder if we are not moving to a time where visual literacy overtakes print literacy and I don't think that we are going to be able to preserve 0s and 1s so robustly. An emerging trend is the creation of national digital libraries and a really good example is the National Library of Australia's **Trove** which focuses on national and local history. Fortunately, there are people who are working hard to preserve the physical and the digital memory of the world. Important work is being undertaken particularly by the IFLA PAC (Preservation and Conservation) centres around the world.

10. Our young professionals are deeply committed and eager to lead / We must give young professionals effective opportunities to learn, develop and lead.

I am incredibly excited about the new generations coming up. I have met many already, I see them at home and at IFLA – young, energetic, committed people who are hungry to learn new things and assume more responsibility. We older librarians must encourage and nurture young people.

So, where to now? The IFLA Governing Board is currently finalising the Strategy Framework 2019-2024 along with input from the Professional Units of IFLA. This will set out an ambitious but achievable agenda for IFLA to achieve its strategic directions. The Framework will be presented to members at the World Library and Information Congress in Athens in August.

And What Else?

The **World Library and Information Congress** is held annually and attracts up to 4,000 delegates from around the world. This year the Congress will be held from 24 – 30 August in Athens Greece and next year the Congress will be held in our region, in New Zealand. The annual Congress is an excellent opportunity to strengthen and widen your professional and social network and to learn about the latest trends in libraries and in your sector.

IFLA represents libraries at events such as WIPO's Standing Committee on Copyright and Related Rights (SCCR), where United Nations member states discuss the topic of exceptions and limitations to copyright for libraries, archives and museums, among other matters.

This year IFLA is taking an active role in the **International Year of Indigenous Languages** (IYIL19), an initiative agreed by the United Nations to promote and raise awareness of indigenous languages across the globe. Each month during 2019 IFLA will be highlighting the great work carried out by libraries around the globe.

IFLA published the first **Trend Report** in 2013 and has been providing annual updates since then that highlight trends that affect libraries. There will be a new Trend Report released in 2020.

Join Us!

IFLA welcomes associations, institutions and individuals to join. If you would like to establish international contacts to further your work, or broaden your horizons by contributing to library work in your specific area at an international level, a great way to get started is to become an IFLA member and get involved in IFLA in its many activities. All the details are available on the IFLA website at **<https://www.ifla.org/membership>**

Christine Mackenzie is President - elect of IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) and a freelance librarian. She retired as CEO of Yarra Plenty Regional Library Service, Melbourne, Australia in January 2016 after 12 years in that role. Previously she was Manager of Brisbane City Council Library Service and Mornington Peninsula Library Service. Email: christine.mackenzie.au@gmail.com and Christine's website: www.christinemackenzie.com.au