

we all require a robust information infrastructure in order to ensure a more equitable distribution of information to our citizenry; all of our countries suffer from the digital divide and a need for lifelong information literacy. It is these focal points that form the basis for our own strategic planning in the Regional Standing Committee for Asia and Oceania, and which we have sought to articulate with IFLA's general priorities.

Collapse of the Development Myth

However, it must be admitted that these priorities for our region pose something of a conundrum, for they sound like traditional development objectives, don't they? And yet 'traditional development' is a concept that many of us call into question – I know that I certainly do, after a career in development that began in the heady days of the 1970s, when we had what seemed a bottomless cornucopia of development funding and a solid Leftist philosophy that informed our development thinking. In the intervening 30 years we have seen development come up wanting in so many ways; we have seen development ideals fail over and over; we have seen development ideals replaced in many countries by neo-colonial aspirations of certain Western countries, and we have seen economic growth replace development planning.

Many of us would now say that Serge Latouche, who developed his 'post-development' paradigm at the beginning of the 1990s, probably got it right. Those of you who have read Latouche – and I highly recommend it if you haven't yet – will recall his basic assertions:

- First, development is a specifically Western cultural concern
- Second, development has transplanted badly in the societies now known as the Third World
- Third, underdevelopment stems from the collision of very different cultural universes within the expansionary West
- Fourth, and most difficult to comprehend, within these imperfectly Westernised societies, the *informal* can be understood as the budding, under highly ambiguous circumstances, of qualitatively new social forms which are not 'alternative paths' of development but *alternatives to development* being confronted with the impasses of both modernity and underdevelopment (Latouche 1993)

Development, in Latouche's words, is an 'Occidental artifact miscarried into the Third World' (Latouche 1993) The development ideal is a Western invention, based on a particular time and place – that is, a colonial time dominated by Western Europe and North America. Because not all societies are Western European/North American, not all societies are fixated on 'development' as we define it, or wish to 'become developed' in the sense of greater economic success.

Development was an outcome of 19th century colonisation; that is, a 'colonisable exterior' was a necessary source of economic riches – first through slavery and plunder and trade, then in access to natural resources and cheap labour. Thus the Third World's underdevelopment is the negative face of the West's development. In other words, developed countries needed colonies and territories for the development process, which left the colonies underdeveloped, depleted and worn out for the most part. Today's developing countries don't usually have the same opportunities to exploit peripheral countries to fuel their own expansion. But it happens to some extent – Vietnam, for example, has now come off the list of most underdeveloped countries. It

exports rice, exports some manufactures such as shoes, television sets, etc. And at the same time Vietnam has ‘colonised’ some of its neighbours – Vietnamese firms manufacture cheap clothing in Cambodia and then bring it to Vietnam for sale. Vietnamese artisans work in Laos, where precious metals and stones are cheap, and they bring these back to Vietnam. Vietnam’s development, in other words, follows a Western model, of exploitation of less powerful neighbours. In this situation some countries, usually the poorest ones, will find it impossible to become developed, of effecting an accumulation of capital large enough to generate a high material standard of living for the whole population.

And so in this view the development ideal has failed – it continues to devastate societies, and has never really delivered what we hoped, greater well-being and sustainable growth for the world’s population. Few except the most rabid capitalists would say that development is little more than an impersonal, money-creating machine that destroys cultures and societies as it generates wealth for the few.

If this is so, if it is even only partly true, developing societies must resist and subvert this homogenising movement. They must change the terms of reference in order to escape ‘the disempowerment inherent in their chronic underdevelopment, and they must escape the straitjacket of the impossible model of development that we currently have.’

Sustainable Development and Information

‘Homo sapiens has a distinct advantage over other species in evolutionary competition because of the ability to reflect, learn, evaluate, and to communicate, orally and in writing, extensive amounts of nongenetic information across generations.’ (Pirages 1996) Whilst this cannot be denied, it must also be recognised that humanity learns different lessons in different contexts, and that there is no true homogeneity in these contexts. This poses a real problem for what we regard as the solution to the development dilemma – sustainability. We tend to conceptualise sustainability, like development, as a mono-concept that applies unchanging across cultures. But in fact what is sustainable in one context may not be sustainable or desirable in another, because each context has different sets of variables, needs and desired outcomes.

Sustainability we define as

...lasting improvements in the economic, social and political conditions of men, women and children in developing countries. This means support for economic strategies that are equitable, that maintain the natural resource base and the quality of the environment and that provide the greatest level of self-reliance possible.’ (MFAT 2000)

For development to be sustainable, it must focus on capacity building, enhancing people’s capacity to participate fully in their societies, in economic, social and political life. It is this participation through capacity building that is so context-specific as to defy generalisation – what is ‘full participation’ in Myanmar, as compared with Singapore, for example? Different societies have different realities, different possibilities, different standards.

Perhaps one solution is to think of sustainability as a process rather than a specific goal to be

achieved. Indeed, isn't this the real miracle of the human situation, that societies in very different ways have been able to survive and sustain themselves by adapting uniquely to their conditions? This is socio-cultural evolution, which is perhaps the same as sustainability. Note that it is *not* just economic or technological (which seem to lack context, or perhaps have a context which is almost exclusively Western and developed-country in orientation); socio-cultural evolution is firmly embedded in local societies and cultures. This is how development can be sustainable, by being fixed in the local culture and society, and not imposed from without, in the way that Western economic and technological values have been imposed on societies. As Pirages (1996) says,

The global spread of a resource-intensive industrial paradigm is peaking at a time when, due to increasingly apparent environmental limitations, that paradigm no longer gives valid guidance for the long-term sustainability of the human race.

Sustainability is the key to the future, yet it seems unlikely that most societies, especially developing countries, will evolve in any real way toward sustainability, because there are too many barriers to such evolution. Ironically, one of the greatest barriers to sustainability in my view is The Information Society, and what it stands for – that is, an increasing volume of information and ever more sophisticated information technology. Why should this be a barrier? As Marien (1996) believes,

The positive impacts [of IT], such as mass storage of information, mind extension through expert systems, computers as tutors, and automatic language translation, slightly [outnumber] the negative ones. But if one looks at the quality of the impacts, the negatives – unemployment, invasion of privacy, an accelerated sense of time, the destruction of sense of place, aggravated rich-poor differences – outweigh the positives.

If we look at this carefully, most of us would agree with Marien. One of the greatest negative impacts of The Information Society is information overload, or what he calls 'infoglut', which arises from too many people sending too many communications in too many ways. This Marien expresses as a mathematical formula: $I = P \times O \times T$. The infoglut impact (I) results from more people (P) in more service occupations producing and distributing information (O), using ever more information technology (T). Information leads to increasing complexity and decreased productivity.

The problem with 'infoglut' is that it creates entertaining distractions from many of our problems, and often makes these problems more difficult to comprehend. In other words, information does not help us solve the problem of development, does not necessarily contribute to sustainability through capacity building, but is actually a hindrance. Too much information that is too difficult to find, control and utilise is actually bad for development – is this heresy from an information professional? Think of your own work, your own professional development – how much information do you actually utilise? Only a very small amount, one might wager; and that's the way it is for development as well. We don't need that much information, we just need *good quality* information, and need to know how to harness it for development – this must be the centrepiece of strategic planning for IFLA's work in Asia and Oceania.

What Can IFLA Contribute?

Probably one of the most apposite themes for an incoming IFLA president is Kay Raseroka's Libraries for Lifelong Literacy, which will be our focus for 2003-2005. This in our view dovetails almost perfectly with our reading of the present situation – a failure of traditional development philosophies, a recognition that sustainable development focussed on capacity-building is the only viable way forward, and a recognition that good information is enough information. Information literacy is a key contributor to sustainable development and to capacity-building, for it teaches lifelong critical skills of how to understand, interpret and utilise information needed for development, and it does this contextually. As Kay Raseroka has stated,

IFLA's goal is thus to facilitate access to, and understanding and effective use of information, however presented, in accordance with diverse information needs in disparate contexts. To achieve this goal, attention must be focussed on developing and maintaining lifelong information literacy in its broadest sense.... (Raseroka 2003)

Recognise that We Are the Knowledge Society

For this goal to become reality we in IFLA need to recognise that the Information Society is probably a spent concept, and that in fact it has impoverished the development movement by encouraging us to think like technocrats. The Information Society is indelibly linked to information technology and technological innovation; therefore, to the extent that countries in our region are unable to access or afford the technology, they are unable to participate in the Information Society – many of our countries will always be second class citizens in this society, because they will always be technologically behind their Northern Hemisphere neighbours.

Instead of the Information Society, perhaps we should be thinking in terms of the Knowledge Society – an idea recently given prominence by Abdul Waheed Khan (2003). In his view the Knowledge Society, or more properly, Knowledge Societies, '...includes a dimension of social, cultural, economical, political and institutional transformation, and a more pluralistic and developmental perspective.' Information tends to empower economic development in particular; knowledge is intrinsic to human development more generally – 'and, therefore, to such matters as intellectual cooperation, lifelong learning and basic human values and rights'. (Khan 2003) This is precisely the holistic approach to development that we have seen is lacking in traditional development perspectives, and by adopting this view we can have a richer and more meaningful understanding of development.

Replace ICT with Information Literacy

In IFLA, as elsewhere, we are beginning to recognise that we have been missing the forest for the trees – we have been focussing on the wrong component in our drive to assist with development. For example, the first goal in the Asia and Oceania Section *Strategic Plan, 2002-2003* states: 'to provide opportunities for regionally-based education and training in library and information management skills, with emphasis on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) developments'. Our view when formulating this statement was that learning about ICTs would foster development by helping people in less developed countries to access the technology they

need to use information. With benefit of hindsight, we probably we got it wrong.

We, like most others, assumed rather naively that ICTs would rapidly pervade the entire world, including the under-developed world. But they haven't, and they won't, not for many decades despite well-meaning experiments to make the technology cheap and accessible. Take as an example the Simputer - a cheap, pocket-sized computing device designed for use by rural populations in India. This has been hailed as a breakthrough in bringing the world of computing to the poor. But delays in production, escalating development costs and a dearth of buyers have led experts to question whether the project will succeed. (Digital Opportunity Channel 2003)

About a year after we formulated our current strategic plan in Beijing (March 2002), I had occasion to read a brilliant work by Mark Warschauer, *Technology and Social Exclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide* (2003), in which it is argued in part that the Digital Divide is really the Literacy Divide, and that the key to bridging the divide is not just technology but the ability to understand, filter, evaluate and use information – literacy, or information literacy. This idea I developed further in Sri Lanka, where the RSCAO met in March 2003. In this workshop I stated, among other points, that

...people who can't read, who have not learned to use a computer and who do not know any of the major languages that dominate Internet content will never be able to use the Internet productively. This is the real Digital Divide, and it is literacy that holds the solution, more specifically information literacy. (Gorman 2003)

Today, therefore, we should be amending our strategic plans to focus in the first instance on information literacy rather than the technology, with the first goal of the Section becoming 'to provide opportunities for regionally-based education and training in library and information management skills, with emphasis on Information Literacy developments'.

Continue to Focus on Education and Training

You will notice that in our view information literacy remains embedded in education and training, for we believe that this is the basis of sustainable development. As Abdul Waheed Khan says,

We well know the central role that learning plays in sustainable development and its contribution in particular to poverty reduction and income generation, empowerment and consolidation of democracy, disease prevention and sustainable health and to the protection of the environment. The access to information and the acquisition of knowledge and skills through education and learning have never been more central than they are today. (Khan 2003)

And so, even though we have heard it many times, and it is probably enshrined in most of the IFLA section plans, education remains the key to development, and we believe that each section should be fostering appropriate education and training related to its specific interests – but with an emphasis on information literacy wherever possible.

In our view education – both in traditional and in new settings – is the key to creating equitable

knowledge societies. Obtaining a balance between the two poses a dilemma for a number of countries in the region today, but with appropriately designed programmes this dilemma can be resolved.

Education is the forum that will provide an opportunity to learn the skills of information literacy. It is the process that reaches out and touches the largest portion of the population and is regarded today as a lifelong process that allows adjustment to changes in life and the way of doing things.

In many countries distance learning is becoming accepted as the desire to increase the provision of learning develops and the economic need to cut the cost of education grows in tandem with participation levels. We are also observing mounting social pressure for democracy and the guarantee for equity and equality of opportunity. At the same time, there is a keenly felt need to improve the relevance and quality of the curricula and to move towards lifelong learning. 'Therefore, education – and I am speaking here of both traditional and modern delivery methods – is the condition sine qua non of Knowledge Societies.' (Khan 2003)

What we are trying to suggest is that there is a clear correlation between literacy or information literacy and information access, and that literacy is really the driver behind the Digital Divide. It is not access to hardware and software, it is not having electricity and Internet connectivity. Rather, it is knowing how to access, read, understand and use the information that we access. An organisation such as IFLA can do very little to bridge the Digital Divide, because it is so massive –

80% of the world's population lacks access to basic telecommunications facilities, which are the key infrastructure of the information society and emerging knowledge societies, and that less than 10% has access to the Internet. Access to the information highways and to content, such as development data and information, is still a major problem in many countries. (Khan 2003)

Some would say it is our duty to help provide these basic facilities that are part of the information infrastructure, that a library can provide a telephone connection, a computer and a modem, that a library has the electricity needed to run this equipment; therefore, it should be a communication centre. But so many libraries in so many countries lack these basics; they don't have telephone lines, they can't afford computers, the electricity is unreliable. No, it is better to focus on teaching people how to utilise the information they can readily and regularly access, whether it is in a printed pamphlet from a government department, a radio programme, a newspaper – whatever is available locally.

Incorporating information literacy into primary and secondary teacher training programmes is one solution to the problem of a lack of ability amongst our population to access, identify and use information available to them. Teacher librarians are the tool for teaching information literacy, complemented by librarians.

Tertiary institutions have incorporated information literacy programmes into their curriculum as part of the lifelong learning education process. In some ways this is like locking the gate after the dog has bolted, for it is a result of the realisation that graduates lack information skills expected of them as graduates. We need to ensure the information literacy skills are taught at the start of

the education system and continue to be developed at secondary and tertiary levels where the focus can then be more on ICT. In addressing information literacy at the earliest stage of the education process, the Asia and Oceania section of IFLA will continue to play its role.

In other words, we can contribute what we are good at. Libraries and librarians in all contexts have an honourable tradition as educators. They have long participated in making the infrastructure understandable to the populace, and responsive to the needs of the citizens. Wherever there is a library, there is a 'university' - sometimes for the elite, the university student or government officer, sometimes for the masses. The library has a principal purpose to educate its users, to help them understand. This is information literacy – helping people understand information, how to access it, how to use it, how to critique it.

For us in the region, the key is to refocus education, teaching and library curriculum to better reflect local and national needs as opposed to international and foreign needs that currently dominate the scene with a heavy ICT focus that is not realistic or achievable by many countries.

Concluding Recommendations

Priority areas of action identified in the Glasgow brainstorming session (advocacy, partnerships, continuing professional development) should all be viewed in accordance with our primary focus on information literacy.

In our view this does not include advocacy that is a political activity in the narrow sense, aimed particularly at such matters as freedom of information legislation, censorship, etc., for in many of our countries this is simply not possible. Rather we should be advocating stronger cross-sectoral professional networks of information workers, whether through professional associations or other groups that might exist to the extent that these can have some impact on resource provision for information literacy education and training as identified above.

This leads naturally to the matter of partnerships, which we believe can be used to advantage for the promotion of our aims – partnerships with IFLA sections, partnerships with other international organisations, partnerships with government agencies. This is where we need to become more proactive and more creative so that energies can be harnessed more effectively than in the past.

And finally, CPD is an important key, for without ongoing training information professionals fail to learn new skills. We need to provide information literacy training for librarians, for library school educators, for school teachers, for policy makers. And happily, we have already begun this through our ALP-funded projects in many countries, including Lebanon, Thailand and Vietnam. And we are looking to introduce more such projects in Laos, China, Malaysia – in this respect, Asia and Oceania is 'on the move'.

We believe that the primary goal of information literacy for all, through improved education and training activities in all countries, articulates well with Kay Raseroka's priority areas of action, as just noted. It now remains to encapsulate our discourse into a set of recommendations for discussion and action. In these recommendations it is tempting to state 'IFLA and its constituent

sections' in place of 'the Asia and Oceania Section', because we think these are entirely justifiable and self-evident goals that will help us achieve our aim of greater information literacy throughout the world. However, our brief is to speak for this one region, and we only hope that other regional sections and other divisions within IFLA share our vision, and will help to implement it.

1. The Asia and Oceania Section should no longer think of developing an information society that is heavily ICT-dependent, but rather a knowledge society that is transformational and pluralistic, heavily tied to local contexts rather than externally imposed development models
2. The Asia and Oceania Section should provide opportunities for regionally-based education and training in library and information management skills, with emphasis on Information Literacy
3. The Asia and Oceania Section should be fostering educational activities that take advantage of developments in distance delivery of educational programmes and products
4. The Asia and Oceania Section should continue to assist in strengthening the effectiveness of library associations and other professional groupings that might contribute to the development of information literate societies.

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