



World Library and Information Congress: 70th IFLA General Conference and Council

22-27 August 2004
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Programme: <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla70/prog04.htm>

Code Number: 111-E
Meeting: 141. Government Information and Official Publications
Simultaneous Interpretation: Yes

The Global Legal Information Network: fostering civic education and the rule of law

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Abstract

Although the mission of the Law Library of the United States Congress focuses foremost on supporting the legal information needs of the legislature, the Law Library possesses a strong sense of public service. This means a commitment to acquiring, processing and disseminating legal information as widely as possible. With an experience of 50-plus years working to track foreign legal sources to produce legal reports on issues in the interest of the government, the Law Library took the initiative of designing a digital legal database, known as the Global Legal Information Network, or GLIN. A number of governments from around the world are working together to share the benefits and responsibilities for the establishment and maintenance of the system. This paper describes the goals and benefits of GLIN, a system designed to provide free and open access to the laws of the world and thus serve

as a tool to support civic education and a variety of programs designed to foster the rule of law.

Sumario

Aunque la misión del Departamento Jurídico de la Biblioteca del Congreso de los Estados Unidos de América esta centrada en el apoyo a la legislatura en sus necesidades de información jurídica, el Departamento Jurídico tiene un alto sentido de servicio público. Esto significa un compromiso de adquirir procesar y diseminar información jurídica lo mas ampliamente possible. Basado en una experiencia de mas de 50 años trabajando en el control de fuentes jurídicas para la producción de informes sobre temas de interés del gobierno, el Departamento Jurídico tomó la iniciativa de diseñar una base electrónica de datos jurídicos conocida como la Red Global de Información Jurídica o GLIN. Un número de gobiernos de alrededor del mundo están trabajando cooperativamente para compartir los beneficios y responsabilidades necesarios para el establecimiento y mantenimiento del sistema. Esta presentación describe las metas y beneficios de GLIN como sistema designado a ofrecer acceso libre y abierto a las fuentes de derecho del mundo y, de esta manera, servir como herramienta de educación cívica y como apoyo a una variedad de programas designados a promover el estado de derecho.

THE GLOBAL LEGAL INFORMATION NETWORK: FOSTERING CIVIC EDUCATION AND THE RULE OF LAW¹

I. Background

The Law Library of the United States Congress (The Law Library) is a part of the legislative branch of the government. The Law Library houses the largest universal collection of legal sources—a total of approximately 2.5 million items in all formats, all languages, and covering all time periods. This collection grows at an annual rate of 60-70 thousand items. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the Law Library is a legal information processing and research center.

The Law Library's stated mission is "...to provide high quality and timely, and innovative research, analysis and reference services to the United States Congress as well as to the Supreme Court, other courts, executive agencies, the legal profession, academic community, and the general public based on the strength of the world's largest and most complete collection of international, foreign, and national legal resources." To carry out its mission, the agency has a complement of 100 full time employees consisting of: lawyers, librarians, technicians and administrative personnel.

Although the mission statement is focuses first on supporting the legal information needs of the legislature, the Law Library possesses a strong sense of public service. This means a commitment to acquire, process and disseminate legal information as widely as possible. This commitment is consonant with the Law

¹ Presented at the 70th General Congress and Meeting of IFLA Libraries: Instruments for Education and Development. August 22-27, 2004, in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Library's conviction that it is the duty of the government, the lawmakers, regulators, and judges to communicate their rulings to the people bound to comply with them. As a legislative agency, the Law Library feels a strong sense that it plays an important role in carrying out this duty.

Given the range of its global coverage, more than 50 percent of the Law Library's assets consist of sources collected from around the world in all languages. Therefore, access to these sources requires the competent assistance of legal experts. They not only offer reference services but more importantly, they respond to requests for advice on a wide range of issues of national and international significance. The product of their work is interpretive and analytical and must be supported by the most authoritative and reliable sources. We assume governments around the world equally value authoritative sources.

Within that context, the Law Library has been offering various forms of access to its assets. Since its establishment in 1832, it has made its collections physically available at its Washington, D. C. facilities in the traditional print or analog format. With the advent of computers and the Internet, the second half of the 20th century saw the opportunity to exponentially multiply access to our sources electronically.

Accessing information on sources of foreign law has always been a challenge. With an experience of 50-plus years working to consistently track foreign legal sources to produce legal reports on issues in the interest of the government, the Law Library took the initiative of designing a digital legal database based on standardized procedures for capturing legal texts as well as search and retrieval procedures. These standards and procedures were then proposed to a number of governments from around the world that had expressed their interest in sharing the benefits and responsibilities for the establishment and maintenance of the system. It was designed therefore, as a multinational database since its inception with the goal of providing timely access to the laws of the world. Both the network of participating government agencies and the database are known as the Global Legal Information Network, or GLIN.

II. Global Legal Information Network

GLIN has several distinct characteristics. First, the word "global" in the Global Legal Information Network is one of its unique features. Unlike legal information systems built for local or national use, GLIN intends to incorporate all the laws of all the nations of the world. Although this seems a large task, the fact is that the Law Library of Congress is collecting information on a global scale in paper format. It would seem easier, therefore, to harness information technology to gather this information digitally on a global scale. GLIN invites all countries to participate in the Network. The more countries that join the Network and contribute legal information to the database, the more useful GLIN becomes. GLIN has no political agenda. The Law Library of Congress is in the business of collecting and disseminating information; hence, any jurisdiction that enacts laws that govern a group of people is encouraged to join GLIN.

GLIN Characteristics

- **Global**
- **Inter-governmental**
- **Non-profit**
- **Cooperative**
- **Standards.**

Global Legal Information Network

Generally, the Network is an inter-governmental organization. That is, GLIN seeks to work with those who are responsible for enacting the laws or for publishing and/or disseminating the laws. Many contributing GLIN members represent legislative agencies while others come from Ministries of Justice. We have found that the best GLIN members are found in institutions that are motivated for the same reasons as the Law Library of Congress, i.e., the institutions need timely access to the information found in GLIN to support those for whom they work.

GLIN is strictly a non-profit venture. Currently, nothing in GLIN is bought or sold. Even if the members determine at some point in the future that they would like to commercialize some aspect of GLIN, it would remain a not-for-profit enterprise.

The cooperative nature of GLIN is one of its most distinguishing features. Although the Law Library of Congress launched the GLIN effort, all members of GLIN have an equal say in the development and operation of GLIN. Through an Executive Council, various committees, and an annual meeting, GLIN members have opportunities to make decisions related to the Network.

In addition, the members of GLIN are working together to create a cooperatively built database. GLIN is not a portal to already existing information, but rather is a database of information created according to an agreed upon set of standards. Fundamentally, these standards pertain to the quality of information that is acceptable as well as the technology that will be used to exchange the information.

One of the hallmarks of GLIN is its reliability. The Law Library of Congress has always collected and relied upon primary sources of law in paper format to fulfill its mission. As we move from the paper world to a digital environment, it is extremely important to ensure that the information is as trustworthy. GLIN is therefore committed to the highest standards of reliability.

GLIN Reliability Standards

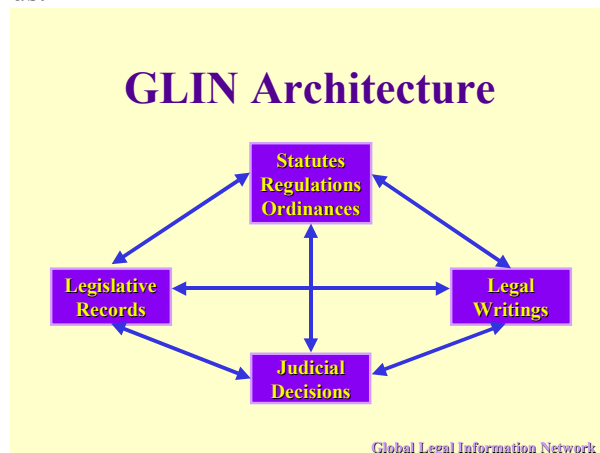
- Official
- Current
- Complete.

Global Legal Information Network

For legal information to be reliable, it must meet three criteria. First, the information must come from official sources. Most countries have statutorily declared an official publication of law. GLIN only accepts material from these official sources. It does not accept material that has been re-typed from an official source. It does not accept material from commercial sources. It does not even link to government websites as most of these still include disclaimers stating that the only official text is the printed text. GLIN is absolutely committed to providing access to official sources of law.

A second standard of reliability is that the material must be current. Legal information changes rapidly and the goal of GLIN is to have member countries contribute their laws as soon as they are enacted. Finally, the information in GLIN must be complete. We cannot build a database that focuses on a particular subject area such as commercial law or environmental law. GLIN members are asked to contribute everything that is nationally or internationally enforceable.

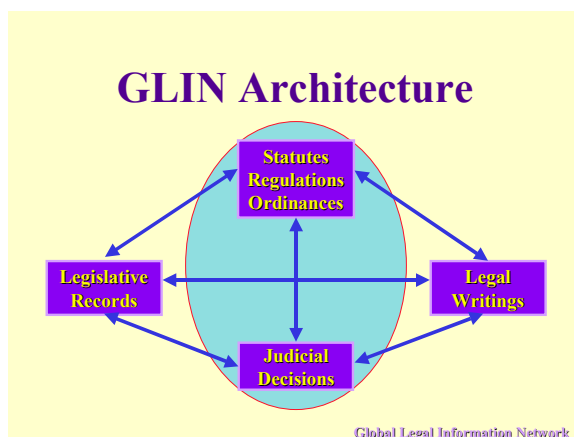
GLIN began as an effort to make available constitutions, statutes, regulations and similar legal material. However, legal information encompasses much more. The universe of legal information that is collected by the Law Library of Congress comprises other categories of legal materials such as judicial decisions, legal writings, and legislative records.



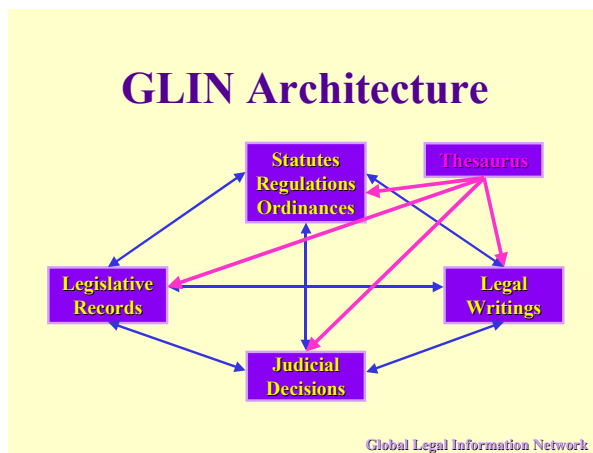
All of the categories of legal information mentioned above are linked together and form a natural system that has been used in the design of GLIN. Looking at statutory and regulatory materials as a starting point, it is clear that there are connections to all the other categories of legal information. Judicial decisions may

have an impact on statutes or cite statutes in the body of the decision. Likewise, statutes and/or judicial decisions may be the subject of law review articles. Finally, the legislative record stems directly from the legislative process and results in a law or similar legal instrument.

The emphasis in GLIN, however, is providing access to primary sources of law. Although secondary source materials such as legal writings and legislative records may be useful to legal researchers, they pose additional issues such as volume (which necessitates selection) and copyright restrictions (particularly in the case of legal writings). Because for many jurisdictions primary sources of law are in the public domain, statutory material and judicial decisions form the core of the GLIN system.



Because the material in GLIN is taken from official sources, it remains in the official language or languages of the contributing countries. GLIN does not yet offer translations of this material. How, then, is it possible to search for legal information from various countries? GLIN uses a common, centralized thesaurus—a set of subject terms derived from the legal instruments themselves—to index all the material in the database. GLIN members are trained to use and understand the concepts represented by the various terms in the GLIN thesaurus so that there will be relatively uniform indexing.



The GLIN thesaurus is unique in that it has been built specifically as a finding aid to locate material in the database. Terms in the GLIN thesaurus are derived from the legal instruments themselves. Thus, a term is entered into the GLIN thesaurus

only when it is needed to index a particular law. The value of this approach is that there are no “blind entries.” Every term in the thesaurus will have at least one record associated with it.

GLIN Database Elements

- **Full Text of Original Sources**
(original language)
- **Summary (English & original language)**
- **Legal Thesaurus (English & original language).**

Global Legal Information Network

Countries that participate in GLIN are asked to provide texts of their laws, regulations, and other legal instruments as they are published in the official sources in PDF (Portable Document Format) format. In addition, countries are asked to provide an English language summary of the law along with terms taken from the GLIN thesaurus. English is currently the common language used to search the database; however, GLIN is currently undergoing a major technical upgrade that will expand the languages available for searching GLIN. Initially, French, Spanish, and Portuguese will be added with the goal of eventually adding the languages of all GLIN member countries.

As we have noted, facilitating access to the laws of the world is a primary goal of GLIN. Accessibility in the digital environment has several facets.

GLIN Access

- **Overall appearance**
- **Functionality**
- **Who can access.**

Global Legal Information Network

In general, any online information system should be “user friendly.” For legal information systems, this may pose a particular challenge; however, GLIN aims to support the research and reference needs of the layperson as well as someone with legal training. The current GLIN system is based on technology from the mid-1990s. A major system upgrade is underway that is designed to improve the overall look of the system. The objective is a system that is easy and intuitive for most users.

Search technology has changed significantly since GLIN was unveiled. Accessibility for those who are frequent users of information databases and the Internet means having various search capabilities. The GLIN upgrade intends to offer the sophisticated user a range of options while retaining the simple search capabilities that someone who is not trained in law or legal information systems.

Finally, accessibility is frequently linked to access policies. Currently there are two levels of access into GLIN. Anyone with Internet access can enter GLIN as a guest. Anyone who has Internet connections can access GLIN as a guest and they can view all the summaries of laws and citations to laws. At the present, access to the full text of laws is restricted to GLIN members. Initially, when GLIN was a fledgling network in the early 1990s, this policy was an incentive for countries to join GLIN. In exchange for contributing its laws, a government would have access to those contributed by other participating countries. Soon, however, we discovered that there were in fact legal impediments in some cases to opening access more widely. Some countries have either copyrighted their legal material or entered into exclusive publication and/or distribution agreements with quasi-governmental or private publishers. These agreements that appear to be growing in the digital world of legal information actually preclude us from openly distributing everything in GLIN.

At the Law Library of Congress we strongly believe that governments have a duty to publish and make law freely available. Citizens should have easy access to the laws that govern them. In a discussion at the last meeting of Directors of the GLIN Network, the members discussed the issue of open access at some length. The Law Library is encouraging those countries whose laws are in the public domain to use GLIN to disseminate their laws to everyone. GLIN will continue to restrict access to those laws that are not in the public domain.



The diagram is a yellow rectangular box with a purple title and three bulleted items. The title is 'GLIN National Station' in a large, bold, purple font, with '(Roles)' in a smaller, bold, purple font below it. The three bulleted items are: 'National Director (Manager)', 'Legal Analyst (Professional)', and 'Information Technology Specialist (Professional)'. Each item has a small purple square bullet point. At the bottom right of the box, in a small, grey font, is the text 'Global Legal Information Network'.

GLIN National Station
(Roles)

- **National Director**
(Manager)
- **Legal Analyst**
(Professional)
- **Information Technology Specialist**
(Professional).

Global Legal Information Network

What does it require for a country to participate in GLIN? Nations that are interested in participating in GLIN are required to establish a “GLIN team” to carry out three functions. First, there is a Director. This individual represents his or her country in the Network. They participate in annual meetings of Directors and make decisions on the operation and organization of GLIN. The Director also oversees the daily operations of the GLIN station in his/her country. He should be familiar with the work that is done by the legal analyst and technical specialist. The legal analyst is responsible for creating the summaries of laws and assigning the appropriate index terms. We believe that attorneys trained in the laws of a particular country are in the best position to understand these laws and to convey the most important information

in summary form. A technical specialist is required to configure equipment and to transfer files to the centralized database. It should be noted here that GLIN has adopted readily available hardware and software so that technology would not serve as a barrier to participation.

The GLIN team members are all required to attend a one-week training session at the Law Library of Congress. The training sessions serve multiple purposes. Fundamentally, they serve to insure that all GLIN teams are trained in the standards, techniques and procedures used by GLIN. Legal analysts learn how to compose summaries and spend time practicing the assignment of thesaurus terms to various records. Technical specialists scan and transfer documents according to GLIN procedures. Directors observe the work of their team members and learn about Network policies and governance. In addition, since training sessions often include representatives from other countries, the sessions serve as a reminder that the trainees are now part of a larger “network” of colleagues that are working toward a common purpose.

GLIN Membership	
<u>Contributing Information</u>	
1. Argentina	14. Nicaragua
2. Brazil	15. OAS
3. Costa Rica	16. Panama
4. Ecuador	17. Paraguay
5. El Salvador	18. Romania
6. Guatemala	19. Russia
7. Honduras	20. Taiwan
8. Korea, Rep. of	21. Tunisia
9. Kuwait	22. Ukraine
10. Lithuania	23. United Nations
11. Mauritania	24. United States
12. MERCOSUR	25. Uruguay.
13. Mexico	

Global Legal Information Network

In part, the origins of GLIN have influenced the current membership. There are presently 25 contributing member nations and international institutions. In addition to the countries that are themselves contributing information, the Law Library of Congress continues to input the laws for all other Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries. One of the most frequently asked questions about GLIN is why the membership list looks as it currently does. Very simply, until recently, the Law Library has not had the resources to actively promote GLIN to many countries. Consequently, the membership grew in a somewhat *ad hoc* fashion. We responded to countries that came to us asking to join, but we were not able to go out and recruit additional members. Our goal, through presentations such as this, and through promotional trips to specific countries, is to expand the membership to include countries in Western Europe, as well as additional countries in Asia and Africa. We are delighted that many countries in the Western Hemisphere now participate, but an invitation is extended to those who are not yet members.

GLIN Benefits

- **Research and analysis support**
- **Identification of inconsistencies**
- **Samples of legislation**
- **The Network as a resource.**

Global Legal Information Network

Because GLIN engages the countries themselves in organizing, analyzing, and making accessible their own laws, GLIN provides a number of benefits to countries that participate. We would like to provide you some specific examples of how GLIN member nations have used GLIN. First, the information that is available through GLIN can be used as the basis for providing research and analysis services to legislatures and other government agencies. In Uruguay, for example, the initial 3-person GLIN team has expanded to a 12-person Division of Legislative Studies that provides a range of research and reference products for the legislature. This group prepared a compilation of labor and social security laws from information gathered in GLIN and provided additional analysis in support of the legislature.

Some countries have also used GLIN to identify inconsistencies in their laws. Old laws are not dropped from GLIN but rather are linked to more recent laws that amend or repeal them; hence, it is possible to look over the complete chronological sequence of laws on a particular subject to see if laws remain that should have been amended or if there is inconsistent language in laws on the same subject. Mauritania used GLIN in this way to examine its environmental laws. Guatemala also used GLIN for this purpose in a process of “de-legislation.”

It is also common for members to use GLIN to find examples of legislation on particular topics from a variety of countries. In Ecuador, the Attorney General approached the GLIN station and asked for examples of financial laws from different countries because he was interested in reforming Ecuador’s financial laws as part of a broader anti-corruption program.

Finally, an important point is that the GLIN Network is more than just a network of computers. Participation in GLIN admits a country to a network of people that can serve as a very important information resource. For example, if a GLIN member finds a law from a different country and the text is in an unfamiliar language, the GLIN team in that country can provide assistance to help understand the law. If any member cannot find a law in GLIN, we encourage them to contact the Law Library of Congress, itself a member of GLIN, so that we may assist by drawing upon the largest collection of legal materials in the world.

Future GLIN

- **Functionality**
- **User Interface**
- **Thesaurus**
- **Multilingual Capabilities**
- **Access Policy.**

Global Legal Information Network

With over 50 years of experience in organizing, processing, storing and providing access to laws from around the world, the Law Library of Congress was the natural center to initiate the development of GLIN. The current GLIN system has provided many lessons, but no major technical upgrades to the system have been implemented since 1998, an eternity in the digital age. Before the end of this year, a new version of GLIN will be unveiled that will further the goal of providing timely access to the laws of the world. The system will offer a range of new functions that will enable users to search GLIN in a variety of ways and in a variety of languages. The overall look of the system will be updated, and GLIN members will be encouraged to create customized welcome pages in their own languages to attract users in their nations. The hope is that countries will use GLIN as a tool to disseminate their own laws to their own citizens. The thesaurus, which to date has been fundamentally in English will be available in French, Spanish, and Portuguese, with the goal of eventually adding the languages of all GLIN member countries. The system will contain the full range of legal materials--both primary sources (statutes and judicial decisions) and secondary sources (legal writings, legislative records).

Finally, the new GLIN will enable the implementation of an access policy that will open as much information as possible to the public. Free and open access to the laws of the world supports a variety of programs designed to foster the rule of law—the rule of words over weapons—mankind’s best hope for peace and justice.