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Culture, knowledge and power

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to Oslo.

Never before have I been in the company of so many librarians. It makes me rather nervous... In fact, I was half-expecting to be greeted with a very loud "Shhhhh!"

As I was preparing for this momentous event, I thought it would be a good idea to read up on some of the things that have been said about you, the guardians of the written word. Well – I found quite a variety of references. "Absurdly knowledgeable" and "secret masters of the world" were my favourites (and yes, I did find them on the IFLA webpage...).

Over the last few days, there has been much written in the Oslo newspapers about libraries and librarians, both because you are in town, and because the new National Library has just been reopened. These events provide a good opportunity to reflect on the role of libraries in society. The library is an institution that has become such a staple in our lives that we tend to take it for granted. I am glad you are here to remind us just how important it is.

Most of us in the developed world have unlimited access to books and information. It is all there waiting for us – as easily accessible as a carton of milk or a loaf of bread. We may not

use the library every week or even every month, but it is there when we need it – for information, help or entertainment.

Here in Norway, even the smallest school has a library. Even the most remote village has access to books – brought by enterprising librarians by boat, by bus, or, not so long ago, by reindeer. Information is there – available to all of us, regardless of income or address.

Nearly everyone has childhood memories of trips to the library. The joy of discovering new stories, the sense of wonder that knowledge is infinite, the excitement of finding the corner of the library that contains books on topics you never discussed with your parents... Libraries were part of growing up, part of our education, part of who we turned out to be.

Norwegian libraries have 37 million different books on offer, available through school libraries, public libraries and research libraries. Europeans say that visiting the library is second on their list of favourite cultural activities. American reference librarians answer more than seven million questions every month. (Ref: *Dagens Næringsliv*, 13.8.05).

Libraries are a vital part of our lives.

People place enormous trust in their library and their librarian. When we have asked everybody around us, when we have “googled” for hours, when we have all but given up on finding the answer – we call the librarian. And more often than not, he or she comes up with what we need.

An amusing story from last weekend’s newspaper illustrates this well (DN, 13.8.).

A woman called the music department at the National Library and asked the librarian to figure out the age of her treasured sewing box. The librarian was doubtful whether this was possible. The woman would not take no for an answer. She proceeded to play – over the phone – a lively tune that streamed from the box when the top was opened. The librarian recognised a popular tune that dated from a certain period – and was able to deduce the age of the box. The woman was pleased – but probably expected no less. “Secret masters of the world” indeed!

We know that the library plays a crucial role in society – as a carrier of knowledge and culture, and as a source of information that is accessible to all.

And, as Thomas Jefferson said:

“Information is the currency of democracy.”

We know that a library can bring a community closer together. We know that libraries provide education for all, regardless of social status or ability to pay. We know that libraries can be a force for development and social change. This makes libraries and librarians a particularly valuable part of society in the developing world.

In countries where not many people have access to books at home, where education remains a privilege for the few, where sources of unbiased information are hard to find, a library can offer undreamed-of opportunities for personal development, greater understanding, and ultimately empowerment.

Bob McKee, Chief Executive of the UK Library Association put it even stronger:'

“Libraries have a role ...in bridging (the) divide between the advantaged and the disadvantaged in our local and our global communities.... (A) library can promote peace not just through the knowledge it provides – but also through the principles and processes it embodies.”

The importance of access to information cannot be overestimated. Only when people have knowledge, will they be able to make the decisions and find the opportunities that can lead to a better life. Only when people have the confidence that independent knowledge brings, will they truly be able to influence their own future, the future of their children – and the future of their country.

Someone once said that
“A library is an arsenal of liberty.”

Only when people can freely arm themselves from this arsenal, can a country truly prosper.

POVERTY AND THE MDGs

But as we all know, this is far from the case today. The world is grossly unfair. So many millions have so little and are so desperate.

Let me give you a few examples. In the world today:

- 1.2 billion people live on less than a dollar a day.
- A child dies from poverty, hunger and disease every three seconds.
- More than 100 million children do not receive basic education. Millions more drop out, or never learn to read.
- More than 850 million people cannot read or write. Most of them are women. Almost all of them live in the developing world.

These people are powerless to find solutions. They are trapped in poverty. They suffer in silence.

Addressing these issues is a joint task for all of us and the greatest challenge for our generation.

We want a world where these figures are no longer true, a world that is fair, with dignity for all, with more equal distribution of power and influence.

And this requires action – global action.

The Millennium Development Goals - what are they?

At the turn of the millennium, world leaders decided on exactly that – action. Every world leader from every country made a commitment to fighting poverty. They agreed on the UN Millennium Development Goals, and they decided on a road map to reach them.

To halve the proportion of people living in extreme poverty, to make it possible for more children to survive their fifth birthday, and for more mothers to survive giving birth. To

promote gender equality and make sure that all children, girls and boys alike, have access to primary education. To reverse the pandemics of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. And to ensure that growth is based on environmental sustainability. These are the first seven goals.

The main responsibility will always lie with the governments of the developing countries.

But they cannot achieve this alone. The rich countries must also play their part. In Monterrey in 2002, we all agreed on a global partnership, a global bargain: Millennium Goal number eight. We, the rich countries of the world, committed ourselves to developing a more open trade and investment system. We committed ourselves to dealing comprehensively with developing countries' debt problems, and to providing access to affordable essential drugs. We committed ourselves to increasing and improving development assistance. And the poor countries committed themselves to improving their performance.

World poverty is now at the top of the agenda wherever and whenever decision-makers meet. This is new. This is unprecedented. For the first time, the Millennium Development Goals, the commitments from a series of UN conferences, have become the basis for discussions and decisions among the "high and mighty" of the world. The goals are at the core of the work of the World Bank. The IMF, the WTO and other economic powerhouses have also signed on. They are frequently cited by heads of state, not least the G8 leaders. For the first time, the interests of the poor and underprivileged are being given the attention they deserve.

This gives us grounds for optimism.

The Millennium Development Goals - status

So – how are we doing? Are we getting closer to reaching the goals?

Yes – and no.

The first goal – halving extreme poverty and hunger – will probably be met. This is the good news. The bad news is that there are dramatic differences between regions and countries.

While China, India and Thailand are making terrific progress, sub-Saharan Africa and the least developed countries are lagging behind. Almost half of the population of sub-Saharan Africa live in extreme poverty.

In 1990, there were almost five times as many people living in extreme poverty in Asia as in Africa. Unless there is a change for the better, 2015 will see a dramatic shift. There will be more people living in extreme poverty – in absolute numbers – in Africa than in Asia.

We cannot afford to leave any region, any country, behind.

Asia demonstrates that the Millennium Goals can be reached. But we must make sure that sub-Saharan Africa and the least developed countries follow suit.

EDUCATION

There is much to be done – by politicians, like me, and by educators, like you.

Education is the best foundation for a better future – for every individual, every family, every country.

Education is our most effective weapon in the fight against poverty.

Education means better health and more job opportunities. Education means stronger political influence, greater tolerance and better understanding of different views.

We refer to the “education vaccine” as a means of eradicating many of the ills of the developing countries. Nothing else offers such an opportunity, such promise or such power. This is why support for education is a key part of Norwegian development assistance.

Charlotte Brontë wrote,

“Prejudices...are most difficult to eradicate from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilised by education; they grow there, firm as weeds among rocks.”

Looking around the world today, we see that the weeds of prejudice are growing profusely. Fundamentalist beliefs lead to strife and suffering. Lack of education makes people easy prey for those who seek unquestioning followers. Poverty makes people desperate. Poverty makes the world a dangerous place – for all of us.

The only way to fight back is through education.

Education is the best tool for weeding out prejudice and intolerance. Education fosters respect for other people’s values and religions. Education must be our first priority: in Norway and in every other corner of the world.

We must use our faculty of reason to dispel the myths and untangle the misunderstandings that give rise to our fear of “the other”. The spirit of brotherhood compels us to try to understand our fellow men.

In the words of George Eliot,

“The responsibility of tolerance lies with those who have the wider vision.”

Prejudice is a monster that must be slain. We must learn to accept and care about our neighbours, regardless of their religion, race or lifestyle. We must learn to face the situation in the world with courage and compassion. We must provide education for change, education for a better and more compassionate future.

CULTURE – A VOICE, A WAY TO POWER

In this process, we must also remember the importance of creating channels of communication where everybody can be heard – regardless of their station in life.

A few years ago, the World Bank published *Consultations with the Poor* – a study of 60 000 people in 60 countries. They were asked what they missed most, what they wanted more than anything. You might expect this to be money – but no. What these people missed most was a *voice*, the opportunity to be represented, the ability to convey their thoughts and concerns to the people in authority. They wanted to express themselves, they wanted to train the spotlight on the inequalities that surrounded them, they wanted to elect their own representatives and gain access to the decision-making process.

In our fight against poverty and inequality, we need to keep this in mind.

People need the means to participate, ways to express themselves, power to be heard.

This involves more than just having access to democratic institutions; it also requires a well-functioning cultural sector, where libraries play a unique role. We know that the developing world suffers from a lack of access – to free media, to the Internet, to books. The contrast with the developed world is stark. Let's look at the case of Uganda.

- In Uganda, only 0.2 per cent of the population use public libraries. In the UK, the figure is 57 per cent
- In Finland, there is a public library for every 2 800 people. In Uganda, each library has to serve one million people.
- Public libraries in the UK have 2.2 books per person. In Ugandan libraries, 240 people have to share every book .

We must do better in bridging the gap between the developed and the developing world. Libraries can be the gateway to a better life. They can provide the opportunity to hear other people's voices, and to develop a strong and clear voice of one's own.

Free and unbiased media, a lively arts environment, cultural co-operation at a wide variety of levels can all help to give poor people the voice they seek, the opportunity to be heard where it matters.

Today the Norwegian government launched a new strategy for cultural co-operation with developing countries. There are several reasons for this:

- Cultural factors are crucial in all kinds of development - in rich and in poor countries alike. A vibrant cultural sector and thriving libraries are essential elements of a well-functioning society.
- A diverse cultural life is a sign of a healthy society. It is not only a means, but a goal in itself.
- Cultural projects can draw attention to issues of particular interest to us, such as democracy and peace building, human rights and the fight against poverty.
- Culture sometimes expresses what government cannot – or will not. It can highlight sensitive issues, and provide an indirect way to a direct result.

Norway co-operates with a number of developing countries, and we are convinced that cultural contact across borders can give poor countries, and individual cultures within them, a unique opportunity to express who they are, what they want, and how they can play a part in the international arena.

They need to build up their own self-confidence, consolidate their cultures and teach us in the developed world that they are more, much more than the suffering and strife we tend to associate with them. They need to show us that they have much to offer and much to say. And we need to listen carefully. Because if we are to succeed in our joint tasks of fighting poverty and promoting peace, we need information that flows both ways. Your work is crucial here.

DIGITAL DIVIDE – ACCESS, ABILITY & POWER

Over the past few years, there has been a global awakening. We are recognising the importance of information for the developing world. At their 2001 Summit, the G8 launched

an Action Plan on information and communications technology in development. In December 2003, the first World Summit on the Information Society was held in Geneva, and in November this year, the second World Summit will take place in Tunisia. Norway is a strong supporter of this process, which focuses on the “digital divide” between rich and poor countries.

The value of information is indisputable, but attempting to quantify it is difficult. There are too many factors that can only be measured in terms of optimism, confidence, influence and power.

The growth of new technologies like mobile phones, solar power, modems and the Internet offers new hope for the developing world. We know it is technologically possible to communicate instantly from just about everywhere. We know it is possible to offer services seamlessly across borders. We know that a librarian in a remote village in the rain forest could be reading up on your conference over the Internet as we speak. It is all possible. And very promising for the developing world.

Because if we can bridge the digital divide, if we can work together to take advantage of the new technologies, I believe our generation has a unique opportunity to level the field. There is still a long way to go. For example, many of us who live in the developed world have more than one phone each, whereas the World Bank estimates that there are about three phones per 100 people in developing countries. Almost every Norwegian between the ages of five and eighty-five uses the Internet, but most people in the developing world have never laid hands on a computer. I believe that if we can change this, we will over time be able to cure many of the ills that plague poor countries. And I believe the developing countries will catch up fast.

Norway is supporting a number of initiatives to improve the situation for the “info-poor”, who are in danger of being bypassed in the new information age. Let me give you a few examples:

- ELDIS is a free, web based internet tool, a “library” for development information. It is run by the Institute of Development Studies in Brighton in the UK. It stores, structures and quality checks information, and makes information on topics such as food security, gender, trade policy, HIV/AIDS and education readily available.
- BRIDGE is another IDS programme, which enables information to be shared between women’s organisations in the North and South.
- The Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information, or PERI, is a pilot project for capacity building within the research sector in developing countries. It provides access to international research and IT education, and focuses on making research from developing countries more widely available.
- The UNIFEM project *Bridging the Gender Digital Divide in the Information Society* is part of the WSIS process.
- Efforts to improve information systems and raise standards of librarianship in universities – both South and North.
- Support for free media – because access to technology is not enough. Free access to information is even more important.

I believe that fighting poverty will remain the greatest challenge for this generation. But I also believe we are making progress, and that now, maybe for the first time in history, we have not only the means, but also the political will throughout the world, to fulfil the promises the poor have heard so many times.

I would like to share some encouraging figures from some of Norway's partner countries:

In *Mozambique*, the share of the population living in absolute poverty has dropped by 15 per cent from the mid-1990s to 2003.

In *Uganda*, the number of children in school doubled between 1999 and 2003, and the number who can read and write more than doubled in the same period. At the outset only a minority of girls could read and write, in 2003 almost two thirds of them could. This is impressive. I suspect more than a few librarians may have been involved.

In Tanzania, basic education is now free for everybody. The proportion of children who attend school has increased from 59 per cent in 2000 to 91 per cent in 2004.

Worldwide figures also show encouraging trends. Recent World Bank statistics showed a 20 per cent reduction in global poverty in the period 1984-2001.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I believe poverty can be eliminated. I believe all people can and should be given the tools to create a better future for themselves, their families, and their societies. And I believe – no, I know – that the work done by librarians all over the world plays a vital role in the fight against poverty.

I recently read about the many inventive ways in which books and information are brought to people.

Bicycles are used in Indonesia, and donkeys in Turkey. Camels in Kenya, and elephants in India. Elephants with Internet access, no less!

And in Tanzania, the country where I grew up, I am told there are now “donkey cart libraries”, where solar power provides internet hook-up for even the remotest village.

The work of librarians helps to bring freedom, equality and opportunities to people all over the world. Their efforts contribute to the fight against poverty and help to build more just and peaceful societies. In the library, people find not only books and information, but hope, confidence and ultimately – power. This is indeed a place where, as Richard Armour has written, people

**“...lower their voices
And raise their minds.”**

We cannot win the fight against poverty without our libraries and our librarians.

Thank you.