

	<p style="text-align: right;">Date : 02/08/2007</p> <p>Libraries for the future: progress, development and partnerships</p> <p>Alex Byrne President, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions</p>
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Libraries for the future: progress, development and partnerships

Opening address, World Library and Information Congress: 73rd IFLA Council and General Conference, Durban, South Africa.

Alex Byrne

President, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions

Members of the National Committee for the World Library and Information Congress

Presidents and directors of library associations

Distinguished guests

Delegates, colleagues and friends

It is a tremendous honour and pleasure to participate in the opening of the World Library and Information Congress 2007 here in Durban, Republic of South Africa. In coming to Durban, in this 80th anniversary year of our Federation and at the 10th

anniversary of the establishment of LIASA, we are very conscious of the key role that this city and its people have played in the recognition of human rights for all. We are very grateful to the National Organising Committee and the South African professional community which proposed that we should come to South Africa and has worked so hard to bring us together in this Congress. Our wholehearted commitment to professional dialogue, to learning about the history and culture of this ancient land, and to interacting with South African and other colleagues will justify the faith and dedication of the organisers. We are especially grateful to the Government of the Republic of South Africa, which has supported this Congress so strongly and, in particular, for its provision of very generous funding to assist participation by delegates from South Africa and other parts of this continent. In doing this, the Government has showed both its commitment to the creation of a global information society and its recognition of the importance of libraries in the realisation of fair and just information society for all.

In coming to Durban, in this 80th anniversary year of our Federation and at the 10th anniversary of the establishment of LIASA, we are very conscious of the key role that this city and its people have played in the recognition of human rights for all. Mohandas Gandhi landed here in May 1891 to represent a countryman in a lawsuit before returning to India. He was given a first class ticket to travel to Pretoria but, when the train arrived at Pietermaritzburg, he was told to move to a third class van. He refused and was thrown off the train by a constable. Reflecting on that experience as he shivered on a railway platform, and enduring many other

racist insults, inspired Gandhi to campaign over the next 20 years for civil rights for Indians in South Africa and especially for the recognition of Indian marriages and for the removal of the poll tax. He began to formulate his philosophy of *Satyagraha* – “the Force which is born of Truth and Love or Non-violence”¹ – which he applied to that struggle and later to the independence movement in India after his return to his home country. The tremendous impact of the Mahatma’s example inspired a worldwide struggle for the rights of all, including, as we are aware, the civil rights movement in the United States led by Dr Martin Luther King and the fight against apartheid here in South Africa, led by Nelson Mandela and his comrades.

That golden thread of justice inspires us in our work to preserve and make available the records of the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of people through time.

Martin Luther King said²: "Make a career of humanity... commit yourself to the noble struggle... you will make a greater person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in." And we might add that “you will make a greater profession of your occupation”. It is for that reason that IFLA’s values celebrate the right to know and that we advocate intellectual freedom so vigorously.

Drawing inspiration from the extraordinary commitment to making a new start in this country, we say that we stand for libraries for truth and reconciliation, for libraries and information services that will help all to discover the truth for themselves and thereby bring peoples together. This is a goal that transcends time and place, drawing on the long history of our profession to state without hesitation

that we are the keepers of the record, that we enable the most qualified researcher, the hesitant student, the aspiring entrepreneur, the caring parent and the youngest child to discover for themselves and to experience the joy of learning and sharing information, ideas and opinions.

Just as the struggle to achieve human rights for all inspired the reconstruction of our societies, the quest to express our professional values in all aspects of our practice leads us to reconsider the very modes of practice and the underlying constructs of our profession. It instigates a tremendous process of professional renewal which will make the library and information profession more relevant than ever to the peoples of the world. It will equip us to truly engage with the grand task of making the world a finer place for all. This is more than ever important as we contribute to the development of the information society. Our advocacy and our professional guidance are vital to ensuring that the emerging information society will truly aspire to be for all and to be fair and just for all.

At times, this takes us into contentious situations, into troubled waters. As I said in June when I was speaking in Cuba:

We must continue to fight against the persecution and punishment of those who express their opinions and of those who seek to provide access to information, however repugnant we might find their opinions or information. We are particularly concerned of course about actions against librarians and libraries but should stand shoulder to shoulder with the defenders of freedom, wherever they may live and whatever their professions.

Standing together with our colleagues to promote and defend our values is a profound responsibility which expresses our solidarity throughout the profession and across the globe. But the moral basis of our profession, our core commitment to access to information, is also expressed through our day-to-day practice and in the development of our capabilities to manage, preserve and deliver information. It is for those capabilities that we are valued – for our ability to develop the systems, structures and human capacities to support information access for all. We must not lose sight of the distinct identity of our profession but nor should we be complacent about it. We must continue to reconsider and reinvent our profession in response to changing circumstances and needs while always remembering our higher goals.

I have been delighted to note a particular example of professional solidarity which has been demonstrated during the preparations for this World Library and Information Congress in Durban. Led by an extraordinary colleague, Sharon Karasmanis, who works at the Borchardt Library, Latrobe University in Australia, a national initiative 'Libs for Africa' has raised sufficient funds to support the attendance of sixteen African colleagues at this Congress. The money was raised through simple events – lunches, morning teas, raffles – and supported by many Australian library workers who will never attend an IFLA Congress but were inspired to show their solidarity for colleagues on another continent. The initiative has been much appreciated by all including, of course, the recipients of the grants, one of whom wrote of the "golden opportunity to meet with

colleagues from different parts of the world to share experience, knowledge and thoughts". On behalf of us all, I applaud the achievement of my Australian colleagues. But we should take this further. Knowing how Australians like to compete, at least in sport, you will not be surprised to hear me challenge our colleagues in North America to exceed the Australian record by assisting Latin American Librarians to attend the Quebec Congress next year, and challenge our European colleagues to help those from the Mediterranean region go to Milan in 2009.

In addition to that grassroots initiative, we have had strong support from within South Africa, including that from the Department of Arts and Culture to which I have already referred, and from the National Research Foundation and SABINET, which together with other organisations have joined LIASA in providing grants to enable African librarians to participate in the Congress. IFLA's own new-established foundation, the Stichting IFLA Foundation, has reinvested some of the proceeds of previous congresses by adding to the funding available for grants. Many other organisations from many countries have assisted. They are too numerous to acknowledge here, but will be recognised in the course of the Congress.

These are excellent examples of partnership, which has been my Presidential theme. When we work together across the profession and join with other like-minded organisations, we become much stronger and more effective. I will give other examples in my report to Council on Thursday but here wish only to draw attention to the partnerships which enable us to implement IFLA's new language policy which was approved by the Governing Board in December 2006. In that policy we have adopted seven official languages – Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Russian and Spanish – through which IFLA endeavours to provide official

communications, abstracts for articles published in *IFLA Journal*, translations of conference papers and simultaneous interpretation of conference sessions. This is only feasible with substantial help of the various language communities in our profession and particularly the volunteer translators and interpreters who make such a vital contribution to our capacity to work internationally, not least at the annual World Library and Information Congress. I commend their work and offer them my deepest thanks.

The theme of this Congress, ‘Libraries for the future: Progress, Development and Partnerships’, encapsulates many of our priorities. It speaks of our need to work together, in partnership, to achieve our goals including the development of our libraries and information services and our associations. Through them, we contribute to the development of our nations and of a fair and just world, a world in which we can progress towards an information society for all. In working towards that aim, we will truly create libraries for the future and demonstrate that the seeds of a just and fair future lie, at least in part, in libraries, in our important work. During this week in Durban, our professional dialogue and interaction with colleagues from many countries, including those across this wide continent of Africa, will take us further towards achieving our shared aims for IFLA and its members, for the profession and for society.

Enjoy and make the most of this World Library and Information Congress 2007 in Durban, South Africa!

Notes and References

1. Gandhi, M.K. *The essential Gandhi: his life, work, and ideas*. Ed. Louis Fischer. New York: Vintage Books, 1983.
2. King, M.L. Speech on 18 April 1959. Washington, DC, USA.

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