IFLA: looking to the future

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The interpretations presented here do not necessarily represent the official position of IFLA.

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to describe the current status of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and outline the challenges it faces in the current environment.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is descriptive, based on published literature, internal sources and participant observation.

Findings – IFLA, an international non-governmental organisation founded in 1927, has a history of steady growth, which repeatedly necessitated structural adjustments and innovations. The pace of change accelerated in the 1970s, when IFLA reached out to the developing countries to become a truly international organisation. As IFLA entered the new millennium the rapid changes taking place in the environment of libraries gave rise to much rethinking of its structures, procedures and practices, including its membership, aims and values, governance and structure, core programmes, annual conference and advocacy. A re-conceptualisation of IFLA based on three pillars – society, profession, and members – is proving useful in rethinking IFLA's future.

Originality/value – An up-to-date account of IFLA, of potential value to IFLA members and institutions considering membership.

Introduction

Librarians have a long history of idealistic internationalism (see **Harrison, 1989**) and practical international co-operation (**Havard-Williams, 1972**). For almost 80 years, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has served the library profession as a forum for exchanging ideas, promoting best practice and

furthering international professional co-operation. As the information or knowledge society dawns, there are new demands on IFLA. Rapid developments in information and communications technologies are bringing about tectonic shifts in the economics of information and in the relationships between the players in the information value chain. Freed by worldwide connectivity and the internet from the constraints of physical carriers and linear flow, information has become ubiquitous, indispensable, dematerialised and yet inaccessible to many. The enclosing of the information commons (**Bollier, 2003**) and disintermediation threaten to undercut the very basis of the library as an institution. Librarians sharing the global village have ever more in common, and ever more urgent reasons to join forces. But questions arise about the future role of IFLA. Can IFLA continue to serve the library profession in these changing circumstances? If so, how? What changes or adaptations are required of IFLA?

Origins and development

IFLA was founded in 1927 in Edinburgh, at the 50th anniversary celebrations of the (British) Library Association, where a resolution was adopted to establish an International Library and Bibliographical Committee. Its constitution was adopted two years later, at a meeting in Rome, when the name International Federation of Library Associations was adopted. IFLA was established as an independent international non-governmental body. In its early years it was closely linked to the League of Nations, the forerunner of the United Nations Organisation (**Breycha-Vauthier, 1977**). The early pioneers of IFLA were inspired by ideals of worldwide peace and co-operation (**Wieder, 1977**; **Wieder and Campbell, 2002**).

Until the Second World War IFLA was mainly a European organisation with a strong North American presence (**Mohrhardt, 1977**). Although membership expanded, largely to other developed countries, it was not until the 1970s that special efforts were made to expand the membership to developing countries. In 1971 the first of a series of pre-session seminars were started for librarians from developing countries (**Jordan, 1977**; **Lim, 1990**). This breakthrough was followed in 1976 by the establishment of a Division of Regional Activities, intended to promote and coordinate professional work in particular developing regions. To this end three regional sections were established, for Africa, Asia and Oceania, and Latin America and the Caribbean (**Parker, 1977**).

Initially formed as a federation of library associations, IFLA in 1976 opened its membership to institutions. The admission of institutional members led to a change of IFLA's name to International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. However, the acronym IFLA was retained. A category of non-voting personal affiliates was also created to accommodate individuals. Further member categories were added later.

For many years IFLA was run by devoted volunteers who worked part time. IFLA's first long-serving Secretary General, Dr Tietse Pieter Sevensma, was the chief librarian of the

League of Nations Library in Geneva. In 1962 the first full-time secretary, Anthony Thompson, was appointed and the following year IFLA's headquarters moved to Thompson's home in Sevenoaks, England (**Breycha-Vauthier, 1977**). In 1971 permanent headquarters were established in The Hague, The Netherlands and IFLA was incorporated in accordance with Dutch law. Today IFLA is still based in The Hague and is housed in premises provided free of charge by the Royal Library, the national library of The Netherlands.

The history of IFLA since 1971 is one of continuing and accelerating development and growth. As IFLA grew, its statutes were repeatedly amended to accommodate an ever-expanding range of activities and to keep effective decision making and democratic governance in balance. The 1970s and 1980s saw an increasing professionalisation of the Federation, exemplified by the launching of a series of medium term programmes, the creation of regional offices in three developing regions, the publication of the *IFLA Journal* (1974+), the holding, in addition to the ever-growing annual General Council meetings, of numerous professional meetings, and the appearance of a range of publications to promote best practice in the profession.

Of particular significance to the international leadership role of IFLA was the development of a number of core programmes: Universal Bibliographic Control (UBC), Universal Availability of Publications (UAP), Preservation and Conservation (PAC), the Advancement of Librarianship in the Third World Programme (ALP), and Universal Dataflow and Telecommunications (UDT), where IFLA's web site, IFLANET, was established in 1993. Most of these were hosted and supported by various national libraries. Growth continued through the 1990s as IFLA developed a more professionally managed secretariat. The late 1990s saw the emergence of new core activities: Copyright and Other Legal Matters (CLM) and Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) (**Campbell, 2002**).

Challenges in the new millennium

As IFLA entered the new millennium the rapid changes taking place in its environment gave rise to much questioning of accepted structures and procedures. Aspects under critical scrutiny included membership, aims and values, governance and structure, the core programmes, the annual conference, and advocacy.

Membership

IFLA has a diverse membership in a number of membership categories. **Table I** shows the number of members per category as on 1 August 2005.

Although on paper the number of members appears quite modest, large numbers of individual librarians and information workers are represented by the institutional

members, many of them with staff establishments of several hundred persons, and especially by the national association members. The largest of these, the American Library Association (ALA), has over 64,000 members (**ALA, 2005**). In the UK the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) has over 22,000 (**CILIP, 2004**). IFLA's estimate that it represents at least half a million library and information workers worldwide is therefore not unrealistic

Is IFLA's membership worldwide? On the same date IFLA had members in one category or another in 150 countries. This is 41 short of the number of countries that are members of the United Nations (**United Nations, 2005**). IFLA's membership is heavily skewed in favour of developed countries such as the USA(295 members), Germany (85), the UK (76) and Canada (70). At the other end of the spectrum there are many countries in which IFLA has only one member. These include countries such as Andorra, Cambodia, Gabon, Haiti, Lesotho, Micronesia, Nepal, Oman, Suriname, and Uzbekistan. Lack of funds, currency restrictions and a shortage of LIS professionals are among the factors that make it difficult for associations and institutions in smaller and poorer countries to join IFLA and remain in good standing. Achieving a fully representative international membership remains a challenge for IFLA. By means of a sliding scale of fees, conference attendance grants, a policy of alternating conference venues between developed and developing countries and other forms of assistance IFLA attempts not only to promote membership in these countries, but also to enable members there to participate more fully in its activities. In partnership with its Management of Library Associations Section (MLAS), IFLA has launched the Global Library Association Development (GLAD) programme to encourage participation in IFLA by library associations in developing regions through partnerships between participating and sponsoring national library associations (**IFLA, 2005a**).

Aims and values

In 2000 a thorough revision of IFLA's Statutes was adopted. The new Statutes, implemented in 2001, attempted to simplify governance structures and make them more democratic and open to innovation. The new statutes also reflect attempts to sharpen IFLA's focus. Three objectives (Art. 5.2) are included in IFLA's mission statement (Art. 5):

1. to promote high standards of delivery of library and information services;
2. to encourage widespread understanding of the value and importance of high quality library and information services (LIS) in the private, public and voluntary sectors; and
3. to represent the interests of its Members throughout the world (**IFLA, 2003**).

These objectives relate not only to the interests of IFLA's members, but also to the profession as a whole and to the role of libraries and information services in society. The Statutes further enshrine a set of core values:

- the endorsement of the principles of freedom of access to information, ideas and works of imagination and freedom of expression embodied in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- the belief that people, communities and organisations need universal and equitable access to information, ideas and works of imagination for their social, educational, cultural, democratic and economic well-being;
- the conviction that delivery of high quality library and information services helps guarantee that access; and
- the commitment to enable all members of the Federation to engage in, and benefit from, its activities without regard to citizenship, disability, ethnic origin, gender, geographical location, language, political philosophy, race or religion (**IFLA, 2005b**).

These core values underpin IFLA's professional work as well as its advocacy for freedom of access to information and freedom of expression, for free access to the information commons and equitable relationships in respect of intellectual property, and for the central role of libraries in the information/knowledge society.

Governance and structure

The IFLA Statutes of 2000 continue to support the well-established principle that IFLA should be structured in such a way as to make possible maximum participation by its members and to address their diverse needs and interests.

IFLA's highest body is its General Council, consisting of all voting members, which meets annually at the World Library and Information Congress. The voting members elect the President-elect (who becomes the President) and the Governing Board, who are responsible for overseeing the execution of IFLA's policies and strategies and the management of its assets and resources.

The engine room of IFLA is constituted by its sections, each run by an elected standing committee. All IFLA members belong to one or more Sections. IFLA members themselves decide to which sections they wish to adhere. Sections concern themselves with types of libraries (e.g. University Libraries), processes and services (e.g. Document Delivery and Resource Sharing), materials (e.g. Geography and Maps Libraries), clients (e.g. Libraries for the Blind), management themes (e.g. Information Technology), education and research themes (e.g. Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning) and regions (e.g. Africa). Standing Committees conduct professional projects such as the compilation of guidelines, standards and other publications, organise training sessions and workshops, and arrange programmes at the annual conference. Linked to the sections are less formal units. In 2002 IFLA had 37 sections. There were also ten Round Tables and six Discussion Groups (**Campbell, 2002**).

In recent years the growing diversity of IFLA's activities and the response of its members to new professional trends and themes have led to a growth in the number of its Sections and other professional units. The steady increase in the number of such units puts pressure both on the headquarters staff that has to provide their administrative infrastructure, and on the programme of the annual conference. In an attempt to simplify the structure, it was decided in 2002 to abolish the round tables and impose a maximum term on discussion groups. The existing round tables were elevated to Sections, which numbered 47 at the end of 2004. However, despite the importance of the matters with which they have dealt, a number of them have proved to be non-viable as Sections and in March 2005 it was decided to close down a number of them. This gave rise to some dissatisfaction as well as to suggestions that a more flexible mechanism should be developed to accommodate the full life-cycle of a professional theme or interest, from its initial appearance as a hot topic, which if it does not disappear as a passing interest, can develop into an initially informal and later more formal grouping, and ultimately decline and merge with another group or disappear. The last phase can be the most difficult. It is generally easier to create structures than to abolish them.

The sections are grouped into eight divisions:

1. I – General Research Libraries;
2. II – Special Libraries;
3. III – Libraries serving the General Public;
4. IV – Bibliographic Control;
5. V – Collections and Services;
6. VI – Management and Technology;
7. VII – Education and Research; and
8. VIII – Regional Activities.

Each division has a coordinating board made up of representatives of its sections. Each coordinating board has a representative on the professional committee. These representatives, together with ten directly elected members, the president and president-elect, make up the governing board. Thus there is a balance between members elected at large and members who have worked their way up through section standing committees and the division coordinating boards. For both categories, however, a two-year term applies. Given the size and complexity of IFLA two years is a short term in which to learn the ropes and make a contribution.

IFLA Governing Board members serve a maximum of two consecutive two-year terms. Every two years IFLA now elects a president-elect, who serves as such for two years before taking on the two-year presidential term, which cannot be extended. An important innovation was the adoption of postal balloting in elections to the Governing Board and presidency, thereby making the process more accessible to IFLA members in developing countries, who are not able to attend IFLA conferences in as great numbers as their colleagues from wealthier countries. This change possibly contributed to the election in 2001 of Kay Raseroka, who in 2003 became IFLA first President from a non-Western country.

In August 2005 the first full cycle of the new system was completed, and a decision was taken to review the Statutes with a view to fine-tuning them.

From core programmes to core activities

Financial pressures and management changes in several of the libraries hosting core programmes forced a rethinking of these programmes. This was probably not before time as a number of the programmes had continued for some years and perhaps achieved as much as they could. Consequently, UAP and UDT were shut down. IFLA Headquarters took over UDT's responsibility for IFLANET, which since 2002 has been hosted by the Institut de l'Information Scientifique et Technique (INIST), in Nancy, France. UBCIM was replaced by a new IFLA-CDNL Alliance for Bibliographic Standards (ICABS), a partnership between IFLA and the Conference of Directors of National Libraries (CDNL), while the National Library of Portugal took on the UNIMARC activities. ALP was renamed Action for Development through Libraries, but retains its acronym and remains at the University Library of Uppsala, Sweden, while PAC remains at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (**Campbell, 2002**; **Campos, 2005**; **Gömpel, 2005**). Together with CLM and FAIFE, the older programmes ALP, and PAC, and the replacements of UBCIM, ICABS and UNIMARC, are now known as Core Activities, the new designation implying less permanence and a greater openness to change than before.

From IFLA Conference to World Library and Information Congress

Already in 1969, when IFLA's General Council attracted 470 participants, there was concern about the increased participation, its organisational and financial implications, and possible negative effects on the professional substance of the meetings (**Wieder, 1977**). In recent years the IFLA Conference, which since 2002 has been known as the World Library and Information Congress (WLIC), has attracted between 3,000 and almost 5,000 participants in various categories, including accompanying persons, volunteers, interpreters, etc. Arranging an annual congress of this magnitude, including a programme in which a large number of sections and other units have to be accommodated, is a major undertaking. From time to time it is argued that the congress is too demanding of IFLA's resources. Is too much emphasis placed on the congress? Although IFLA is perhaps best known for its annual conference, IFLA is "not merely a conference". It is equally true that the WLIC is not merely a conference. It provides the arena in which much of the business of IFLA and especially its sections is conducted. Without the annual WLIC, it is difficult to see how the approximately 900 volunteer members of standing committees and other groups could come together annually. If they did not, IFLA's work would suffer and IFLA would lose the considerable momentum it has built up.

Nevertheless, IFLA has responded to the concerns by reducing the length of the congress and by appointing a professional conference organiser (PCO) for the five-year period 2005-2009, and as from 2007 IFLA, through its PCO, will be fully responsible for the

organisation of the congress. This is intended to ensure greater consistency, enhance long-term planning and provide a more reliable income stream. It will also relieve the burden on the professional associations in the host countries and make it possible to hold congresses in countries where the profession is not yet well established and highly organised. In spite of these changes, calls continue to be made for reducing the frequency of the congress, for example biennial instead of annual, for the programme to be more focussed (**IFLA, 2002**), and for its length to be further reduced, whilst at the same time attendances show an upward trend and there is continuing pressure to fit more and more programmes and activities into the available time.

Advocacy

Librarians and information workers face rapid and far-reaching change in their technological, social, political and legal environment. Some interpret these changes as spelling the end of libraries. Librarians need to respond firmly to such diverse threats as the enclosure of the information commons and continuing assaults on intellectual freedom in many countries. The library is the most widespread and generally accessible public agency that can provide the general population with free or affordable access to networked digital resources. As such it is a key agency of the information society, and it is essential that it should be recognised as such. All this calls for concerted advocacy.

IFLA is today the undisputed body representing the broad LIS profession and sector, and is so recognised by bodies such as Unesco, the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and as a participant in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). IFLA confers regularly with the International Publishers Association through the IFLA/IPA Steering Group. Together with the International Council on Archives (ICA), the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), IFLA is a founding member of the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS). The mission of ICBS is to collect and disseminate information and to co-ordinate action in situations when cultural property is at risk (**Shimmon, 2004**).

IFLA is able, better than any other organisation, to speak for libraries internationally. The implication is that IFLA has to play a leading role in international advocacy work. Through CLM, IFLA is able to advocate for an equitable international intellectual property dispensation. Through FAIFE, IFLA is able to represent the profession when intellectual freedom is threatened. Through intensive participation in the WSIS process IFLA has been able to position libraries as key agencies in the Information Society (**Byrne *et al.*, 2004**). However, there is no room for complacency. Constant vigilance is required. Only through networking and partnerships can all the bases be covered, but resource-sharing too requires the investment of resources. Given the expectations of its membership and its limited resources, IFLA has to reassess its priorities and if need be cut back on other activities in order to invest in effective advocacy.

Three pillars

If the underlying question is what the role of IFLA should be in today's challenging and rapidly evolving environment, there are many sub-questions. How can IFLA continue to remain hospitable to a range of interests, serving and unifying a diverse constituency, while at the same time becoming more streamlined, focussed and responsive? Has IFLA outgrown its origins as a federation of associations or, on the contrary, should it refocus on its relationship with its association members? How can IFLA, which is excessively dependent on membership fees, diversify its income base? How can IFLA best use its limited and far-flung resources to respond to emergencies such as the Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina?

Some answers are suggested by the "Three Pillars" model, put forward by Kay Raseroka, then president, and Alex Byrne, then president-elect, at the end of 2004 (**Raseroka and Byrne, 2004**).

The Society Pillar is concerned with IFLA's contribution to society as a whole. It has to do with the role and impact of libraries and information services in society and the contextual factors that determine their operational environment. In particular it is concerned with advocacy.

The Profession Pillar is concerned with the issues covered by IFLA's professional sections and divisions, to which professional librarians and information workers world-wide voluntarily contribute their time and expertise in determining professional innovation and best practice. Their work is complemented by IFLA's core activities. This work is at the core of our professional practice and helps libraries and information services to fulfil their purposes and to shape responses to the needs of clients in a rapidly changing global environment.

The Members Pillar is concerned with services to IFLA's members. These include member benefits and services, such as free publications and significant discounts on other IFLA publications and conference attendance, and participation in IFLA's governance. Membership of IFLA should be efficiently managed, and IFLA must communicate effectively with its members not only to ensure that, regardless of where they are, they can share fully in the benefits of membership, but also to project a positive and attractive image.

This essentially quite simple conceptualisation of IFLA has proved to be useful in current strategising and budget development processes and has also provided a point of departure for a business process review that is currently being undertaken at IFLA Headquarters. It has potential, at least as an analytical tool if not as a structuring principle, for use in the review and redesign of IFLA's communication practices, information technology, organisation structure, and future congress programmes. It lends weight to the argument that advocacy should receive a fair share of IFLA's resources.

One thing is certain: looking back in 2027, when IFLA will celebrate its centenary, the Three Pillars will long have been overtaken by new models and concepts. IFLA has been reinventing and renewing itself for eight decades and can confidently be expected to continue doing so.

Table I IFLA membership categories and numbers

Membership category	Number of members
Institutional members	1,104
Personal affiliates	368
National association members	143
Student affiliates	40
International association members	17
Other member categories	17
Subtotal	1,689
Corporate partners	27
Bodies with consultative status	16
Total	1,732

Table I.
IFLA membership categories and numbers

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