

# CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON INTERNATIONAL LIBRARIANSHIP

PETER JOHAN LOR

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Secretary General: International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions and Extraordinary Professor: University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa  
peterjlor@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

Over several decades various monographs have appeared that include the words “international librarianship” in their titles, but most of these are compilations of chapters by various authors, describing library conditions in particular foreign countries or regions. Most have done little to systematise or develop a conceptual framework for international librarianship. In this article an attempt is made to fill this gap. Varying uses of the word “international” and the relationship between international and comparative librarianship are examined, before the motivations or rationales of writers on international librarianship are categorised: exoticism, philanthropy, extending national influence, promoting international understanding, internationalism, cooperation, innovation, advancing knowledge, and self-understanding. The possibilities of librarians in different countries learning from one another are critically examined. It is proposed that international librarianship, as a field of study or an academic sub-discipline, refers to, in a narrower sense, the systematic study of similarities and differences between countries, and their causes; international relations and influences; and international cooperation and the role of international organisations, insofar as these relate to libraries and librarianship. Themes that should be covered in a syllabus or basic text on international librarianship are listed.

## KEYWORDS

Librarianship, International, Comparative

## 1 INTRODUCTION

A search in bibliographic databases using the search term “International librarianship” yields a fair number of monographs that include these words in their titles. In a review of Carroll and Harvey’s *International librarianship: cooperation and collaboration* (Carroll & Harvey 2001), WV Jackson (Jackson 2003) observed:

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Although the literature of comparative and international librarianship has not flourished in recent years, one type of work seems to recur periodically. This is the anthology of articles... by various authors: such compilations generally include pieces both geographical (that is, about a country or region) or topical (for example, about cooperation, buildings and so on) in nature (Jackson 2003:364).

Jackson's observation is apt. Most books on "international librarianship" are compilations of chapters by various authors, describing library conditions in particular foreign countries or regions, along the lines of the following (real) examples:

- The standardisation of Chinese bibliography
- University libraries in West Africa
- Public libraries in Nigeria
- Library and information services in Bermuda
- Indonesian university libraries and their reference services

In these volumes we also find chapters on international library cooperation, the work of international agencies in the field of librarianship, and relations between countries in the field of librarianship. More real examples:

- Colonialism and the development of libraries and archives in French Indochina
- IFLA and international librarianship
- Anglo-Nordic library relationships
- International cultural exchange through libraries
- International influences in Thailand

The second group of examples comes closer to what this author understands by international librarianship, as will be discussed shortly, but what has generally been missing is an attempt to systematise or develop a conceptual framework for international librarianship. In most cases the introduction or preface to the compilation is extremely brief and provides only the most cursory attempt at defining what is meant by "international librarianship". For example, Miles Jackson's impressive volume of well over 600 pages offers no attempt to provide a systematic introduction or conceptual framework (Jackson 1981). The 1985 *Festschrift* for William J Welsh (Price & Price, 1985) is an example of a book with the words "international librarianship" in its title, but which does not say anything about international librarianship as such. Presumably the title, *International librarianship today and tomorrow*, was chosen because Welsh, at that time Deputy Librarian of Congress, was well-known in international circles and participated actively in forums such as IFLA and the Conference of Directors of National Libraries. The preface of the book by Carroll and Harvey (2001) referred to earlier provides only a sketchy account of what is meant by international librarianship (see quotation below).

The most recent monograph on international librarianship, *International librarianship: a basic guide to global knowledge access* by RD Steuart (2007) departs somewhat from the pattern in that it has a single author and does not consist of contributions describing library phenomena in various countries. However, except for a brief introductory chapter and a chapter on information policies, the bulk of the book is essentially a directory of international and national library associations, organisations, national libraries and bibliographic services.

There is a striking exception to the general trend in books on international librarianship, the book *World librarianship: a comparative study*, by Richard Krzys and Gaston Litton (1983). This is an ambitious attempt to create a “world librarianship”, defined as “the abstraction referring to the status of the profession in all parts of the world during a specified period of time” and its scientific investigation, which they call “world study in librarianship”. Under this they subsume “international library science” and “comparative library science” (Krzys & Litton 1982:3). Their work does not appear to have attracted followers; certainly the terminology they attempted to introduce has not been adopted by later writers. Generally, the field remains dominated by anthologies.

In the author’s view the term “international librarianship” should not be used in the titles of books merely containing a collection of chapters about libraries in various countries. If a book purports to be about international librarianship, a more coherent and structured approach to the subject is needed. As a critical response to a number of major monographs and anthologies in the field, this article explores the nature and scope of international librarianship. It examines the motivations of authors who have contributed to the field, explores the notion of librarians “learning” from how librarianship is practised in other countries, and concludes with an outline of the scope of international librarianship as it could be covered in a comprehensive monograph. For the purposes of this article “librarianship” is understood broadly to encompass the study of processes, systems and theories relating not only to libraries, but also other allied information agencies.

## **2 IF YOU ARE NOT AMERICAN YOU MUST BE INTERNATIONAL**

The way “international librarianship” is understood may be related to the different ways in which the word “international” is used in American and British English. In the USA the word “international” is commonly used to mean “from another country”. Thus an “international student” or an “international visitor” is in most cases merely a student or visitor from another country. In British English they would be referred to as *foreign* students or *foreign* visitors, and the expression “international scholar” would be used to refer to only a foreign scholar who enjoys international renown.

This analysis suggests that the multilateral or multinational (many to many) connotation of the word “international” is lost in American English and replaced by a one to many connotation (American to other). What is not American is “international”. This is illustrated by Stephen K. Bailey’s 1966 definition of “international education” as “... non-American substance of school and university curriculums in the United States”, cited by Carroll (1970:175). It is debatable whether the semantic shift of “international” from British to American English can be explained by the parochialism or isolationism so often attributed to Americans. It is more likely (and charitable) to assume that “international” is simply used in the USA as a euphemism to avoid labelling other people as “foreign”. Such euphemisms often end up influencing the concepts they refer to.

Keresztesi (1981) argues that a distinction should be made between bilateral and international relationships. Bilateral relations (involving two countries) are not international (involving more than two countries). They should therefore be excluded from the scope of international librarianship. This distinction, while technically defensible, is not adopted here. For the purposes of this article the word “international” is used to refer to library relations or phenomena involving two or more countries.

### **3 INTERNATIONAL AND COMPARATIVE LIBRARIANSHIP**

Louis Shores (1966:204) defined comparative librarianship as follows:

...the study and comparison of library theory and practice in all of the different countries of the world for the purpose of broadening and deepening our understanding of professional problems and solutions.

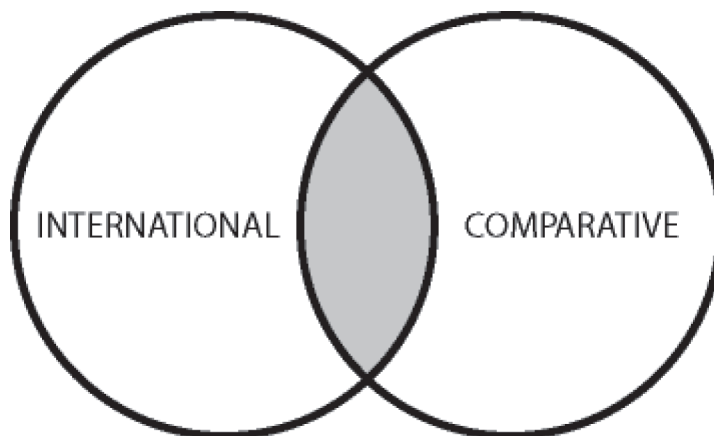
In this context comparative librarianship is clearly international. Comparisons within countries (between cities, states or library types, for example) are excluded. During the 1970s and 1980s a number of authors contributed to the discussion on the relationship between comparative and international librarianship or library science. For Harvey (1973) comparative librarianship is essentially or predominantly international in that it involves comparisons across countries. In this respect international librarianship has followed the lead of the older fields of comparative law and education. He divided the field into three subfields, “foreign library science” (covering descriptions of library phenomena in a country or countries other than that of the author), “international institutional library science” (dealing with library matters of international bodies) and “comparative library science” (as a systematic comparison of a specific library topic in two or more countries).

Classifying comparative librarianship as a branch of international librarianship may look like a neat solution, but obscures the relationship (cf. Keresztesi 1981). In her article on comparative librarianship in the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, Collings (1971) states that it is “a scholarly method of investigation”. Parker (1974) also describes the comparative methodology as a tool, and the most appropriate tool for international librarianship.

In the preface to his 1981 book, referred to earlier, Miles Jackson distinguishes international librarianship from comparative librarianship:

...the terms “international” and “comparative librarianship” are regarded as having different meanings but both are of importance in understanding world librarianship. International librarianship is limited strictly to those activities that involve librarianship and all its aspects across national boundaries. It would thereby exclude comparative analysis, but include such activities as exchange of librarians, books, ideas, and the study of library systems in different countries. On the other hand, comparative librarianship should lean on the tradition of comparative studies found in other fields such as political, government and legal studies (Jackson 1981:xxxi).

Relating international librarianship to “activities that involve librarianship and all its aspects across national boundaries” is a good beginning, but the exclusion of comparative analysis unsatisfactory. Following Collings (1971) and Parker (1974) “international” should refer to the field and “comparative” to the methodology. Thus we can use the two concepts as overlapping and not mutually exclusive, as in the following Venn diagram:



This suggests that comparative librarianship may be conducted at both national and international levels. Although comparative librarianship is predominantly concerned with the comparison of library systems or conditions between countries, such comparisons can also be undertaken within countries, for example, a comparison of public library development in different federal states or provinces, or a comparison of the values of school, public and university librarians in the same country. The diagram also suggests that international librarianship may or may not have a comparative dimension.

## **4 FROM EXOTICISM TO SELF-UNDERSTANDING**

Comparison is a step up from mere description. As emphasised by Harvey (1973) it is a major step that requires a discouragingly elaborate methodology. However, not all work in international librarianship has lofty scientific aims. This section reflects on the motives or rationales of those who have written about international librarianship, and how these relate to the results achieved. In this connection it is worth noting that an earlier classification of “pragmatic goals” was suggested by Collings (1971). The present author suggests that authors who have contributed to what is broadly known as international librarianship have been variously motivated by the following, or combinations thereof:

- exoticism
- philanthropy
- national influence
- international understanding
- internationalism
- cooperation
- innovation
- advancing knowledge
- self-understanding

### **4.1 EXOTICISM**

The first cluster of motives can be placed under the label of exoticism. This includes curiosity about how things are done in foreign countries, the love of travel and adventure, and the prestige that comes from having been where others have not. Writings motivated by exoticism tend to be anecdotal and descriptive.

### **4.2 PHILANTHROPY**

The second motive is philanthropy, that is, love of our fellow humans. Here we find accounts by librarians and students who have travelled to other countries to assist in library development. Accounts of their experiences also tend to be anecdotal and descriptive, with occasional analytical and evaluative elements.

### 4.3 NATIONAL INFLUENCE

This third motive is often interwoven with the previous motive and is a cultural or economic influence through foreign aid for library development. The work of the British Council, the United States Department of State (formerly carried out by the United States Information Services, or USIS) or Germany's Goethe Institut in providing library and information services and in stimulating and assisting the development of libraries in many countries, comes to mind. Such activities are not entirely altruistic, but only serve to extend or strengthen the influence of the country providing the assistance. Accounts in this genre tend to be descriptive or promotional, but insufficiently evaluative.

In a detailed analysis of the goals of international librarianship in US library schools, Frances Laverne Carroll (1970:43-55) identified two major goals and four minor goals. Two of the minor goals suggest that exerting national influence is an underlying motive for the study of librarianship in other countries:

- to advance the objectives of US foreign policy (including the combating of communism and the strengthening of relations with the allies of the USA)
- to promote international understanding and appreciation of the United States

Carroll's analysis highlights some of the ambivalence inherent in international studies, particularly at the height of the Cold War. Some goals are clearly subordinated to national policy interests. Others too, may not be as altruistic or idealistic as they sound.

### 4.4 INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

In the analysis referred to above, the first of Carroll's (1981:43-55) major goals was:

- International understanding. This has three dimensions:
  - attitude (an affective dimension concerned with feelings of friendliness and willingness to cooperate)
  - knowledge (a cognitive dimension concerned with understanding the behaviour of other people)
  - strategic knowledge (another cognitive dimension concerned with understanding the intentions of others with a view to decision making, e.g. in foreign policy)

The promotion of positive attitudes, friendship and cooperativeness in the library sphere, and understanding the behaviour of librarians in other countries are laudable motives, although the last of the three dimensions of "international understanding" suggests that exerting national influence is also a motive in seeking international understanding.

#### 4.5 INTERNATIONALISM

In the context of international librarianship, and especially in the context of international library cooperation, internationalism frequently features as a shared value. This appears to be an idealistic motive: librarians engaged in international cooperation are described by Harrison (1989:xv) as “citizens of the world with a strong faith that what they are supporting is really worthwhile and that both short-term and long-term good will come from it”. In the USA internationalism has had a strong protagonist in Frances Laverne Carroll, who devoted much research to the internationalisation of library and information science education. Internationalisation is defined by Carroll and Harvey (1987:x) as “the process by which a nationalistic library school topic, an entire curriculum, or an entire school is changed into one with a significant and varied international thrust, the process whereby it is permeated with international policies, viewpoints, ideas and facts”.

#### 4.6 COOPERATION

Librarians have a long and honourable tradition of cooperation. Peter Havard-Williams went so far as to make cooperation the central theme of international librarianship. He wrote: “I define international librarianship as cooperative activity in the field of librarianship done for the benefit of the individual librarian in the whole of the world, and done frequently by the likes of you and me” (Havard-Williams 1972:170). International cooperation in respect of document supply, bibliographic standards, preservation and other technical areas will undoubtedly remain an important motivation. But given rapid developments in information and communications technologies and the accompanying phenomena of globalisation and disintermediation, efficient cooperation among librarians worldwide is needed for the profession to participate effectively in the global forums. These are forums such as the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO), the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), where far-reaching decisions are made that affect free and fair access to information resources in libraries serving the peoples of the world (cf. Schleihagen 2004).

#### 4.7 INNOVATION

A seventh motive is innovation. As K. C. Harrison (1989:xii) has put it: “...librarians with weather-eyes on professional practices in other countries have been able to adopt, adapt and apply many of these to their own library situations.” Such transplanting has occurred particularly in technical library processes. This has led to writings of a technical and evaluative nature.



It is interesting to note that the rather diffuse statement on international librarianship in the preface to Carroll and Harvey (2001:ix) suggests that innovation is a motive:

International librarianship is about the new ideas in libraries being developed in the twentieth century and often being developed and moved to another country by a librarian or a group of librarians, to make a librarian's world more global and the community in which the librarian works more understandable for local people.

A more recent statement of this motive is found in the introduction to a new column, "International perspectives on academic libraries" in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship*. The editors of the column, Philip J Calvert and Rowena Cullen, wrote:

It is hoped that this column will help broaden the journal's perspective outside North America; raise issues faced by academic librarians in the developing as well as the developed world; and identify issues that are common to all academic libraries, but to which the solutions must sometimes be modified to suit particular countries, cultures or economic environments. It should also be remembered that, although North America academic libraries are the driving force behind much innovation in the LIS field and are the source of much new thinking in the discipline, librarians in other countries have sometimes to deal with certain issues before they become critical in the United States or Canada; hence there will be times that the flow of information will travel in the other direction (Calvert & Cullen, 2001:394).

Although this statement strikes the non-North American reader as somewhat parochial if not self-satisfied, the recognition that the traffic of ideas and innovation can be a two-way process, is worth noting. The following section returns to this point.

#### 4.8 ADVANCING KNOWLEDGE

The quest for advancing knowledge includes description, analysis, classification and comparison in order to arrive at generalised statements that explain phenomena and yield greater understanding. This is the first of Carroll's two major goals:

- advancement of knowledge, which can be divided into two dimensions:
  - diffusion or transmission of existing knowledge, e.g. through primary, secondary and undergraduate education
  - discovery or production of new knowledge, including synthesis through research and scholarship (Carroll 1970:43)

Louis Shores's earlier statement of the purpose of what he calls comparative librarianship was cited as: "broadening and deepening our understanding of professional problems and solutions" (Shores 1970:204).

In his Foreword to Harrison's International librarianship (Harrison 1989), Lester Asheim (1989:vii) points to the value of

...learning-through-participation... not only through actual practice as a librarian in some other country, but also through the mutual exchange of ideas and viewpoints made possible through international associations... Both of these... provide the librarian with the opportunity to have direct contact with the practice and philosophy of library service in varying circumstances and at different levels of societal development, and from this insight, to identify and appreciate the many factors outside of librarianship itself that shape and define the nature of a library's services and its social role.

This suggests that international comparisons can provide insights that are less readily gained from the study of library conditions in a single country.

#### **4.9 SELF-UNDERSTANDING**

Asheim (1989) goes on to list a number of factors outside of librarianship that determine who uses libraries, how and why, and what barriers inhibit their use. Such factors operate everywhere, "...but somehow we can see and understand this much more clearly in a foreign setting than we can when we are looking at a phenomenon with which we feel comfortably 'at home'"(Asheim 1989:viii). What is significant about this motive is that is concerned with self-understanding, which represents considerable progress from the starting point of exoticism. This is also reflected in the last of Carroll's (1981) minor goals: "to gain perspective on one's own values and traditions". It can be said that self-understanding, achieved by seeing the self in relation to others, is the ultimate goal of travel.

### **5 LEARNING FROM ONE ANOTHER**

In the previous section a number of statements have been cited that raise interesting questions about the notion of librarians in different countries learning from one another. Miles Jackson (1981) refers briefly to LIS development in developing countries and poses some questions for researchers in international and comparative librarianship:

One such question is what can a nonindustrialised nation offer to an industrialised nation in terms of contemporary developments in librarianship? Can American librarianship learn from Nigerian librarianship? Can librarianship in Papua New Guinea learn from librarianship in Jamaica? (Jackson 1981: xxxi-xxxii)

This touches on the issue of learning taking place between developed and developing countries. Although Jackson did not mention the wholesale export of library concepts, ideologies and technologies from rich to poor countries, this is an important phenomenon in international librarianship.

## 5.1 DEVELOPING COUNTRIES LEARNING FROM DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

It seems obvious that there will be techniques, technologies and systems invented or developed in a developed country (A) that may not be known in a developing country (B), but that may fruitfully be adopted there. A typical expression of this is the visiting librarian or expert from country A, who says to colleagues in country B, “Gosh, don’t you do/have/use X? You must get it. It will solve your problems.” Of course, things are not always as simple as they seem. Apart from the fact that libraries in country B may not be able to afford innovation X, there may be various local factors that would make it difficult to implement system X successfully. There may be such a large gap between the countries, politically, culturally, economically, etc., that the advice, however well meant, is quite unrealistic. Techniques, technologies and systems are not ideologically neutral. An attempt to import X without also importing the conceptual and ideological schema and value system that underlies it in country A, may be doomed to failure. Moreover, country B may not want to import country A’s ideologies and values.

When one thinks of librarians in one country learning from their colleagues in another, technology transfer comes to mind first. Techniques, technology and systems could cover a wide range of know-how ranging from the use of 3x5 inch cards to RFID. But the import does not always have to be so tangible. Other imports could include library legislation, the system of legal deposit, the organisation of an interlibrary lending system, the organisation structure of the country’s public library system, or the system of training librarians and information workers, with the hierarchy and names of qualifications awarded. In these cases the cultural and ideological content of the innovation is generally more obvious than in the case of techniques and technology.

Sometimes it is as interesting to see what is not learned. For example, the US has long influenced the development of the library profession in South Africa. During the apartheid years the South African library community continued to adopt American technical innovations such as online searching, integrated library management systems, and electronic book detection systems, but significant elements in the white leadership of the profession filtered out professional values such as freedom of expression and equal rights for all library clients (Lor 1996).

## 5.2 DEVELOPING COUNTRIES LEARNING FROM ONE ANOTHER

Jackson’s example of librarianship in Papua New Guinea learning from librarianship in Jamaica is appropriate here. This is not so much a question of political correctness, but one of commonalities. Two developing countries might have a great deal in

common. In the case of Papua New Guinea and Jamaica, both are islands, they have a tropical climate, they underwent a period of British or British-influenced colonial rule, are members of the (British) Commonwealth and use English as the official language. But there are also significant differences, for example in their ethnic composition and heritage, number of languages spoken, duration of British colonial rule, per capita GDP, literacy rate, etc. Intuitively one feels that, to learn from one another, it might be wiser to pair Jamaica with Trinidad and Tobago and Papua New Guinea with Guiana. Underlying such a judgement are certain assumptions about what countries should have in common to make possible sensible comparisons, mutual learning or technology transfer. Therefore a major task of a systematic international librarianship would be to surface and test the assumptions. This would require identifying the factors that influence library development in different countries, evaluating their impact, and understanding why they impact on libraries the way they do.

### **5.3 DEVELOPED COUNTRIES LEARNING FROM DEVELOPING COUNTRIES**

Finally, there is Jackson's example of what American librarianship can learn from Nigerian librarianship. An obvious response is: how fortunate American librarians are. International librarians can impart a sense of perspective, it should not form the basis for smugness or complacency. Rather, it may enable some of us to at least exercise our profession with greater awareness and appreciation for what is so easily taken for granted. This underlines the importance of understanding what one observes in other countries.

Amongst other things that American librarians can learn from Nigerian librarians are how the latter serve small rural communities, illiterate users, and how they deal with oral history, oral traditions and indigenous knowledge.

A greater understanding of the situation in a developing country would help librarians and others in developed countries who want to do good through aid programmes, staff exchanges, book donations and the like, to do so more sensibly and with greater sensitivity to the needs of the beneficiaries. In the foreword referred to earlier, Lester Asheim (1989:viii) also refers to the value of international librarianship in preventing errors in assisting developing countries:

...all-too-often the actual attempts of the more advanced countries to assist the developing ones in the establishment or development of library services are marked by incredible errors and miscalculations, arising out of the failure to take these outside influences into account.

He cites the gift of a number of bookmobiles to a country with a shortage of fuel and poor road network. Such donations are made out of "...ignorance born of the belief

that whatever works for us will work for everyone” (Asheim 1989:viii). Librarians from developing countries can tell many horror stories of books donated with good intentions but that were useless. A better and more sensitive understanding of needs and circumstances in the recipient countries could go a long way in avoiding such errors.

## 6 THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF INTERNATIONAL LIBRARIANSHIP

At this point the reader is entitled to ask what the author understands by international librarianship. It is suggested that this term has two meanings. First, it refers loosely to the international activities categorised above, regardless of how systematically or scientifically they are pursued or described. Secondly, international librarianship as a field of study or an academic sub-discipline, refers to, in a narrower sense:

- the systematic study of similarities and differences between countries and their causes;
- international relations and influences; and
- international cooperation and the role of international organisations

In relation to libraries and librarianship, broadly construed, “international”, as suggested earlier, is read as referring to two or more countries. A comprehensive and systematic treatment would require that all three of these themes be covered in a syllabus or basic text on international librarianship, which might include the following material:

- terminology, definitions, scope and conceptual structures of international librarianship
- sources: journals and other sources in the field\*
- values and orientations: internationalism, social responsibility, third world solidarity; American, British, European and Soviet approaches
- research method: international surveys, case studies, etc.; assumptions and validity of comparisons
- international comparative studies, regional studies, and country comparisons: national and regional non-library factors; explanatory theories (e.g. influence of Calvinism, climate, orality & literacy)
- international diffusion of library theories and techniques: technology transfer; adoption of innovations, adaptation, rejection
- international influences: Transatlantic, Anglo-American, Continental European, colonial, post-colonial

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\* Journals that regularly contain articles relevant to international librarianship include *COMLA newsletter*, *Focus on international and comparative librarianship*, *IFLA journal*, *Information development*, *International information and library review*, *Library times international*, and *Libri*. Mention should also be made of the *Unesco bulletin for libraries*, long deceased. *Library and information science abstracts (LISA)* and *Library literature* are indispensable tools for literature searching in international librarianship. A significant proportion of the literature is not yet on the web.

- role of cultural and information agencies (USIS, British Council etc.) and philanthropic foundations (Carnegie Corporation, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Soros, etc.); book donations (Ranfurly, Sabre, etc.)
- international non-governmental organisations in LIS: IFLA, FID, regional library associations, specialised international associations
- UNESCO and other intergovernmental organisations; international attempts to promote national library and information policies (UNISIST, NATIS, etc.); literacy, reading and book development policies
- international cooperation in library and information services: international interlending and UAP, bibliographic control and UBC, preservation, international advocacy, etc.
- development aid to libraries in the emerging and developing countries; role of development agencies active in LIS-related projects (Danida, Sida, IDRC, etc.); development assumptions and concepts; evolution of development efforts
- international information relations: North-South, South-North and South-South power relations and information flows; digital divide; intellectual property issues, WIPO, WTO, GATS etc.; barriers to expression and access; WSIS.

## 7 CONCLUSION

For a discipline to develop, it is necessary to move beyond anecdotal and descriptive contributions to those that serve explanation and understanding. We need to develop a more coherent conceptual framework for our research and to find appropriate methodologies. We should explore whether we can draw on comparative studies in disciplines such as education and political science, to help us in this endeavour.

People become involved in international librarianship (in the loose sense) for different reasons. As in all international relations, the practice of international librarianship involves a mixture of good intentions, ignorance and self-interest. The task of the discipline or sub-discipline as it is researched and taught (international librarianship in the narrow sense), should be to reinforce the good intentions, dispel the ignorance, and expose the self-interest.

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