

A Report

Prepared for the IFLA Council Meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark 1997

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- I. **Introduction** -- caife_e.htm#int --
 - II. **Principles of access to information and freedom of expression** -- caife_e.htm#prin --
 - III. **Illustrative examples of problem areas** -- caife_e.htm#ill --
 - IV. **Proposals for strategic action** -- caife_e.htm#pro --
 - V. **Mechanism for action** -- caife_e.htm#mec --
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I. Introduction -- --

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has had the subject of 'Access to Information and Freedom of Expression' on its agenda in various forms now for several years although has not as yet formulated a policy on this nor set up any mechanism to look at it in detail.

Prior to the Istanbul Conference in 1995 the President had planned to set up a more formal procedure to remedy this and Council expressed its clear support as a result of passing a resolution at the 1995 meeting where it confirmed its commitment to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as stated by the 55th IFLA General Conference in 1989.

Concern was expressed about increasing infringement on free expression and the free flow of information in many parts of the world and the resultant limitations on the ability of libraries and librarians to serve the needs and interests of their users.

The establishment of a 'Committee on Access to Information and Freedom of Expression' (CAIFE) by the President after Istanbul was welcomed by members and it was charged with producing a report to be presented to Council at its meeting in Copenhagen in 1997. The Committee has consisted of representatives from 32 countries across the world.

It has been accepted both by the Executive Board and by CAIFE in its more detailed deliberations from the very beginning that this topic, despite concerns from all parts of the world, has limited universality in its expression of the necessary actions that should be taken to overcome problem areas nor indeed in the actuality of the problems themselves. It was also accepted that there are many other international and national organisations concerned with issues relating to access to information and freedom of expression so IFLA must focus on those issues which relate to libraries and their ability to serve their users.

An outline of the principles of access to information and freedom of expression are given in Section II together with illustrative examples of problem areas in Section III. This is followed by proposals for strategic action in Section IV and a possible mechanism for action in Section V.

As Marianna Tax Choldin put it in her presentation in Beijing we are just 'beginning a conversation.'

II. Principles of Access to information and Freedom of Expression -- --

In order to promote the spread of knowledge, education and culture to all nations throughout the world it is essential that all forms of information should be allowed to flow freely. Not only will such access to information contribute to international understanding but will also enable diversity of opinions to be recognised and respected and the mutual enrichment of cultures to be enhanced.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) fully supports the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto in emphasising the need for both legislation and adequate financial support for libraries from both national, state and local governments.

All people should be able to use libraries freely and effectively to pursue lifelong learning, independent decision making

and cultural and economic development.

IFLA affirms these principles and the following actions that are necessary to comply with them and stresses that Librarians and Library Associations themselves also have a primary responsibility to endorse and advance them.

Actions

- Libraries should be adequately funded to be able to provide the information, staff and other resources which support lifelong learning, independent decision making and cultural and economic development.
- Librarians have a professional responsibility to present in the libraries under their control all perspectives on both current and historical issues: collections and services should not be subject to any form of ideological, political, racial, linguistic or religious censorship.
- Library Associations and Libraries should challenge any form of censorship which inhibits fulfilment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.
- A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, gender, race, religion, nationality, social or economic status, or views.
- Libraries should respect personal privacy, both in the use of information and in the handling and storage of personal data.

III Illustrative Examples of Problem Areas -- --

There are many areas of concern that could be identified and the following are illustrative of them. It is however not intended in this document to develop them or to attempt to suggest ways of dealing with them in detail. They may in the future however be suitable topics for more careful and extensive consideration together with adequate guidelines for action when a common platform has been established.

The range of actions that result in restrictions on access to information and barriers to free expression that are of concern to IFLA can be roughly categorised into three types.

1. National situations

The most extreme cases occur where censorship is practised on a state level in nations that by legislative means restrict free expression in political, ethnic, religious or minority situations where it is in conflict with the 'official' policy thus openly violating human rights.

Although most countries have adopted one or more treaties on human rights (in particular the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights) they may well argue that there would be a resultant conflict with their laws and regulations that may result for example in problems of national security.

2. Local situations

- In some cases organisations or groups of citizens may impose censorship on collection development or library services for political, religious, cultural or moral reasons without 'good cause'. This can also result in libraries or librarians renouncing their professional obligations due to fear of reaction or reprisals.
- Restrictions may occur as a result of economic and financial issues that are a result of local controls although they may well have their origin nationally.
- Library policies or practices may inhibit the use by large sections of the population for reasons of disability, low literacy, culture or poverty.

3. Commercial interests

- International or national trade restrictions blocking free flow of information.
- Companies withholding or limiting access to information for potential users due to economic reasons.
- Legal issues such as copyright and in particular where it involves prohibition of lending.

IV Proposed Strategies -- --

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions supports policies which sustain access to information and freedom of expression such as the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 19), the United

Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 19), the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (Article 9), the [European] Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Article 10), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative and other similar conventions.

IFLA will co-operate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting the abridgement of free expression and access to information. For example, IFLA will work co-operatively with the appropriate professional organisations as issues arise involving either the creators of information (authors, journalists, scientists, artists etc.) or the disseminators of information (publishers, bookstores etc.).

The focus of IFLA's formal action, however, will address issues involving libraries, librarians and library associations.

In support of this general policy outlined above there are a number of actions that IFLA should initiate, including the following:

- Request all colleagues world-wide and all library associations to adopt the new IFLA Policy Statement and to keep IFLA informed on all successes and violations of these policies.
- Work with other appropriate bodies such as the United Nations, UNESCO, the International Association of Publishers, FID, the Global Information Alliance and other relevant non-governmental organisations to adopt and implement the IFLA Policy Statement.
- Publish a report on a regular basis and present it to the IFLA General Council, on successes and violation of the rights of access to information and freedom of expression.

If IFLA is requested to address a specific incident, IFLA should seek, if possible, the advice of the national library association(s) in the country where that incident arises. It should also bring the incident to the attention of the national Human Rights Commission (or similar agency) of that particular country.

IFLA should also seek, where appropriate, independent verification from International Human Rights organisations or other appropriate bodies.

In recognition of the various differing cultures and political situations that exist across the world, IFLA's strategies will need to be tailored to meet the particular situation that arises. Such strategies would include the following:

- Providing advice, support materials and facilitative assistance to librarians, libraries or library associations as required.
- Working through existing government diplomatic channels offering facilitative assistance such as the sponsorship of fact-finding missions.
- Presenting resolutions to the appropriate governmental bodies and international agencies expressing IFLA's concern regarding specific violations.

V Mechanism for Action -- --

It is essential that a 'mechanism' is established by IFLA to address these issues. It should, in the first instance at least, take the form of a Standing Committee charged with developing IFLA policy and practices in this area. Membership should have wide geographical coverage and have representatives from many cultures and stages of development.

Its remit should include the following:

- Provision of a clearing house of information on for example, policy statements, strategies to fight violations, names of resource people and contacts who have had similar experiences.
- Using whatever means of communication as necessary, including IFLANET, to share information and possibly to document and inform of violations, being however sensitive to issues of confidentiality and the danger of reprisals.
- Acting as the link with IFLA HQ and the Executive Board (the latter would in any case have to make a final decision on what action to take in the case of major violations).
- Co-operating with other areas of IFLA activity and in particular UAP and Copyright to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort.
- Preparation of regular reports to IFLA Council.

At this stage of our understanding of what IFLA can or should do, it would be premature to establish an 'office' as such, since it would draw limited resources from other areas of activity. Whilst building up capabilities in this activity IFLA will

have to rely to a large extent on other organisations that already have personnel in place.

However, it is essential that Council should agree that this is an area of major concern for IFLA and that adequate funds should be made available when appropriate.