



WLIC 2024

Briefing Paper to the Advisory Referendum

July 2023*

*This file was amended on 12 July with updates to the “IFLA and Association Statements” section and to correct a typographical error.

This paper provides background for those taking part in IFLA’s Advisory Referendum regarding the decision to hold the IFLA World Library and Information Congress (WLIC) 2024 in Dubai. It is based on the material provided to the Governing Board for its own decision-making. It is intended to set out the full range of factors for consideration, allowing Members to arrive at their own informed decision, based on the facts.

Summary of Factors regarding the Decision to hold IFLA WLIC 2024 in Dubai, UAE

In Favour of Decision

- The call for expressions of interest (EOI) for WLIC 2024 was open to the world excluding associations from Europe. The EOI was released in June 2022.
- The bid from the Emirates Library and Information Association for Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE) as the host city was strong and met all criteria. A total of 3 responses were received, however the Dubai bid was the only viable bid meeting the criteria.
- IFLA’s new governance structure, which was introduced in 2021, specifically strengthened geographical inclusivity with the creation of new regions including the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as a new and separate region within IFLA. The objective of the new governance structure is to provide strong representation of regional priorities across IFLA’s work, strengthen advocacy for libraries, create more opportunities for regional participation, make IFLA more visible globally and implement the regional elements of IFLA’s Strategy.
- IFLA has had limited access and involvement in the MENA region to date. WLIC 2024 would offer an opportunity to increase the presence of IFLA and enhance the engagement of especially Arab women in international librarianship.
- Selecting Dubai demonstrates IFLA’s commitment to valuing diversity and inclusion with regards to ethnicity, geographical location, language, political philosophy, race, and religious beliefs.
- Recognition that religion and culture, as well as constitutions and law across MENA are interconnected in a way that is not the case in some other IFLA regions.
- The UAE is party to several international human rights treaties and human rights are included in their constitution.
- Dubai is considered a safe city, especially for women, with extremely low rates of crime.
- Although legally IFLA cannot have a session, satellite meeting or business meeting labelled "LGBTQ+" on the programme, this does not mean that members of the LGBTQ+ community will be prevented from entering the UAE.

- There are no restrictions at the conference on other human rights topics or freedom of speech.
- The Governing Board has resolved that it will work with the LGBTQ+ Users SIG on an event that may occur before the conference. Such an event may take place in a nearby location.
- Other peer organisations are holding international events and conferences in the UAE this year and in 2025 with the aim of building relationships with the region.

Against the Decision

- IFLA's core values include 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.
- According to several human rights organisations, Dubai has a poor record of implementation of human rights.
- There is a restriction on what IFLA can discuss as regards issues of the LGBTQ+ Users SIG within the conference programme. Restrictions on the conference programme was a reason for not progressing a previous conference bid for 2019. On that occasion an already existing alternative bid was supported.
- IFLA's values give prominence to freedom of access to information and freedom of expression as the basis of everyone having the right to library services.
- Librarians around the world must be free to express themselves and be supported by IFLA to do so.
- Selecting Dubai rejects IFLA's commitment to valuing diversity and inclusion with regards to gender-identity, sexual orientation, and political philosophy.
- Homosexuality is not recognised in the constitution of the UAE and therefore illegal. Potential delegates from the LGBTQ+ community may feel unsafe or anxious.
- IFLA must support the rights of the LGBTQ+ community to be part of all IFLA activities.
- Some associations have indicated their intention to not support a conference in Dubai and this may have implications for IFLA's membership and member support in the future.

Selection Process to date

Following the call for expressions of interest for WLIC 2024, three bids were received. Bids are not only about a location, conference venue and logistics, but they must also include the involvement and commitment from a national association. The bid from the Emirates Library and Information Association for Dubai, UAE, was the only one providing sufficient detail and funding assurances to progress to the stage of a site visit. The site visit took place in March 2023, with participation from a Governing Board member, the team responsible for leading conference planning from IFLA Headquarters, and a representative of our Professional Conference Organiser.

During the site visit, it was noted that the UAE includes human rights in its constitution and that the proposed national committee was 50% female. The site visit was positive in terms of the conference venue, the involvement of the national association, the Emirates Library and Information Association, and information shared on the development of libraries and the cultural agenda in the country. The value of utilising WLIC for the development of the

profession and libraries within the region was emphasised. The site visit report prepared for the Governing Board confirmed that all logistical aspects were in place for a successful conference.

At its meeting in April 2023, the Governing Board gave “in principle” approval for Dubai, UAE as the venue for WLIC 2024. The conference dates were set for 19 – 23 August 2024 and it was agreed that satellite meetings associated with WLIC 2024 would take place within the UAE to reduce costs and visa issues for delegates. The UAE has many libraries who are eager to host and support satellite meetings.

An outstanding issue was around the possibility for the **LGBTQ+ Users Special Interest Group (SIG)** to hold a session at the Conference. The goal of this SIG is to address the information needs of LGBTQ+ library patrons related to library services, programmes, or collections. The Governing Board was very aware of sensitivities, particularly at a time when libraries in some countries are under pressure regarding freedom of expression and freedom to read.

Prior to, and during the site visit, IFLA sought assurances that there would be no barriers to including the discussion of services to LGBTQ+ users in the conference. After some weeks of exchange, we received the information that the UAE is committed to strengthening the promotion of human rights and has established a National Human Rights Authority.

However, on 25 May 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that the constitution and laws of the UAE mean that Dubai is unable to provide a platform for the LGBTQ+ Users Special Interest Group to discuss topics related to equity and inclusion issues of LGBTQ+ communities in the conference. Nothing precludes other equity and inclusion topics from being discussed.

In the light of the limited time between the letter from the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Governing Board meeting, inputs were sought from a limited number of stakeholders, to whom the content of the letter was conveyed, to advise the Governing Board in its decision-making.

With the planning for 2024 already far tighter than usual, a decision on whether to hold the Congress in Dubai was therefore urgent at the Governing Board meeting held on 7-9 June 2023. The choice was between a conference in Dubai or no conference at all. IFLA staff advised that with the knowledge of current developments in the international conference industry, a fully online conference would not be viable, and this advice was taken. Given the timeline, there were no other meaningful options.

The Governing Board acknowledged that if the decision was not to go to Dubai, there would not be a WLIC in 2024.

During its meetings in The Hague, the Governing Board held a robust discussion about the merits of holding the Congress in Dubai, considering all the inputs received. The Governing Board decision was that WLIC 2024 would be held in Dubai.

The Governing Board emphasised the need to ensure that the importance of equity, diversity and inclusion is at the heart of the programme in 2024 and undertook to work with the LGBTQ+ Users SIG to explore options for an event held prior to the Congress in another location. The event would be outside of the conference and not listed in the programme.

Key considerations

Key factors considered by the Governing Board in its own decision making.

Precedents

The 2017 EOI process for the WLIC 2019 resulted in a bid that placed conditions on discussion of LGBTQ matters on the programme. Based on this restriction it was determined to support an already existing alternative bid.

In 2018, WLIC was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In November 2017, the LGBTQ+ Users SIG wrote to the Governing Board noting its concern that IFLA had selected a city in a country with restrictive policies on same-sex sexual acts. It noted the importance of reducing inequalities (as set out in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals) and argued that this made it impossible for the SIG to hold a session. Their letter was supported by 25 other Sections and SIGs.

The Governing Board responded with a letter and then published a statement on [spreading library values through global dialogue](#). The letter noted that conferences may take place in countries which have different values, but that IFLA would defend the right of sections to organise sessions freely, as a basis for engaging in discussions without restrictions. The SIG held a joint session with another SIG, but members of the LGBTQ+ SIG chose not to attend the Conference.

Geographical inclusivity

In 2021, IFLA implemented its new Statutes, governance, and organisational structure. This included the six regional divisions, reflecting a clear prioritisation of efforts to strengthen IFLA's reach and relevance across the globe, and making it clear that we see geographical inclusivity as a core IFLA value.

The objective of the new governance structure is to provide strong representation of regional priorities across IFLA's work, strengthen advocacy for libraries, create more opportunities for regional participation, make IFLA more visible globally and implement the regional elements of IFLA's Strategy.

The Middle East and North Africa region was one of these new regions. At the time, it was acknowledged that IFLA had limited engagement in the MENA region, and that librarians had limited access to IFLA conferences, for a variety of reasons including obtaining visas.

This is a region where religion, culture and law are interconnected in a way that is not the case elsewhere.

The opportunity to host WLIC in Dubai would bring WLIC to this region for the first time. Since 2016, only one WLIC has been held outside of Europe and North America.

Participation

A Conference in Dubai would allow new members of our profession to participate. By holding IFLA conferences in Europe or North America, many find it hard to participate for reasons of difficulty in obtaining visas, as well as cost. Dubai would notably not just be easier for librarians from Arabic countries to access, but also those from South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, many for the first time. Through WLIC, IFLA would be providing an opportunity for local and regional librarians, especially Arab women, to participate, share experiences, and network with international colleagues.

IFLA has seen that previous conferences in some countries have resulted not only in increased membership and participation during the conference but also in subsequent years. Within the library field in those countries, it has led to the spread of innovations and ideas to the advantage of the communities that libraries serve.

In addition, we would create an opportunity for stronger integration of Arab libraries, librarians, and librarianship into the global field. In this context, the region brings a long and rich tradition, as well as notable centres of innovation and expertise. In doing so, we would also open up possibilities for exchange and dialogue on questions where they may currently be differences in approach.

It is difficult to imagine, in the short term, another opportunity to bring the conference to this region, given the criteria and capacity required from the national association and host city.

Broader inclusivity

IFLA's values mention the *commitment to promote and value diversity and inclusion, notably as regards age, citizenship, disability, ethnicity, gender-identity, geographical location, language, political philosophy, race, religious beliefs, sex, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status, and actively pursue relevant policies and practices.*

These values make clear the need to promote and value diversity and inclusion as regards citizenship, geographical location, political philosophy, and religious belief, but also gender-identity and sexual orientation.

While security is high in Dubai, and official travel advice does offer guidance on how to travel without issues, many LGBTQ+ potential delegates may feel unsafe or anxious. There is opposition from many organisations and individuals to the decision to hold the conference in a country where this is the case, and where it is not possible for the LGBTQ+ Users SIG to hold their own session. This is seen as a departure from IFLA's own values.

The proposed conference venue in Dubai will be safe for participants. The city is recognised as being very safe. However, personal safety outside the conference venue is a matter for each individual. At any conference, IFLA cannot give guarantees as IFLA is not able to control personal behaviour. All travellers should make themselves aware of the culture and behaviours of the countries they are visiting. Travel advice for the UAE notes that public displays of affection are discouraged, regardless of gender.

Freedom of expression

IFLA's values regarding freedom of expression are based on a commitment to the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), as embodied in Article 19.

IFLA's values give prominence to the rights to freedom of access to information and freedom of expression, as the basis for the argument that everyone has a right to library services.

IFLA has in the past made freedom to organise conference sessions a condition of accepting bids. The Governing Board understood that if WLIC 2024 goes to Dubai, it will not be possible to feature references to LGBTQ+ library issues on the programme.

The debate has highlighted inherent tensions within IFLA's values. Geographic inclusion is a stated priority for IFLA however there is concern that geographic inclusion may lead to the exclusion of IFLA members who cannot exercise their freedom of expression notably for discussion of LGBTQ+ issues.

Within the conference venue, we do not anticipate any restrictions on discussion on other issues such as human rights or library matters dealing with women, religion, climate, etc.

Activities by peer organisations

Many other events are held in the United Arab Emirates and will be subject to the same constraints as IFLA.

The International Association of University Libraries ([IATUL](#)) annual conference was held in Dubai and Sharjah in March 2023. The [10th Sharjah International Library Conference](#) conducted by ALA, at the Sharjah International Book Fair and the Combined Book Exhibit will be held in November 2023.

Outside of the library field, the [International Council of Archives](#) is holding its Congress in Abu Dhabi on 9-13 October 2023. Meanwhile, the international Conference of the [International Council on Museums](#) and UMAC (ICOM International Committee for university museums and collections) will take place in Dubai in 2025.

International events in the UAE are also common – the World Urban Forum took place in Abu Dhabi in 2020, while [COP28](#) will be held in Dubai in November 2023. So too will a major UNESCO conference on education and culture in early 2024. These are events that IFLA attends.

Financial considerations

A decision not to hold the conference in Dubai would have negative financial consequences, both in terms of lost revenues to support IFLA's work, and the contractual obligation to compensate the Conference Organiser for the time they have already spent on WLIC 2024. These costs would be covered by IFLA's reserves and were not included as a factor in the decision-making process.

Either decision is likely to impact IFLA membership. Some members have already stated that they will not support attendance by delegates from their country/organisation or could leave IFLA if the Conference in Dubai is confirmed. A cancellation may also cause members from the MENA region to cancel their membership and / or restrict their IFLA activities.

The conference in Dubai may result in fewer participants from Europe, North America and Oceania but more participants from MENA, Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. This may also impact on the conference programme.

Looking into the future, there are potential funders across the MENA region ready to support activities that favour education and culture, and which are already enabling organisations in other sectors to carry out ambitious capacity building programmes. Holding the conference in Dubai would likely help build relationships, while a decision to cancel would make it unlikely that IFLA can build connections that enable such programming.

Long-term issues

The issues set out above all have a long-term dimension, but it is worth highlighting that the choice raises questions about what it means for IFLA to be an international organisation with a defined set of values. Inevitably, the pursuit of geographical inclusivity involves diversity and divergence when it comes to cultural, social, religious and other issues.

This choice also calls for discussion about the model for our conference, and the reality that the financial requirements for holding an international conference, combined with a strict application of values, may lead to a limited pool of host countries.

IFLA and Association Statements

[Dubai to host IFLA WLIC 2024](#)

IFLA

[A statement on WLIC 2024 from the IFLA President and President-elect](#)

IFLA

[Response to the announcement about IFLA WLIC 2024 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates](#)

IFLA LGBTQ+ Users SIG

[Management & Marketing SC supports the LGBTQ Users SIG response to the announcement about IFLA WLIC 2024 in Dubai from LGBTQ+ Users SIG](#)

IFLA Management and Marketing Section

[FAIFE Statement](#)

FAIFE

Asia-Oceania

[Malaysian Librarian Association Supports IFLA's Decision to Host WLIC 2024 in Dubai](#)

Librarians Association of Malaysia (PPM)

Indian Library Association (letter of support)

[ALIA Statement on the IFLA World Library and Information Congress 2024](#)

Australian Library and Information Association

Europe

["WLIC i Dubai är oacceptabelt"](#)

Helene Öberg, Svensk biblioteksörening

[DIK's stand on IFLA's 2024 Congress in Dubai](#)

Anna Troberg, DIK (Swedish Union for Librarians)

[Non au WLIC \(World Library and Information Congress\) à Dubaï](#)

Association des Bibliothécaires de France [updated 26 June]

[IFLA WLIC i Dubai 2024](#)

Paw Østergaard Jensen, Danmarks biblioteksforening

[Kirjastokonferenssi Dubaissa on pettymys](#)

Juha Manninen, Finnish Library Association

[IFLA Conference in Dubai: how to defend the core values of libraries?](#)

Antoine Torrens, Comité français international bibliothèques et documentation (Cfibd) signed by:

- ADGBV – Association des directeurs de bibliothèques de grandes villes (France)
- ADBS – Association des professionnels de l'information et de la documentation (France)
- APDEN – Association des professeurs documentalistes de l'Éducation nationale (France)
- BPI – Bibliothèque publique d'information (France)
- CBPQ – Corporation des bibliothécaires professionnels du Québec (Canada)
- CFIBD – Comité français international bibliothèques et documentation (France)
- FMD – Fédération des milieux documentaires (Canada)

[Comunicat sobre la designació dels Emirats Àrabs Units \(Dubai\) com amfitrions del WLIC 2024 \(IFLA\)](#)

Col·legi Oficial de Bibliotecaris-Documentalistes de Catalunya

[CILIP statement on Dubai as the venue for IFLA World Library and Information Congress 2024](#)

CILIP, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (UK)

[ILG statement on Dubai as the venue for IFLA World Library and Information Congress 2024](#)

CILIP Information Literacy group

[Statement on the selection of Dubai as venue for WLIC 2024](#)

Vidar Lund, Norwegian Library Association

[WLIC 2024 in Dubai](#)

Bibliosuisse

[Posizione AIB in merito alla sede scelta per il Congresso IFLA 2024](#)

Laura Ballestra, AIB - Associazione italiana biblioteche

[Stellungnahme und Appell des BIB zur Wahl des Austragungsortes Dubai für den IFLA-Weltkongress 2024](#)

Berufsverband Information Bibliothek e.V.

[IFLA-Entscheidung sorgt für Empörung](#)

Bernd Schleh, BuB: Forum Bibliothek und Information

[Statement of the German Library Association \(dbv\) on the Dubai-decision of the IFLA-Governing Board \(GB\)](#)

Deutscher Bibliotheksverband e.V. (dbv)

[IFLA](#)

VDB - Verein Deutscher Bibliothekarinnen und Bibliothekare

[Response to the announcement by IFLA that Dubai, United Arab Emirates will host the 2024 IFLA World Library and Information Congress](#)

Library Association of Ireland (LAI)

[SCONUL Statement on IFLA decision to hold the 2024 World Library and Information Congress in Dubai](#)

Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL)

[Comunicado sobre la designación de Emiratos Árabes \(Dubái\) como anfitriones del WLIC 2024 \(IFLA\)](#)

Federación Española de Sociedades de Archivística, Biblioteconomía, Documentación y Museística (fesabid)

[Letter of concern to IFLA on the World Library and Information Congress in 2024](#)

IAML

[RLUK response to the decision of Dubai as the venue for IFLA WLIC 2024](#)

RLUK

Russian Library Association (letter of support)

Latin America and the Caribbean

[Nota de repúdio – IFLA World Library and Information Congress 2024](#)

Jorge Moisés Kroll Prado, Federação Brasileira de Associações de Bibliotecários, Cientistas da Informação e Instituições (FEBAB)

Middle East and North Africa

[Dubai to host IFLA WLIC 2024](#)

Lebanese Library Association

<https://twitter.com/sliaksa/status/1671676783198973952>

Saudi Library and Information Association

<https://twitter.com/uaeLibrary/status/1671889039388192768>

<https://twitter.com/uaeLibrary/status/1671800776581169152>

Emirates Libraries and Information Association

<https://twitter.com/AFLI1/status/1670819254264901632>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/aflinfo/permalink/10163084309614358/>

Arab Federation for Libraries and Information (AFLI) (Statement of support on IFLA-L, letter of support)

North America

[ALISE Will Not Be Sending IFLA Representative to IFLA WLIC 2024](#)

Association for Library and Information Science Education

[Resolution on the Selection of Dubai as the location for the IFLA 2024 World Library and Information Congress \(WLIC\)](#)

ALA Council, American Library Association

[Canadian Statement on the Decision for IFLA WLIC 2024 to be held in Dubai, UAE](#)

Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA FCAB)

Sub-Saharan Africa

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