



World Library and Information Congress: 70th IFLA General Conference and Council

**22-27 August 2004
Buenos Aires, Argentina**

Programme: <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla70/prog04.htm>

Code Number: 187-E
Meeting: 105. New Professionals' Discussion Group
Simultaneous Interpretation:

An introduction to the New Professionals' Discussion Group

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This session is an opportunity for you to discuss what you want the New Professionals Discussion Group (NPDG) to achieve within IFLA. I have been asked to talk about two things which might assist your discussion. One is my experience of a similar group which exists in the UK. The other is the idea of “Librarians without Borders”.

I became a qualified professional librarian twenty five years ago. And the one thing – more than anything else – which helped me to develop as a professional in the early years of my career was involvement with a group like the NPDG which exists – and had existed for many years – as part of the national association in the UK. The group in the UK has two aims – to support the development of new professionals and to bring new energy and new ideas to the national association – and both these aims apply to the NPDG within IFLA.

By working as an active member of the group in the UK for about six years at the start of my career I gained several benefits. I developed a network of contacts across the library community in the UK which I still draw on today. I developed an understanding of library issues which was much wider and richer than I could have gained simply by doing my day job. I developed new confidence and new skills which I could not have developed to that degree at that stage in my professional life without the group. And I met colleagues through the group who have, over the years, become very good friends.

That's what a new professionals group can achieve for the people who become actively involved within the group. But such a group can also achieve outcomes of value to the library community as a whole and to society in general.

In the UK, for example, it is the new professionals group (now called the Career Development Group) which provides support for people who are working towards professional qualification. Who better to give support to people seeking to become qualified than the people who have just recently become qualified?

The UK group has also always had a strong international dimension and has always supported projects which give assistance to library services in countries which have fewer resources than the UK. When I was active in the group the main project was to support the development of a public library in a local community in Papua New Guinea.

This example leads me to the second thing I have been asked to talk about – Librarians without Borders (LWB).

For me, the idea of LWB came from a conversation with colleagues in the UK about the situation in Iraq. We wanted to find a way for librarians from the UK to work in partnership with librarians in local communities and institutions in Iraq to try to assist in rebuilding the library services of Iraq. So the idea of LWB is about librarians who want to be active internationally working with colleagues in countries where assistance might be welcomed in the aftermath of conflict or national disaster – or where resources for development are scarce.

This is not a new idea and there are many examples of good practice from which we can learn. When I spoke about this idea recently at the Canadian Library Association Conference I was told about a number of projects involving colleagues from Canada. When I was at the IFLA Conference in Jerusalem in 2000 I became aware of partnership working taking place on the West Bank between colleagues from Palestine and colleagues from Norway and other countries. In the UK I am aware of work being done in the health library sector, through an organisation called Partnerships in Health Information, to link medical librarians in the UK with colleagues in countries like Sierra Leone and Chechnya. And there are a number of examples on the American Library Association website of projects involving partnership between libraries in the USA and libraries in Iraq. These are just a few examples – I am sure that there are many more.

A useful starting point for IFLA might be to carry out some research to produce a more complete picture of what is going on around the world in terms of LWB so that we could then see what lessons can be learned from this existing activity – lessons that could then be applied to new LWB activity with that activity being coordinated, perhaps, through IFLA.

The idea of LWB fits within the IFLA framework in three ways.

First, because of the fundamental question about IFLA – the question that is never openly debated but is always in our minds. Is IFLA a genuinely global organisation or is the prevailing mindset of IFLA really only the mindset of the developed world? If IFLA really is a global community brought together by common interests, shared knowledge, common ideals and mutual

support – then LWB could be an important instrument by which IFLA could demonstrate that the Federation is truly global in its thinking and its work.

Second, because of the work of FAIFE – one of the core activities of IFLA – to support and promote intellectual freedom. A few years ago FAIFE persuaded UNESCO to support a mission to Kosovo to examine the state of libraries after the war in Kosovo. Similar missions to Afghanistan and to Palestine are being discussed. There is a clear connection, I would suggest, between missions like this – to establish the state of libraries in damaged countries – and partnerships under the banner of LWB to help rebuild those libraries.

And third, because of the initiative you are discussing today – the establishment of the NPDG within IFLA. Discussion is good. But action is better. A new professionals group brings ideas and idealism to an organisation like IFLA. It also brings energy and activism. The network of librarians active in international work that will be developed through the NPDG could be the network that begins, within IFLA, to put the idea of LWB into action.

In conclusion. I drew strength and inspiration from that group of new professionals in the UK and I found in myself an idealism and an activism which has remained at the heart of my professional life. The idea of LWB combines those two qualities of idealism and activism.

Earlier this afternoon I heard two presentations full of these qualities. Clara Budnik of Chile talked about libraries in her country during the period of dictatorship. Then we heard from a colleague from the Social Forum, a South American group currently meeting here in Buenos Aires, outside of the IFLA Conference. The Social Forum puts its idealism and activism to work outside IFLA. Clara's approach is to put her idealism and activism to work inside the IFLA community. For me, Clara's approach is the right approach. We are one global community of librarians – we need to grow and develop as one community. And this will not happen if alternative voices and dissident ones are only heard outside of the IFLA framework. The NPDG could be one important way to bring into IFLA more voices of idealism and of activism, more voices that express alternative views, more voices that have new things to say, more voices that are different – voices that can challenge and energise the established discourse of IFLA.

I hope that what I've said in this brief presentation - about my own experience of a new professionals group in the UK, about the concept of LWB, and about idealism, activism and hearing new voices – gives you some useful ideas to consider in your discussions this afternoon.

Thank you.

Dr Bob McKee, Chief Executive, CILIP, UK and member of the IFLA/FAIFE Committee and Advisory Board.

October 12, 2004