

MAPPING THE FUTURE COURSE OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IN ECUADOR

A report on a seminar should be clear and concise; if it is longer than absolutely necessary, the reader loses sight of its fundamental aim, in this case, to “map the future course” for public libraries and their users, researchers and administrative staff.

I. AN EVALUATION OF THE PRESENT SITUATION: WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO

A **regional seminar** was organised in Quito for the purpose of making people aware of and promoting **the IFLA/UNESCO Manifestos on public and school libraries, the Internet, the Information Society in Action and the multicultural library.**

- a) The seminar gave us an ideal opportunity to define who we are and what we do as members of what could be called an anonymous profession linked to literacy, knowledge, information and thought. In this sense, the seminar constituted a species of census of library professionals, since as soon as news of the International Library Seminar in Quito became known, not only members of associated professional groups who were already more or less acquainted with one another, basically because of their mutual differences, were eager to participate, but 370 others in towns and cities throughout the country also asked to be included in the seminar in order to be able to express their various opinions and points of view. This massive response was quite a revelation.
- b) These members of the profession met in Quito, not to air their differences, but rather to seek positive ways of reinforcing the public library's status in society as a cultural meeting-point, the librarian's role and to encourage the participation of the library's principal target, the library user – the reader. This was a positive step in the right direction; it was not the end, it was a beginning.
- c) Ecuador's cultural centres, which have been suffering from increasing political interference and rivalry, were recently given the opportunity to participate in the IFLA project, under the patronage of the cultural centre La Posada del Pensamiento Borges. A number of organisations also collaborated: the Casa de Cultura, the Ministry of Culture, the National Library network and the Metropolitan Cultural Centre. Their participation implies that it is possible to envision “cultural governability” as the gateway to social and political governability. The public library is in fact the gateway to democracy.
- d) The librarians' voices were indeed heard during the seminar, not as faceless members of an “invisible” profession, but as committed individuals with professional concerns to express. The creation of a National Library was proposed; it would serve two purposes. Firstly, as a public library stocked with a comprehensive range of literature, modern and traditional. Its other role would be that of a national

library which would make available to users every aspect of Ecuador's historical and cultural background and development.

- e) The creation of a network of public libraries can only come true if it becomes part of a wider, regional network that serves as a model and a sponsor. This became evident in our workshops, where each participant was given the opportunity to learn from the successful enterprises of our colleagues in other countries. This was a very useful and practical experience which we could take away with us from the seminar. Food for thought, which is always positive.
- f) Our 17 foreign speakers were the principal key to breaking down the barriers which had previously divided librarians; librarians in Ecuador had never before got together to discuss their common problems and aims. The talks given amply lived up to the expectations of Ecuadorian participants, who hung on every one of the visiting speakers' words.
- g) The sponsorship of IFLA/ALP and the presence of IFLA/LAC authorities, that permitted La Posada del Pensamiento Borges to democratise the seminar, turned it into a meeting-place for cultural exchange which was given wide coverage in all the media (television, radio, press). The media do not generally display much interest in events of this type.
- h) The seminar's website, which includes the talks given by visiting and Ecuadorian speakers, is constantly visited, a clear sign of that the interest the seminar set in motion continues.
- i) All of this helped to achieve the seminar's main objective, which was to circulate word of the IFLA/UNESCO Manifestos on public and school libraries, the Internet and the Information Society in Action.

II THE LIBRARY'S EVOLUTION: OUR PAST

- a) The Quito seminar gave Ecuadorian librarians the opportunity to identify with one of the greatest figures in our country's history, Dr Eugenio Espejo, doctor of medicine, librarian, journalist and founding father of Ecuador's independence. The very name of Espejo gave national status and visibility to this international event. Participants in the seminar agreed that Ecuador's national hero is not a military figure, but a writer and librarian.
- b) Espejo's historical role was stressed by leading authorities during the seminar and particularly by the official organism responsible for commemoration of national events (la Oficina de Conmemoraciones Cívicas de la Presidencia de la República), which with the opening of the seminar inaugurated the bicentennial celebration of Latin America's first Declaration of Independence (el Primer Grito de Independencia) on 10 August 1809.
- c) The library's links with Ecuador's history and struggle for independence added a note of prestige to the seminar, together with its venue, the library building, and its symbolic setting. This is an

important point, since traditionally, the library has been seen as a dull, sleepy, almost dead place, rather like a museum and in fact, for most schoolchildren, a visit to the library is a punishment.

- d) The name of Eugenio Espejo, a mestizo Indian and a national symbol, allowed us to discuss the subject of intercultural libraries in an environment in which the symbol was accepted by all.
- e) In short: the experience of reclaiming our national history through the dissemination of knowledge and not through military pronouncements (only) was a fundamental aspect of the seminar.

III THE FUTURE

- a) The IFLA has now taken a formal stand; Ecuador's librarians are now aware of the IFLA's aims and the possibilities they open up for the national library system. The IFLA is no longer an anonymous, meaningless abbreviation.
- b) The IFLA is now a reference for the future, a chance for Ecuador's librarians to waken up to the possibilities it has to offer and to take advantage of the assistance it can give them in resolving problems and promoting projects. There is interest in participating.
- c) The IFLA is now familiar with the situation of libraries and their staff in a multicultural society such as Ecuador's that is aware that knowledge and information of every description together constitute the keystone of the free and democratic society proposed by our great leader, Eugenio Espejo.
- d) IFLA/UNESCO's Manifestos on public and school libraries, the Internet and the Information Society in Action will be the theoretical and practical framework on which our libraries' ethos and activities will be based. This will enable our library system to improve the quality of the cultural and social services they provide for their users.
- e) In a final, anecdotal comment, we would like to emphasise the extent to which the image of Jorge Luis Borges, a universal symbol for all librarians as a reader and writer, has created a wave of interest throughout the nation. Our institution has received countless emails, faxes, phone-calls and personal visits from members of the public who want to find out more about the famous Argentine writer's work. But most of those who contacted us did so because they have realised that a library can be a true "heaven on Earth"...

To conclude, and in agreement with our talks with Elisabeth Carvalho and other distinguished guest speakers, we could say that the Quito seminar has enabled us, in nautical terms, **"to chart the course"** of our libraries' future ideas, activities and services to the public, and the possibility of creating a modern, multicultural public library network. A vital objective is to make access to knowledge and modern information technology available to the general public

who use our libraries. An equally important target is to reinforce the national identity we so urgently need.

I would like to thank the IFLA/ALP and Gunilla Natvig in particular for creating and supporting our project. Without their institutional and financial backing we could not have organised the Quito seminar.

Special thanks to Elisabeth Carvalho, a close friend whom I have always thought of as the Fairy Godmother who can make all our dreams come true.

Thanks, too, to María Elena Zapata, a staunch, committed colleague, who laid the first stone on which the seminar was based and who stood by us throughout the entire process.

Thanks also go to María Isabel Franca and Filiberto Martínez for their academic assessment and to Alicia and María, whose experience in organising seminars was very invaluable.

Finally, thanks to all the IFLA/LAC members who supported our venture.