



Acceptance Speech

delivered by IFLA President Donna Scheeder
at the 81st IFLA Congress in Cape Town, South Africa

22 August 2015

I am so honored to stand before you as the new President of IFLA. Looking out over the audience it brings to mind the first assembly that I attended at my first IFLA meeting. I looked at all of the officials on the stage and wondered how does this relate to me? Never in my wildest dreams did it occur to me at that meeting that I would be President someday. So look around, someone here for maybe the first time will someday be the IFLA president. Before I talk about the journey we will undertake together over the next two years, I want to recognize those who prepared me for this day. It takes a village to make a president.

It has been a wonderful experience to work for six years with our Secretary General, Jennefer Nicholson who has done so much to transform IFLA to the effective global voice of libraries that it is today. Her vision and leadership combined with the dedication and hard work of the IFLA staff makes it not only possible, but a real joy for anyone to say yes, I will stand for President-Elect. I served eight years thus far on the IFLA Governing Board and to all of the GB members I have served with, would you please stand and be recognized. Thank you. You are an inspiration and a source of great knowledge and wisdom and I hope you will continue this journey with me into IFLA's future. To my colleagues at the Library of Congress and especially CRS [Congressional Research Service], your generosity and support have been invaluable and I would not be standing here without it. To the U.S. delegation, ALA members, and especially to the members here from SLA [Special Libraries Association], many of you were involved in IFLA long before me and I want to thank you for your encouragement and support all along the way. Finally, I want to thank my home sections, Law, one of the newest Standing Committees and Libraries and Research Services for Parliaments. You have taught me what hardworking, creative and dedicated Standing Committee members can do. I want to give a special shout out to Albert Ntunja the head of the Library of the Parliament of South Africa who not once but twice has hosted a fabulous satellite meeting. The National Organizing Committee gave us many inspiring and innovative experiences at this conference.

When I left Cape Town after our pre-conference here eight years ago, it never occurred to me that I would return to take the stage as the IFLA president. And while the spirit of South Africa is stronger and even more inspirational than before, the times we live in are very different than eight years ago and yet these times provide us with amazing opportunities to create our own future where every library is valued and seen as the centre of the community it serves.

This brings me to the challenge, the call to action and how we must respond.

There has been much said about the future of libraries and librarians, some of it good and some not. What we all know in our hearts is that libraries are very important. We can change people's lives. But if we are to maintain this position we must act.

We are in a world of change that is a constant and happening faster than ever before. What we know about change is it is better for an organization to lead its own changes than to have ones imposed upon them by others. This is particularly true in our world where technology is disrupting all kinds of economic and social sectors like publishing, government and academic institutions. We also know the best time to initiate change is before you have to. It stands to reason then that in order to be successful we must build and implement a change agenda.

Three years ago [IFLA] President Ingrid Parent launched the IFLA Trend Report and challenged us to come together locally, regionally and nationally to discuss what impact these societal trends are having on our libraries and on each one of us. Those conversations continue to take place in many languages around the globe. You in your conversations discovered a long list of challenges. These discussions have been very fruitful but discussion alone is not enough. We must take action and initiate the change we want. We must together build our change agenda.

It is helpful to think of our building our change agenda on four levels. First, is the personal level. What skills and competencies do we need to continue to be successful in the 21st century? Librarians must embrace continuous individual learning to keep their skills up to date and relevant. We must let go of old ways of doing things, no matter how comfortable we find them. What do our library educators need to do to insure they are providing our libraries and other organizations with professionals who are equipped to provide the transformational services that will keep our libraries and profession strong?

Second, is building the agenda for our organizations. What will our communities need? What changes do we make so that our organizations continue to connect people to the information that they need to exercise their civil, political, economic and social rights , learn and apply new skills , make decisions and participate in an active and engaged civil society, stay healthy, create community based solutions to development challenges , ensure accountability, transparency, good governance and empowerment, and measure progress on public and private commitments on sustainable development ? When I use the word communities here I am referring to the widest definition that includes those served by national, academic, government, public, school, business, law, and any other kind of library or information service. What is the change agenda for libraries, archives and the organizations they serve? Libraries must look at these trends and ask themselves where are the possible opportunities that are relevant to our mission and our region? They must look at the trends with positive outcomes that are happening elsewhere and decide how to overcome barriers so that their areas can benefit from these positive changes as well. They must also look at the societal problems faced by their region and country and ask themselves how the library can make a contribution. They must build the change agenda that fits their own circumstances.

I am happy to report that this work is already underway in many parts of the world. I have seen some amazing examples of transformational services during my visits over the last two years to Italy, Spain, Canada, Croatia, Korea, Turkey, and Northern Ireland as well as to the ALA conferences in the United States. I see it at my visits to my own neighbourhood library branch where the seats are filled and computer stations are at the service of every age and ethnic group.

Third, there is a need to develop national and regional policy agendas. This is where national library associations with the active participation of their members, in collaboration with the leadership of their national libraries, need to work with their members of their legislatures. Information policy is the set of all public laws, regulations and policies that encourage, discourage, or regulate the creation, use, storage, access, and communication and dissemination of information. There are several fundamental issues that comprise information policy. Most prominent are public policy issues concerned with the use of information for democratization and commercialization of social life. These issues impact, the entire digital environment.

We have now been given a new and exciting opportunity with the coming issuance of the United Nations Sustainable development goals. There are many levers for you to use to get libraries to the table in your countries. Each nation must put together their individual plans to meet these goals but it is up to you to show your leadership how libraries can be their partners in fulfilling their national plans.

Finally and extremely important is the global information policy agenda. Last year in Lyon IFLA launched the Lyon Declaration. Thanks to all of you and the dedicated IFLA staff, the Lyon Declaration now has close to 600

signatories representing a wide variety of the sectors which are part of the civil society. When I presented the declaration in New York, it provided the IFLA delegation to the UN with a powerful foundation of support. As a result, access to information is a specific target stated in the goals. Even more importantly the message that none of the other goals will be possible without access to information was heard loud and clear. Increased access to information is a cross-cutting issue that will contribute to the achievement of all goals—whether in health, education, transparency and accountability: all goals will benefit from people being able to know more about how to achieve them.

And we—libraries—can help our countries get there. There are over 320,000 public libraries worldwide, and hundreds of thousands of school and research libraries—in all of our countries. Librarians are skilled information professionals who can be strong partners in increasing access to information. And we can help people gain the information literacy skills needed to improve their lives. What does this mean to each of you? Libraries in your country are better positioned for a seat at the table but you are the ones whose voices must be heard. You have some tools but you must use them.

With the signing of the Cape Town Declaration this week, thirteen African nations took an important step towards recognizing that libraries are their partners in working toward achieving the sustainable development goals. The Declaration welcomes the IFLA position regarding the 2015 [UN] Sustainable Development Agenda and commits to provide the necessary resources for the development of African libraries to respond to modern day challenges and provide access to emerging technologies. Bravo Africa!

However, this is only a part of the global agenda. At this conference the IFLA Governing Board began the rollout of our 2016-2021 strategic plan. Many of you discussed the role your sections will play in furthering these four directions, libraries in society, information and knowledge, cultural heritage and building capacity. This is not a plan for the Governing Board and staff. It is a plan for all of IFLA, every single one of us and for all of the members who are not represented here today. Our collective vision is our destination. That vision states that we, all of us together, are the trusted global voice of libraries. We empower and inspire society by driving access to information knowledge and culture for all to support learning, creativity and information. That is the global call to action.

As we saw with the Lyon Declaration, IFLA is successful when all of IFLA is engaged and participates. I and the IFLA Governing Board and staff cannot answer the call to action alone. We will not reach our destination without your active participation. Will you work to build and implement your change agendas? Will you define the change we want? Will you join me on this journey? Will you answer the call to action? In my dreams I hear “yes” in every language I can possibly imagine. So I will ask you one more time, will you join me on this journey? Will you answer the call to action?

I am looking forward to the next two years as we work together to do amazing things. As we work together to create the change we want, please remember the words from my President Barack Obama:

“We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.”

Thank you for agreeing to take this journey. I promise with your help the best is yet to come.

Donna Scheeder
IFLA President 2015-2017