



Speech by IFLA Secretary General Gerald Leitner 2nd Meeting of African Ministers Responsible for Public Libraries

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Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

The information divide is a development divide.

Those on the right side are seeing better lives, better livelihoods.

They are able to find, understand, use and share information.

To create, innovate, and simply take better decisions for themselves, their families and their communities.

To find their way and prosper in a connected, digital society.

Those on the wrong side are cut off. Left behind, at a time when the rest of the world is accelerating.

Deprived of opportunities to learn, earn and improve their lives.

Deprived of their right to development.

The right set out in the agreement signed by all UN Member States in 2015, setting out an agenda for sustainable development to 2030.

The information divide runs not just between countries, but between communities, between individuals.

It is often a question of connectivity. Half of the world's population remains offline.

But not only this.

To bridge the information divide, people also need knowledge and skills.

From basic literacy to critical thinking. And the practical and entrepreneurial skills needed to apply information.

And they need confidence. Confidence both in their own abilities, and in the support of those around them. Confidence is necessary to make the most of information.

Libraries are bridges.

In Africa, around the world.

Safe spaces, where people – all people – can access information, safe in the knowledge that they are in a house of freedom.

And that if they need it, they have someone to turn to.

An information professional.

Someone who will help them get there. Get to the goal they have set. Get the information that makes the difference.

To their farming. To their health. To their education. To their livelihood.

IFLA is the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions.

The global voice of libraries.

Of library and information professionals.

Amongst our members, we have many associations working nationally or regionally. 103 institutions, and national and international associations, from Egypt to South Africa, from Senegal to Ethiopia.

And of course I am thrilled to count a strong AfLIA amongst them.

The role of IFLA is to strengthen the role of libraries.

To make them stronger, both in the service they offer to their users, but also in the place they hold in society.

IFLA is also busy advocating for libraries – providing the tools for our members to make the case for our institutions.

To ensure we live in a world where libraries are supported and empowered to, in turn, empower their communities.

IFLA itself also advocated through its representation in the highest fora – the United Nations, the World Intellectual Property Organisation, UNESCO.

We are proud to be the global voice of libraries. To bring your work. Your ideas. Your energy. To decision-makers.

And of course we are, with over sixty sections and special interest groups, the biggest brains trust in the library field.

A think tank. A hotbed of ideas.

The place where we can build the future together.

IFLA provides a forum, an arena, a space for these vital discussions.

Through our over 60 committees and special interest groups that bring together librarians from around the world.

We have 76 African representatives over 26 different on IFLA Standing Committees, including a section dedicated to the African region.

Through our sixteen Preservation and Conservation Centres developing and disseminating knowledge and good practices.

Two of them are here in Africa. Here in South Africa, and in Cameroon.

Through our programmes, focused on building strong library associations.

In our previous programming period, we supported projects in Botswana, Cameroon, Eswatini, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Ensuring a better connected, better supported library sector.

And ensuring that you have strong and effective interlocutors.

We're now working with Egypt, Kenya, Senegal, and again with Zimbabwe.

Two IFLA language centres are based on the continent, in Egypt and Senegal, and of course I am proud to be in the home country of IFLA's Africa Office, here in South Africa.

Two Africans are also part of the IFLA International Leaders' Programme.

And I am proud that we are working with AfLIA and Electronic Information for Libraries to support a new cohort of young African library innovators.

The movers and shakers of the future.

Leaders of change.

But IFLA's work is also global because the challenges we face are global.

I mentioned the UN's 2030 Agenda earlier.

This sets a course for the next twelve years.

For everyone.

It highlights the issues where all countries must progress. Because when continents, when countries, when individuals are left behind, we all suffer.

From eradicating poverty to building stronger institutions, through agriculture, health, education, employment and innovation.

When governments started to plan the 2030 Agenda, IFLA stepped up.

Because for us, the key principles set out spoke to us.

The focus on the right to development of the individual.

Leaving no-one behind.

The interconnection of the different policy areas.

The importance of cross-cutting factors, such as access to information.

The final version affirmed this last point, with its explicit reference to the importance of access to information in goal 16.10.

And eighteen other references amongst the remaining targets.

This is not just about access to public information. Budgets, policies, and so on.

But public access to information.

Access to information as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Because when a student needs to do their homework.

When a scientist needs to read the latest research.

When a parent needs to find out how to feed their child properly.

When a farmer needs to apply new ways of farming.

It isn't important where the information comes from.

As long as it's good, as long as it's reliable.

And this is the business of libraries.

So for me, for us, the UN's 2030 Agenda is a library agenda.

A call on Member States to prioritise those activities that libraries have long prioritised.

A call to focus their efforts – your efforts – on building literate, informed, and participatory societies.

To improve people's lives

IFLA is, therefore, working with its members in Africa, with the global library field, to deliver.

To realise this potential.

To use the reach of libraries and library associations to raise awareness of the Agenda.

To build partnerships – with each other, across government, with civil society.

To ensure that the potential of libraries is recognised, and realised, in national policy planning.

I believe that Africa can be a leader.

I have a great confidence in this.

Just a week ago today, I was in New York. I met with a number of your Permanent Representatives.

No other continent was better represented than Africa.

And there was such support.

Such interest in the work libraries were already doing to deliver on the global goals across the continent.

Such encouragement to libraries to get involved in the policy process.

As one of our speakers from the UN suggested, I would love to see libraries engaged in voluntary national reviews.

And even on a national delegation at the UN in New York.

You can lead the way, just as you led the way in 2015 by signing the Cape Town Declaration.

You can do this in other fora, such as the World Intellectual Property Organisation to deliver meaningful progress on copyright reform around the world.

Because for Africa to take its rightful place in global culture, it needs to promote access, to give a chance to all of its talents.

You can show your commitment to meaningful access to information, for all at the UN. Defend the references made to it as the SDGs are reviewed next year.

Call for indicators that truly reflect whether people – your people – can access the information they need.

Ensure that the world stays true to the promises it made in 2015.

To support this work, IFLA is working with its African members to build a single portal for data about libraries.

Because if libraries are to make the case for access to information, then it is vital to have access to information about libraries.

So IFLA is building a Library Map of the World.

With key data about libraries.

How many?

What types?

How many users?

How many loans?

So far, almost a third of African countries are contributing data, with a strong focus on public and national libraries.

We're working hard with our members in Africa to get more, and better statistics.

To develop capacity.

So that we – so that you – can have the data you need to understand what is available to you. What needs to be done.

And we are adding SDG Stories.

Stories about the impact libraries are having in their communities.

The difference we are making.

And how this relates to the SDGs.

We'll be uploading stories about Africa soon. So you can see for yourselves.

I'm sure you'll be proud of what you see.

IFLA has an ambitious agenda.

To do this, we – libraries – need to be the best we possibly can be.

We need to improve ourselves to improve the world.

We need to build a strong, globally united library field, as a driver of literate, informed, and participatory societies.

For this, we have embarked on our own Global Vision process.

Here too, Africa's libraries are playing their role.

Tomorrow and Sunday, we will be meeting with library leaders from across the continent.

Discussing the results of a year of conversations. Never before has there been such an initiative, bringing in so many voices.

Nearly 22 000 globally, and over 1200 in Africa. This is – I am confident – the largest mobilisation of African librarians ever seen. The loudest they have spoken.

And through your responses, we have shown that libraries globally are united in their goals and values.

And we have identified ten highlights, and ten opportunities, on the basis of the input of our members.

Our mission, this weekend, will be to develop ideas for action on how we can deliver on these in your countries. And across the Africa region as a whole.

I know what great ideas there are here. I am looking forward to what comes out.

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

To return to where I began, the information divide is a development divide.

But neither are inevitable.

Libraries can provide a solution.

Libraries in Africa are providing solutions.

And through its work.

Through the energy, passion and investment of its members.

IFLA is helping them go further still.

In turn, you can help.

Through the declaration coming from this meeting.

Through the actions you take when you get home.

Through the positions you take at the UN, at the World Intellectual Property Organisation.

You can leave a legacy that will make the world a better place.

Thank you.