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Commentary

Mechanisms for collaboration and influence: the role of IFLA and other international library-related organizations

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ABSTRACT

Collaboration and influence lie at the heart of non-governmental organizations because they are created by people and their organizations which want to achieve some shared goals. Collaboration needs to be fostered at many levels including that among individuals, between member organizations, and with external bodies. Library organizations need to build structures of collaboration to provide a foundation for collaborative action towards shared goals. It is also vital that they understand the need to be influential, to look continually outside their own fields to see who to influence to support their aims.

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THE ROLES OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Although modern international organizations date back to the nineteenth century, they have proliferated and become much more influential since the second world war when the United Nations Organization (UN) was formed. A host of UN agencies deal with political, health, agricultural, technological and many other issues at the global level together with other international inter-governmental bodies such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF). These global inter governmental organizations (IGOs) are complemented at a regional level by bodies such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the supranational governmental agencies of the European Union (EU). While all provide fora for discussion and negotiation, many have powers to demand actions from governments by regulating activities under international conventions, instituting standards or requiring certain actions. To varying degrees, governments have ceded some powers to such bodies with ASEAN located more at the consultative end of the spectrum in contrast to the EU's considerable powers over its member states.

Over the same period there has been a tremendous proliferation of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) from the early examples which included the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC, 1863), the International Publishers' Association (IPA, 1896) and, in the library and documentation field, the International Federation for Documentation (FID, 1895–2001). Today these non-governmental bodies include professional associations such as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 1927), associations of people with shared interests such as the World Chess Federation (1924) and, increasingly, activist organizations such as Amnesty International (1961). Their structures are varied sometimes being federations of national or regional associations, sometimes consisting of a global body with national chapters, occasionally having individual members, and sometimes accepting a mixture of membership.

The activist bodies, formally labeled transnational social movement organizations (TSMOs—[Smith et al., 1997](#)) have become increasingly prominent and influential through their adeptness at using the media and mobilizing public opinion across the world. But all types of international non-governmental organizations have become more influential and more recognized for the contributions they can make on important global issues including climate change or people trafficking. From the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), international non-governmental organizations have begun to be formally recognized as contributors to international discourse and invited to participate in international conferences and other negotiations.

Some of the international non-governmental organizations have responsibilities under formal conventions or other international instruments. Pre-eminently, the Red Cross derives its mandate to act in the event of international armed conflict from the four 1949 Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocol I confer on the ICRC a specific mandate ([ICRC, 2010](#)). In the cultural sector, the international Committee of the Blue Shield ([ICBS, 2010](#)) covers museums and archives, audiovisual supports, libraries, and monuments and sites under the Hague Convention adopted by UNESCO in 1954. This Convention was the first international treaty aimed at protecting cultural heritage in the context of war and is administered by a partnership of five international non-governmental organizations: International Council on Archives (ICA), International Council of Museums (ICOM), International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), Coordinating Council of Audiovisual Archives Associations (CCAAA) and IFLA.

THE LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SECTOR

Many international bodies influence the practice of librarianship both within and between nations. To take a very longstanding example, the work of one of the oldest international governmental organizations, the International Postal Union, has facilitated the supply of printed materials and the development of interlibrary loan services across the world. Its primacy for libraries has now largely been supplanted by the International Telecommunication Union, now a United Nations agency, which regulates the use of radio spectrum, undersea and satellite communications and has an increasing role in relation to the Internet. The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) is similarly important for the library and information sector as it seeks to balance competing interests in copyright and other aspects of intellectual property and to find ways to address current concerns such as the appropriate treatment of Indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge.

IFLA engaged with these international governmental organizations, particularly those in the United Nations system, during the World Summit on the Information Society. It partnered with close

colleagues in such bodies as ICA and the IPA and worked with various TSMOs and sympathetic governments to prosecute an agenda for freedom of access to information and its counterpart freedom of expression. Those interventions, extending over the years 2002 to 2005 were very successful in ensuring that governments committed to those principles in the formal declarations of the Summit meetings and in promoting the importance of libraries, information services and related organizations in ensuring the freedom to know for all peoples. In the process, that campaign changed IFLA.

Together with the programs of the two IFLA core activities initiated in 1997, Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) and Copyright and other Legal Matters (CLM), that involvement in high level international diplomacy through World Summit and associated meetings changed IFLA (Byrne, 2007). It gave IFLA the confidence to state its case at the highest levels and to identify advocacy as one of its central aims. While far from becoming a transnational social movement organization which can mobilize thousands or more activists around the world to draw attention to its cause, IFLA has taken on some of their characteristics in that it has become more proficient at presenting its arguments and braver in trying to seek public support.

In addition to that advocacy role, IFLA works programmatically with a number of international governmental organizations, especially UNESCO, to highlight issues, develop solutions and try to effect outcomes. IFLA's work to promote the importance of information literacy is a case in point with many workshops held around the world creating a constituency of support for that crucial twenty-first century capability.

But these initiatives are not solely the domain of the peak body for the library and information sector, IFLA. They are invariably pursued through partnerships with other organizations in the sector including IFLA's own members and bodies with relevant aims. Examples include OCLC in the areas of bibliographic standards and the development of new discovery systems, eIFL in relation to ensuring access to digital services in poorer nations and EBLIDA for issues relating to Europe.

Through such collaboration with and between organizations in the library and information sector and beyond, individual organizations can be much more effective in both understanding what is to be done and in finding and implementing appropriate programs. There is a multiplier effect through which the efforts are magnified and the consequences of the programs become much more than the sum of the efforts of the individual participating organizations.

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The examples sketched in this article demonstrate that the importance of international organizations and particularly international non-governmental organizations has grown immensely over recent decades. Their roles have expanded and their influence has increased to the extent that governments and international governmental organizations must not only listen to them but go further by seeking their input.

Collaboration still lies at the heart of non-governmental organizations— local, regional and international— because they are created by people and their organizations which want to achieve some shared goals. Whether those goals consist of playing chess at the highest possible standard, responding effectively to disasters, or lifting the performance and status of a profession, they can only be achieved through concerted action. The organizations must therefore be successful at engaging and retaining the commitment of members and stimulating their enthusiasm for shared causes. Collaboration needs to be fostered at many levels including that among individuals, between member organizations, and with external bodies. For IFLA, that means inspiring its member associations and institutions and, through them, the individual members or staff of those bodies. Learning from the success of the transnational social movement organizations, library organizations need to build structures of collaboration to provide a foundation for collaborative action towards shared goals.

While essential, collaboration is not sufficient for the success of 21st century international organizations. It is also vital that they understand the need to be influential. Whether operating within a region such as the Arab Federation of Library Associations does in the Middle East and North Africa or globally like IFLA and ICA, organizations in the library and information sector, as in other domains, need to look continually outside their own fields to see who to influence to support their aims. Targets include governments, transnational bodies, international governmental organizations and the public. Through influence, priorities can be changed and goals achieved far beyond what the organizations might achieve by themselves or with partners within their own sectors.

Thus the watchwords for 21st century international organizations in the library and information sector, as elsewhere, are collaboration and influence.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Dr Alex Byrne is a professional librarian, researcher and writer. He served for decade in leadership positions with the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, including President 2005–2007. In his day job, he is the University Librarian at the University of Technology Sydney, Australia. His career has taken him to several Australian universities as librarian, University Librarian and Vice President.

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