



IFLA Pre-World summit Conference 'Libraries @ the Heart of the Information Society' Geneva, Switzerland, 3-4 November 2003

Address during the closing session

Chères collègues, dear colleagues.

It is my duty to attempt to summarise the richness of the past two days. This is, of course, an impossible task. I can only recognise the extraordinary thing we have done, thanks to the initiative and commitment of our Swiss colleagues.

We are here in the Assembly Hall of the United Nations in Geneva, the former home of the League of Nations, a place redolent of the history of humanity's attempts to promote international understanding, tolerance, peace and progress.

In the adjoining Library building is an exhibition which illustrates how the brave initiatives fostered by the League developed into the range of international governmental organisations which we now see in Geneva and other cities and which are participating in the preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society.

As Sjoerd Koopman mentioned yesterday, IFLA was present at the foundation of UNESCO. In fact, IFLA had strong relationships with UNESCO's predecessor, the International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation and for many years the IFLA Secretariat was located in this city. It was thanks to an eminent Swiss librarian, Marcel Godet, that IFLA survived the rigours of the Second World War. President Godet and Secretary General Sevensma managed to continue some international contact through the dreadful times of war from Geneva. On his retirement from the presidency, Godet reminded us that it is the role of libraries and librarians to work "à humaniser l'homme".

This is again our task. Our interventions in the preparatory process for the World Summit have been remarkably successful. Working with others, and with the support of the President of PrepCom, M. Adama Samassékou, and others, we have ensured that both the draft Declaration and the draft Action Plan include strong references to human rights, especially the right to know, and to the need to ensure unrestricted access to information around the world. The important role of libraries in ensuring access to knowledge has been reinforced.

In the meetings held today, we have been able to meet with some of the government delegations to emphasise these points. There have been many fruitful meetings and others have been

arranged for the next few days.

The most important message which we must take home from this city of international dialogue is that libraries are essential if we are to "humaniser l'homme", if we are truly to develop a people centred information society. We must emphasise to our colleagues, to our communities, and especially to our governments that it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel. The global network of libraries, with more than 2.5 billion registered users is already at the heart of the information society. A modest investment will return great benefits for communities and nations.

But there are also things we can do. Over the next few days we can try to ensure that other governments follow the lead of Finland, New Zealand and the United States, by including a librarian in the official delegation to the World Summit on the Information Society. We can ensure that our governments are briefed on the major issues, as summarised in the IFLA papers prepared for the Summit, which are available on the IFLA website.

Over the next eighteen months we can pursue the actions we discussed yesterday and make sure that we have some great stories to present before the Tunis phase.

We have much to do, but we have made a great start. We must all express our heartfelt thanks to our Swiss colleagues for their tremendous initiative and efforts, to IFLA HQ staff for their commitment on top of their many other responsibilities, and to you for taking the time and trouble to travel to this city to promote our great cause.

Thank you.

Alex Byrne

President-elect, IFLA

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