

Acceptance Speech

Acceptance Speech delivered by Sinikka Sipilä at the Closing Session of the 79th IFLA World Library and Information Congress in Singapore

Distinguished guests, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

This is an extremely special moment for me. I am at the onset of my term as President of IFLA, and I have the opportunity to tell you about the goals I have set for my presidency. In the face of my upcoming duty, I feel humbled, but at the same time I also feel very honoured and privileged. I am grateful to you for giving me this opportunity to work for the better of the library and to lead the field's worldwide organization for the next two years. I will strive in every way to be worthy of your confidence and to fulfil my duties the best I can.

In my work, I will remember my predecessors and the examples they have given. I have closely followed the work of three presidents, Claudia Lux, Ellen Tise and Ingrid Parent, when being a member of the Governing Board of IFLA since 2007. They have all become role models whose work is a joy and honour to continue. At the same time, their achievements have posed high expectations and goals for my own term, now, as I carry on after Ingrid.

We have been able to witness how intensely, skilfully and elegantly Ingrid has represented IFLA around the world bringing forth the role of libraries as initiators and enablers of change. Her theme, Libraries – a Force for Change! has continued the work of her predecessors, emphasizing the active, visible role of libraries. IFLA and its members are indebted to you, Ingrid, for your excellent work for the good of IFLA.

My aim during my term as President of IFLA is to continue to promote libraries in their crucial task in society. Therefore, I have chosen as my Presidential theme Strong Libraries, Strong Societies. I firmly believe that libraries exert an impact on society and development by fostering equal opportunities and access to lifelong learning and education, research and innovation, culture and recreation for all. In this way, libraries can contribute to building stronger communities and societies.

My theme supports and promotes the IFLA Strategic Plan for 2010–2015 and Key Initiatives and is based on the previous Presidential themes. The newly launched IFLA Trend Report will be a significant tool for my work as well as it provides detailed options for libraries across the world to position themselves internationally within the evolving digital information environment.

How do you define a strong library?

A strong library can be defined as one that has adequate capacity to meet the information needs of its patrons. Thus, for a library to be perceived as a strong library by its user community, it needs to meet such key criteria as:

- User orientation
- Competent personnel
- Adequate and sustainable funding
- Up-to-date, adequate collections and ICT equipment with connections to digital contents
- Sufficient space

These key criteria represent challenges to libraries in many countries. That is why we at IFLA, national library associations and all libraries need to act as advocates and spokespeople for libraries to make the decision-makers and politicians, and all other relevant stakeholders, aware not only of the benefits of libraries to society but, at the same time, of the needs of libraries if they are to fulfil their tasks.

Therefore, we need innovative ways to make libraries more visible. One example is the Cycling for Libraries un-conference where librarians cycle locally, regionally or even internationally to campaign for libraries, gather media attention and attract politicians, patrons and non-patrons to discuss libraries in open dialogue, like they did this year, cycling from Amsterdam in The Netherlands to Brussels in Belgium and delivering a message on libraries to the European Parliament.

What is a strong society like?

It is my understanding that strong societies consist of informed citizens who actively participate in their community and promote sustainable development, intellectual and economic growth as well as general well-being.

A strong society is open, free and equal, giving its citizens the possibilities to use all their knowledge, abilities and skills to benefit their own and their families' lives, the community they live in and thus their entire society.

One of the pillars of strong libraries and strong societies is the democratic ideal of freedom of access to information and knowledge.

Background of my theme

IFLA is actively working on issues and projects concerned with libraries and development. This has also inspired me when I planned my presidential theme.

My theme also springs from our own experiences in Finland and from the personal experiences that I have gained in libraries in other parts of the world. I would like to share these with you.

Finland has developed from a poor agrarian country into a modern, knowledge-based economy in the past fifty, perhaps sixty years.

When the first schools and libraries were established about 150 years ago, the standard of living of Finns was very low. Since the 1960s, the government has promoted an effective education system and free access to information through an extensive library network as part of the welfare state policy.

According to the constitution, freedom of access to information and equal opportunity to develop themselves without being prevented by economic hardship are basic rights for all citizens. Libraries are seen as crucial actors in promoting these values. Thus the government supports libraries. They are included in the Government Platform which is the highest political platform and framework in Finland.

Finland has a national library policy with strategic documents outlining library development. This guarantees adequate and sustainable funding and purposeful development of library services, as well as the long tradition of trained staff and financial support from the state.

Today, about 80% of Finns use the library regularly. Both public and research libraries are open and free of charge to all.

Both the education system and the library system are based on the same principles: equality and inclusion. They have contributed greatly to the social cohesiveness, cultural development and economic success currently enjoyed by Finns. Libraries build capacity and have an impact on the people's lives in Finland.

My theme also has its roots in my experiences while I was working in a library of the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College, an educational centre for South African refugees in Tanzania, in Eastern Africa. There, I appreciated thirst for knowledge in people living in exile, far away from their home country. In the village, the library was the heart of the centre. It supported the students of all ages in their school work. It provided the refugee community with literature, newspapers, films, music and cultural events to ease their feelings of homesickness and to prepare the people for repatriation when that time eventually came.

Dear colleagues, my goal during my Presidency is to facilitate the progress of the important issues in the IFLA Strategic Plan and Key Initiatives. I will by no means do this alone but together with my professional colleagues. The Governing Board of IFLA, professional units and the IFLA office have extremely competent professionals with whom it is a pleasure to work for the better of IFLA and libraries. I am looking forward to continue cooperation with Secretary General Jennefer Nicholson. I would like to thank all of you for the support you have given me.

I would also like to thank all my IFLA Governing Board Team and the international library community for your support during my term as President Elect.

Finally, I would like to extend special gratitude to Finland's Ministry of Education and Culture, all Finnish library associations, the Finnish library community and my Finnish Team for your support during my Presidency. Without it, my job would be impossible to do.

Dear colleagues, I hope for your continued support and confidence in my upcoming Presidential responsibilities. Doing this job together, we will achieve the best results in advancing IFLA's goals and in building strong libraries for strong societies.

Thank you for attention!