



Human Rights and Cultural Diversity

IFLA Response to the OHCHR Consultation,
27 April 2019

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) is the global organisation for libraries, created in 1927 with members in around 150 countries, representing the world's over 2.3 million libraries. We work both to promote libraries, and to strengthen the ability of our members to deliver equitable access to information to all as a driver of development.

IFLA appreciates the opportunity to contribute with relevant information, measures and good practices in realising human rights and cultural diversity on behalf of library associations and institutions around the world. We look forward to continuing the debate with the OHCHR in relevant forums.

Relevant information, measures and good practices in realising human rights and cultural diversity

Libraries are the primary institutions in any society for preservation of- and access to culture and information, as well as ensuring that everyone has the possibility to benefit from it and so realise their [cultural rights](#).

As a federation of associations and institutions, IFLA cooperates with actors at all levels, around the world. Our core work – supporting our members to provide the best possible services to their communities through the development of good practices, guidelines and standards – mobilises them to support the protection of cultural rights and promote cultural diversity.

In line with Article 2 of [Resolution 72/170](#), IFLA has also placed the Sustainable Development Goals at the heart of its own strategy, recognising and looking to build on the unique potential of libraries as drivers of equality, prosperity and wellbeing for all. In this, it works closely both with UN agencies (notably UNESCO and its national commissions, and the World Intellectual Property Office), and with civil society partners.

In line with Article 19 of the Resolution, IFLA supports initiatives which contribute to **creating, developing and maintaining societies that respect cultural diversity and human rights**. As institutions with a mission to collect and give access to knowledge, libraries are very well placed to support the dialogue called for in Article 11 of the Resolution. In particular, its [Special Interest Group on Religions, Libraries and Dialogue](#), which offers a space for how libraries can contribute to understanding between religions.

IFLA also affirms that respect for the diversity of culture, tolerance, dialogue and cooperation, in a climate of mutual trust and understanding are among the best guarantees of international peace and security. Model library programming responds to the recommendations of the OHCHR and the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, with the provision of diverse collections and events programming which supports people to understand their rights and to respect the right of others.

In 2012 IFLA and UNESCO published the [Multicultural Library Manifesto](#) acknowledging that the international community must recognise and support libraries and information services in their role of promoting and preserving cultural and linguistic diversity.



The Manifesto was reviewed in 2018 leading to the development of a [toolkit](#) to give practical approaches on how libraries can apply the Manifesto drawing on best practices from Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

The toolkit also provides practical examples on how to sustain the principles and actions described in the Manifest, such as a workshop outline and handbook to assist libraries in communicating the key elements of the Manifesto and the objectives of multicultural services to library professionals and their clients.

Libraries serve diverse interests of its communities, and they function as learning, cultural and information centres. In addressing cultural and linguistic diversity, library services are driven by their commitment to the principles of fundamental freedoms and equity of access to information and knowledge for all, in the respect of cultural identity and values. This work is particular supported by the IFLA [Library Services to Multicultural Populations Section](#), that brings together libraries and institutions interested in the development and availability of library services designed to meet the needs of cultural and linguistic minorities. The Section focus on issues such as language barriers for refugees and immigrants, and is promoting that library services must serve a diverse community.

Preservation of documentary heritage is of course a key mission of libraries. In particular, IFLA works with its sixteen [Preservation and Conservation Centres](#) to ensure that library and archive materials, published and unpublished, in all formats, will be preserved and in accessible form for as long as possible.

In this, increasing attention is being paid to the treatment of the heritage of **indigenous and marginalised communities**. There is a growing body of experience on how to respect and engage these communities and build strong relationships. This builds on a growing awareness that past practices have risked creating skewed collections, due to certain cultures being seen as more important than others.

This work passes, in particular, through IFLA's [Indigenous Matters Section](#). This section's work, in line with Articles 31 and 34 of the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) and the principles of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, has helped provide guidance on how to engage indigenous communities in the process of identification, selection, classification, interpretation, preservation/safeguard and development of indigenous cultural heritage.

Libraries are increasingly aware of their role in encouraging and fostering cultural diversity. The fact that they can offer a physical space, open to all and without commercial pressure, makes them particularly valuable in this regard. In addition to access to information and literature, libraries offer creative writing programmes and support journalism, 'making', and other activities that involve the enjoyment of artistic and creative freedom for all.

Increasingly, IFLA is focusing on the importance of **freedom of expression** as a vital complement to freedom of access to information, and has a [committee](#) dedicated to these parallel objectives. The importance of artistic freedom and access to information as an enabler of this also feeds into our engagement on copyright issues (in particular limiting the liability of the internet intermediaries who have facilitated so much creativity).

IFLA is active in supporting the **rights of women** through the work of the special interest group on Women, Information and libraries. They have focused on the role of libraries in protecting [women's rights](#) in conflict or crisis situations, with papers looking at both past and contemporary situations, and underlining what libraries can do and are doing. [This summary paper](#) highlights the key cases shared.



Challenges and issues relevant to the implementation of Resolution 72/170

A challenge affecting all cultural heritage organisations is a lack of adequate funding for their work. The fire at the National Museum in Brazil followed years of neglect and under-funding. Reduced opening hours and closures of public libraries in the United Kingdom have been the result of steep budget cuts, and affect both their ability to collect diverse collections and to provide services to their local communities in all their diversity.

Deliberate destruction of heritage and the libraries that hold it – often motivated by a desire to make different cultures and ways of thinking disappear – is also a concern. Attacks like the destruction of the library of the University of Mosul, or the burning of Jaffna Public Library in Sri Lanka underline to what extent libraries are a target for those who are intolerant to other ideas and cultures.

A more general worry is around the perception of culture being mainly about buildings, objects or music, rather than documentary works. Literature is an essential component of world cultural heritage, but tends to be the least well supported. Initiatives such as the International Year of Indigenous Languages offer a welcome opportunity to celebrate language as a key vehicle for culture, but more needs to be done to ensure sufficient focus is given to the books and other written materials that give language permanence.

There are of course issues around freedom of expression, with libraries subject to pressure from both users and authorities to remove or make less accessible works that deal with diversity. It is not always necessary for a government to act formally – there is can be risks of self-censorship (which may affect all of creators, publishers and librarians). The results of this call for evidence, in terms of offering insights into the incorporation of cultural rights into national laws will be valuable.