



Report on the GIOPS-FAIFE African Seminar and post-WSIS Conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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An innovative format and diverse program attracted more than eighty participants from all over Africa to a joint United Nations conference and IFLA seminar, held in Addis Ababa from 27 to 30 March 2006, under the umbrella title "Access to Information and Knowledge for Development".

The conference and seminar were cosponsored by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and by IFLA's Government Information and Official Publications Section (GIOPS) and office for Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE), with the participating support of the IFLA Africa section and of IFLA past president Kay Raseroka.

The four-day combined program marked the first international attempt by librarians anywhere to implement the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society, which had just concluded in Tunis in November 2005. It was also a successor event, awaited for eleven years, to the GIOPS Africa seminar of December 1994 in Harare, giving an opportunity for library professionals to assess how far the continent has come in the public provision by libraries of government information and information about governments, a fundamental tool of political free expression and democracy.

"Building of African Capacity to Implement the Outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society in the Sphere of Libraries and Access to Information and Knowledge" was the challenge of the first two days of the joint event. While the focus for these two days was on African follow-up to the World Summit, the part played by IFLA in the WSIS process was also highlighted, as was the international recognition which had been given by the Summit to the role of libraries in fostering civil society, democracy and human rights.

The focus of the last two days of the program was the IFLA GIOPS-FAIFE Seminar on the "Strategic Management and Use of Government Information in Africa", which included case studies and papers on strengthening free access to information and free expression through libraries in Africa, as well as on countries and situations where they are in danger. An American-style town hall meeting for the participants on whether free access to information is essential to democratic progress and economic development in Africa was one of the highlights of the final day.

Resolutions on an action framework for WSIS follow-up activities in Africa were agreed after small-group workshops. More significantly, perhaps, as their final act the African participants unanimously approved a resolution proposed by Jane Wu as chair of GIOPS and by Frank Kirkwood as representative of FAIFE, to turn themselves into an ongoing African librarians' forum for information exchange and action, communicating electronically and through a discussion group at IFLA under the name of "Access to Information Network - Africa".

While the primary language of participation was English, the program also encouraged the use of French and Portuguese by participants from those language communities. Most of the presentations of the conference and seminar can be found in English on the UNECA website at <http://www.uneca.org/disd/events/2006/wsis-library/main.html> .