



Libraries @ the heart of the Information Society: IFLA Pre-World Summit Conference Geneva, 3-4 November 2003

WHY A PRE-SUMMIT CONFERENCE?

We believe that libraries and librarians can and should have a key role in helping to deliver an equitable global information society. Most countries already have a network of libraries of many kinds. A relatively modest level of investment in new technology, training and, above all, content provision could kick-start the information revolution in many regions. Indeed there are already examples of good practice that are tackling the digital divide, broadening access and developing skills and opportunities.

But much of the formal preparation for the World Summit has been concerned with procedures and protocol. Even when they have got down to business, delegates have seemed more concerned with the 'pipes rather than the information that could be delivered by those pipes', as one observer has put it. Despite our strenuous efforts, libraries have received little attention. There is a clear danger that, dazzled by the lure of new technologies, delegates will concentrate on reinventing the wheel.

So we are inviting you to a Pre-Summit Conference, '**LIBRARIES @ the HEART of the Information Society**' in an attempt to bring together knowledgeable librarians, who are powerful advocates for the potential for libraries in the rapidly developing information society, with representatives of the national delegations to the World Summit itself. Librarians will have the opportunity to brief the delegates on the practical things libraries and librarians can do to put into place the ideals behind the concept of the global information society.

ABOUT THE SUMMIT

The UN Summit on the Information Society is being organised by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) in two phases. The first takes place in Geneva from 10-12 December 2003 and the second in Tunis in November 2005. The close involvement of the ITU has probably encouraged the emphasis so far in the preparatory stages on the technology rather than the content.

The Geneva Summit is expected to approve two documents, a Declaration of Principles and an Action Plan. The early drafts of these documents make only passing and unsatisfactory references to libraries. So there is much still to do to persuade the decision makers of the relevance of libraries.

It is expected that the final phase of the Summit in Tunis in November 2005 will measure the progress made on the action plan agreed in Geneva.

THE PREPARATORY PROCESS

Three Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) meetings were scheduled before the Geneva Summit. Two have been held already, the third will take place in September. The first was mainly concerned with procedural matters. The second concentrated on drafts of the final Declaration of Principles and the Action Plan, although there was still a great deal of time spent on procedural matters. The degree of involvement of "civil society" allowed, mainly through NGOs such as IFLA, was unsatisfactory. The opportunity still exists for us to convince the politicians and diplomats of the potential role of libraries.

In addition to the PrepComs, there have been several regional conferences. UNESCO has been very active, organising a series of consultative meetings in 2002 and electronic discussion forums last December and January. The draft Declaration of Principles and Action Plan are currently out for consultation and will be the subject of further work by the drafting group, at the Inter-Sessional meeting in Paris in July and at PrepCom3 in September .

WHAT HAS IFLA DONE SO FAR?

We were not represented at the largely procedural PrepCom 1, but we were at PrepCom 2 and we shall be at PrepCom 3, and at the Inter-Sessional meeting in Paris. At PrepCom 2 we had a team of eight people operating on a shift basis for the two-week meeting. We formed alliances with other organisations such as the International Council on Archives (ICA) and the International Publishers Association (IPA). We made sure that the voice of librarians was heard. We have produced a series of documents which can be seen at www.ifla.org/wsis. They are copyright free and may be used in whole or in part by anyone participating in the WSIS at international, regional or local levels, provided that due acknowledgement is given. We took an active part in a series of five consultation meetings held by UNESCO and in the electronic discussion forums. Mr. Adama Sammasékou, President of the WSIS Preparatory Committee will address a plenary session of the World Library and Information Congress: IFLA conference in Berlin on Monday 4th august 2003 -- 2003.ifla.org. The UNESCO Open Forum at the same conference will also be devoted to the World Summit.

WHAT NEXT?

Apart from the Pre-Summit Conference, November, we are involved in a number of activities:

- Developing a *Tool-Kit* for librarians to use in advocating the role of libraries in the information society. A draft the of *Tool-Kit* is at: www.ifla.org/files/assets/wsis/Documents/wsis_toolkit.pdf
- Contributing proposals for inclusion in the draft Declaration of Principles and draft Action Plan
- Planning our involvement in PrepCom 3 and the Summit itself
- Planning some publicity events during the Summit to highlight the importance of libraries.
- Preparing an attractive leaflet on the role of libraries in the information society.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

This is a huge opportunity for the international library community to make its voice heard.

- Find out who your national delegations to the Summit are at www.itu.int/wsis/participation/prepcom2
- Make contact with them
- Encourage them to be represented at the IFLA pre-Summit Conference (invitations are being sent to all national delegations)
- If they have not heard from us, tell us and we will send another invitation
- Use the *Tool Kit* to advocate for libraries with your government and other organisations involved in the World summit process, e.g. NGOs, national UNESCO commissions, etc.
- Publicise the World Summit and your involvement in your professional journals
- Let us know if there are powerful and influential advocates for libraries who should be invited to our Pre-Summit conference

AND FINALLY ...

The World summit has enormous potential to harness the power of ICTs to change people's lives for the better. But it also has the real possibility for disappointment. Remember the World Summit on Sustainable development? A very real danger is that, once again, the potentially vital role of libraries in helping in a practical way to deliver to people the information, inspiration and knowledge they need, will be ignored.

Register -- www.geneva-tourism.ch/formulaires/libraries.php -- for LIBRARIES @ the HEART of the Information Society by 5th September 2003.

Let's do our best to ensure that this time libraries are recognized!

Ross Shimmon
Secretary General

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