Your Royal Highness, dear CONSAL members, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to participate in the 16th CONSAL Conference here in Bangkok, Thailand. I thank the organisers the National Library of Thailand and the Thai Library Association for their kind invitation to speak here today. It is interesting and important for the IFLA President to learn what kinds of themes are being raised by the members of IFLA. The theme of this conference is ‘ASEAN Aspirations: Libraries for Sustainable Advancement’. This is a very relevant and crucial theme to the ASEAN libraries of today and for the future. I am looking forward to our discussions on this topic.

On behalf of IFLA, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the ASEAN libraries for your strong support to IFLA and your active participation in the Governing Board, as well as its committees and congresses over the years. The IFLA Regional Office for Asia and Oceania is hosted by the National Library Board of Singapore. The AO Regional IFLA Office is promoting and coordinating actively the IFLA policies, initiatives and activities and organising training and events. For instance, many of you may have participated in the Building Strong Library Associations regional meeting in Jakarta last year and are working on projects now. There will be a regional meeting devoted to the International Advocacy Program in September this year. At IFLA, we are looking forward to your continuous support also in the future. Thank you very much.

This is my first visit to Bangkok. In fact, one time I have travelled through Bangkok to your neighbouring country Laos PDR. Earlier, I have visited also some other ASEAN countries such as Singapore, Indonesia and The Philippines.

About IFLA

For those of you who might not be familiar with IFLA (The Federation of Library Associations and institutions) it is the leading international body representing the interests of libraries and information services and their users. The Federation is an independent, non-governmental, not-for-profit organisation. It was founded in Edinburgh in 1927. Our strength originates from our 1400 members representing nearly 150 countries. Our administrative offices are located in The Hague in The Netherlands.

We have three main aims. First to promote high standards in the provision and delivery of library and information services, second to encourage widespread understanding of their value to the communities they serve, and finally to represent the interests of our members throughout the world.
The President’s Theme: Strong Libraries, Strong Societies

Each President selects a theme that best describes her or his values and goals for the duration of their Presidential term. My theme is Strong Libraries, Strong Societies. The core message of the theme is this: Libraries exert their critical influence on societies and their development by promoting equal opportunities and providing equitable access to lifelong learning and education, research and innovation, culture and recreation for all. In so doing, libraries can contribute to building stronger societies.

Background of the theme

I chose this theme, in part, because it springs from our own experiences in Finland that can now be regarded as an active and strong library country. But it wasn’t always that way.

Finland has developed from a poor agrarian country to a modern, knowledge-based economy in a rather short period of time – over the past fifty, perhaps sixty years, in fact in a lifetime.

We differ from most developed Western countries in the late timing, rapid speed and intensity of our transition into a 21st century industrial state.

Although Finland gained its independence in 1917, it wasn’t until after the Second World War that the pace of development began to pick up. Since then, 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 our constitution, it is a basic right for citizens to have freedom of access to information. Libraries are seen as crucial actors in promoting this access and they have been included in what is called the Government Platform, which is the highest political framework for action and public policy in Finland.

I believe that it is because of the government policies, the continuous and active development work done by the libraries themselves and the encouragement by the library associations to support our profession that libraries are so deeply rooted in today’s Finnish society. On average, each Finn visits the library nearly ten times a year and borrows 17 loans per year. Books, reading and libraries are all highly valued in Finland.

Both public and research libraries are open and free of charge to all. In a national library customer survey conducted in 2010, over 70% of the 13,000 respondents stated that libraries had improved their quality of life.

My theme also has its roots in my experiences in other countries. Especially during my Presidency I have visited libraries in many countries. But I have also an earlier experiences that have strongly influenced me. I also would like to mention Tanzania, where I was working in a library of an educational centre for South African refugees more than 20 years ago. There, I experienced the power of knowledge to people living in exile, far away from their home country. The library was the heart of the centre. It supported 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 them for repatriation when that time eventually came.
That early experience has strongly affected me both personally and professionally and made me very aware of the differences, especially the imbalances, between developed and developing countries in access to information and knowledge.

This is where IFLA plays a fundamental role in advancing libraries and library associations in all parts of the world. It provides strategic tools for the development of libraries like the Trend Report, The Lyon Declaration and the Building Strong Library Associations Program to name just few.

IFLA, Libraries and Development

I have learnt that no matter if we are from a so-called developed, developing or transitioning economy, one thing is very clear. The better that our libraries are developed, the better they can support their user communities and promote socio-economic and democratic development for the benefit of all sectors of society.

Nonetheless just like most other public institutions, libraries have not remained immune from setbacks - stemming principally from the global economic downturn. All over the world, libraries are experiencing cuts in their funding which of course affects their functioning and development in so many ways.

Having said that, the core functions of libraries - access to, organisation and delivering of quality information have not disappeared; in fact they are more important than ever in today’s digital world.

As one of my IFLA colleagues recently noted, “Public libraries offer expertise. Dedicated staff provide advice, which can be the difference between users simply accessing information and being able to use it. Public libraries can offer something for everyone in the community – the children and youth, women and girls, the vulnerable and marginalised, the entrepreneur and established businessman, the inventor or the health worker”. This holds true for academic libraries as well when they are serving teachers, researchers and students.

Just as libraries can offer critical support to individuals, so too can they become centres of community support and development at the local level. In this way, libraries can help governments achieve their own development goals by offering access to the Internet and online and printed information resources to citizens.

To that end, IFLA is working actively on libraries and development issues and projects, which I also had in mind when I planned my Presidential theme.

The Statement on Libraries and Development

Effective and efficient economic development in the 21st century, by definition, demands access to information by all segments of society on an almost infinite range of topics: from how to find a job, to how to start a business, or how to provide information on study possibilities. We believe that libraries can promote growth by helping people to obtain the information they need in order to access economic opportunities, improve their health or support their communities, to name but three benefits that libraries can provide.

To promote this development, IFLA has launched a Statement on Libraries and Development stating that:
Libraries provide opportunity for all

Libraries are found in all locations – in the countryside and in the city, on the campus and in the workplace. Libraries serve all people, regardless of their race, national or ethnic origin, gender or sexual preference, age, disability, religion, economic circumstances or political beliefs. Libraries support vulnerable and marginalised populations and help ensure that no person is denied basic economic opportunities and human rights.

Libraries empower people for their own self-development

Libraries underpin a society where people from any background can learn, create and innovate. Libraries support a culture of literacy and foster critical thinking and inquiry. Through libraries, people can harness the power of technology and the Internet to improve their lives and their communities. Libraries protect the rights of users to access information in a safe environment. Libraries are socially and culturally inclusive. They can help all people engage with the public institutions they need to access services, and can act as gateways to civic participation and new e-government services.

Libraries offer access to the world’s knowledge

Libraries are an essential part of the critical infrastructure that supports education, jobs and community growth. They offer meaningful, convenient access to information in all its forms, whether it is in a manuscript, printed, audio-visual or digital format. They can support formal, informal and lifelong learning, the preservation of folk memories, traditional and indigenous knowledge, and the national cultural and scientific heritage. When national information policies aim to improve telecommunications and provide high-speed broadband networks, libraries are natural partners for the provision of public access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and networked information resources.

Librarians provide expert guidance

Library staff are trained, trusted intermediaries dedicated to guiding people to the information they seek. Librarians provide training and support for the media and information literacies people need to better understand and participate in the information society. They are also cultural stewards, curating and providing access to cultural heritage and supporting the development of identity.

Libraries are part of a multi-stakeholder society

Libraries work effectively with many different stakeholder groups in varied situations. They deliver programmes and services alongside local and national governments, community groups, charities, funding organisations, and private and corporate enterprises. Librarians are agile actors who are able to work alongside others in governments, civil society, business, academia and the technical community to help deliver policy goals.

Libraries must be recognised in development policy frameworks

As libraries have a natural role in providing access to the information content and networked services that underpin sustainable development, policymakers should encourage the strengthening and provision of libraries and utilise the skills of librarians and other information workers to help solve development problems at community levels.
Libraries support national development plans

Libraries represent a strong investment in a community. They offer all citizens opportunities to gain access to and use information and knowledge that can enable them to actively participate in society. This contributes to the economy by enabling members of the community to improve their employability skills, and health and wellbeing, use their creative potential, expand reading and literacy skills, and create new knowledge.

In order to further the potential of communities through libraries, libraries should be positioned within the national vision and the following relevant targets

- Employment target – Libraries can facilitate employment by helping people develop necessary skills and find jobs
- Research and Development target – Libraries facilitate and support research activities
- Education target – Libraries support all levels of education
- Poverty and social exclusion target - Libraries provide safe places for everyone and include all layers of society

In order to keep our libraries strong and active agents for development also in the future, it is important to advocate for the inclusion of access to information, culture and ICTs for development within the UN Post2015 Development Goals process and to adapt our services to meet the needs of the citizens in the changing digital information environment.

IFLA therefore urges policymakers and development practitioners to leverage these powerful existing resources and ensure that any post 2015 development framework:

- Recognises the role of access to information as a fundamental element supporting development
- Acknowledges the role of libraries and librarians as agents for development
- Encourages UN Member State support of the information frameworks underpinning development – providing networks, information and human resources – such as libraries and other public interest bodies

The Lyon Declaration

Next, I would like to refer to the Lyon Declaration on Access to Information and Development. This is an IFLA initiative that was launched last year at the Lyon IFLA Congress. It is an advocacy document which is intended to exert a positive influence on the UN’s post-2015 development goals. IFLA is campaigning to collect signatures by September 2015 from libraries and other organisations to support the declaration. Today we have more than 550 signatories.

The Principles of The Lyon Declaration state that access to information supports sustainable development by empowering people for instance to:

- Exercise their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.
• Be economically active, productive and innovative.

• Learn and apply new skills

• Enrich cultural identity and expression.

The Lyon Declaration offers library associations a huge opportunity to demonstrate leadership, be responsive to their community and wider society, and to work with partners to influence policy and decision-makers. In particular, associations can take the initiative to lead the sector in advocating for the role of libraries to their UN national delegation – utilising IFLA’s resources (http://www.ifla.org/libraries-development), and becoming involved in the preparation of national development plans.

Policy makers, funders, and development agencies need to start looking at the potential of libraries and thinking of them as partners in development activities. Conversely, libraries themselves must do more to publicize the services they offer and the role they can - and are - playing in the economic and social life of the communities they serve.

One concrete example of this is that IFLA urges library associations to contact their national UN delegations and explain that for libraries, the most important goal of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals is the goal numbered 16.10 that refers directly to ensuring the public access to information. IFLA’s aim is to assure that this goal stays in the final version of SDGs.

Framework for strong libraries

For libraries to be strong, I believe that they must operate within the context of a legal framework. By that I mean, governments must recognize that rights of free access to information and furthermore, freedom of expression must be established as a basic civil right, constitutionally and through legislation. Library legislation, in fact, must provide strong support for the development of comprehensive library and information services.

Thus, national library policies with strategic documents outlining this path are critical. Furthermore, national recommendations or standards are needed to promote consistency in service delivery.

It follows then that with such recognition and policy support from government, libraries can legitimately request sustainable funding for the key services they provide to the community. Not just for the provision of improved physical infrastructure and collections, but also to ensure the availability of library education to train more professional staff.

How to define a strong library?

So how do we define strong libraries? Perhaps their strength is defined by their mission. Professor R. David Lankes, of Syracuse University, USA has suggested that the core mission of libraries, public and otherwise, is creating a nation of informed and active citizens and the job of the library is to fulfil the needs of the community members, and not simply to house materials. Libraries need to be very aware of and responsive to the environment that they and library professionals are part of, not simply spectators. Libraries have tended to focus on their collections, and user needs were secondary to that task; now the
user is their prime concern, and collections and services are driven by user needs and societal changes. That really should be the case if the library is doing its job in being relevant to its community.

From my perspective, if we wish to accomplish this goal, then libraries must be seen by their user communities as welcoming safe places, with adequate space, staffed by competent and helpful personnel, and provide access to up to date resources relevant to their needs, including digital contents.

Of course this all can’t be left to individual libraries and librarians. The burden is too great. They must be supported at the local and national levels by their library associations and at the international level by IFLA. They, in fact all of us, need to act as advocates and spokespeople for all libraries. We must do that so that the decision-makers and politicians and other relevant stakeholders are made aware not only of the benefits of libraries for society but, at the same time, of the needs of libraries if they are to fulfil their mandates, including fostering community development and civic participation.

In fact it would be useful to point out to all decision makers, but perhaps especially to politicians, that the economic return for investing in libraries is excellent. Surveys have consistently shown that for every baht or dollar spent on libraries, about 4 bahts or dollars are returned to the economic benefit of the communities they serve.

It is only through such advocacy that libraries can hope to secure adequate funding even during harsh economic times.

What is a strong society like?

So, if that is what strong libraries look like, then what is the profile of a strong society? It stands to reason that strong societies consist of informed citizens who actively participate in the life of their community.

Strong societies are open, free and equal, giving their 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. And that lies at the heart of a country’s socio-economic development.

For its part, IFLA, through a variety of strategies and services, helps to build the strategic capacity of its members to strengthen the role of libraries and library associations in the knowledge society worldwide. In this regard, IFLA has launched the IFLA Trend Report in Singapore 2013 and it is available on the IFLA website. The report is not just concerned with what libraries will look like in a decade’s time, but concentrates also on what society might look like and how libraries may adapt to best serve what society needs. The report identified five trends that affect a society and in that way also how it impacts on libraries. These trends are:

- NEW TECHNOLOGY WILL EXPAND ACCESS TO INFORMATION, BUT ALSO PRESENT BARRIERS
- ONLINE LEARNING WILL TRANSFORM AND DISRUPT TRADITIONAL EDUCATION
- BOUNDARIES OF DATA PROTECTION AND PRIVACY WILL BE REDEFINED
- HYPER-CONNECTED SOCIETIES WILL RECOGNISE AND EMPOWER NEW VOICES
- OUR GLOBAL INFORMATION ECONOMY WILL BE TRANSFORMED BY NEW TECHNOLOGIES
The report provides opportunities for discussion and debate, to assist our sector in realizing its place in the information society and society at large. Discussions on the Report are on-going in many countries and they make it easier to understand the necessary changes in libraries to allow them to respond to the changing needs of their users. These issues were also discussed at my second IFLA President’s Meeting in Istanbul last week. Our theme was the Art of Transforming Libraries, based on both the Lyon Declaration and the Trend Report. There were many inspiring presentations on these topics. We continue these discussions also at the IFLA World Library and Information Congress in Cape Town. I wish you all warmly welcome to attend the congress and share your thoughts with us all.

Conclusion

With that, let me conclude my remarks.

I am very happy to have had this opportunity to share with you today my thoughts about Strong Libraries for Sustainable Development. I will leave you with my favorite quote by the American social reformer Henry Ward Beecher who said: ‘Libraries are not a luxury, they are one of the necessities of life’. Never were truer words spoken, and I believe they have more relevance today than ever before, particularly in the context of our discussions today.

Thankyou.