

Freedom of Information and the Library

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Abstract: The present article examines progress in reorienting libraries towards more effective participation in the freedom of information process. In 1997 the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) set up its Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) Committee to promote information rights in the context of libraries. In 2008, an IFLA Manifesto on Transparency, Good Governance and Freedom from Corruption was adopted. Learning materials derived from this manifesto were first piloted in Vietnam and India. Further workshops were held in Iceland and Argentina and the success of the whole program has culminated in the Serbian experience.

Keywords: Freedom of information, libraries, IFLA, FAIFE, transparency, freedom of expression, Serbia

1. Introduction

“IFLA has on numerous occasions and in many forums made clear its belief in the positive role of libraries in society and its commitment to enhancing this role. It has consistently linked this to the principle of Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression, as set out in Article 19 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.”¹

In what follows, I will describe what has been done by IFLA FAIFE² in order to show the direction for libraries to reorient themselves as transparency institutions. In particular I will describe the programme undertaken in my country- Serbia.

¹IFLA [Manifesto on Transparency, Good Governance and Freedom from Corruption](http://www.ifla.org/publications/ifla-manifesto-on-transparency-good-governance-and-freedom-from-corruption).
<http://www.ifla.org/publications/ifla-manifesto-on-transparency-good-governance-and-freedom-from-corruption>

² The Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression Committee

Just let's firstly define transparency. Ann Florini³(2000) defined it as being opposite of secrecy. Secrecy means deliberately hiding your actions, while transparency means deliberately revealing them, she says. Though Florini emphasizes volition, transparency is not always voluntary, although the movement toward transparency is often voluntary.

Paul Sturges⁴(2012) has painted a more complex portrait of this phenomenon: 'It is best to regard transparency as the adoption of openness, whether imposed or voluntary, in both public and private sectors with the central aim of promoting good governance and a strong secondary aim of combating crime and corruption'.

2. The Transparency Manifesto

The idea that libraries could be rethought as transparency institutions, as well as the idea that FAIFE should work towards a new IFLA Manifesto on transparency began to take shape around 2005. Two national library associations that have a permanent FAIFE committee in their structure were involved in this phase of the 'rethinking' process- the Croatian Library Association and the South African association. An emerging central European democracy and a very newly democratic African state.

Primarily, the CLA agreed to attach a FAIFE one day workshop entitled 'Libraries, Civil Society Organisations and the Struggle Against Corruption' to its annual celebration of the International Day of Human Rights at the National Library of Croatia in Zagreb, in 2006. The Department of Information Science at the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Philosophy also agreed to be a partner. Speakers from Croatia, Bosnia, Russia, Germany, the USA, South Africa and Britain were brought together for the occasion in order to discuss the activities of anti-corruption activists and the frequency of corruption in the library profession itself.

The 'rethinking' process involving the FAIFE Committee of LIASA, the South African association, continued in 2007. This country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up under an Act of Parliament of 1995 is an outstanding example of introducing transparency into a previously secretive system. The aim was to allow the revelation of the truth about what really happened in the enormous number of cases of human rights violations that had taken place under the apartheid system.

At the end of these workshops, a list of sub-topics that might eventually form part of a policy statement, were compiled by the FAIFE representatives.

³ Founding director of the Centre on Asia and Globalization at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

⁴ Former FAIFE Chair

IFLA Manifesto was formally accepted in 2008, however the existence of a policy document was only a starting point. In order to increase the likelihood that it would be known and used, funds from SIDA⁵ and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation were committed to introducing learning materials that could be used by library associations and other interested parties. This process began at an experts' workshop held in Germany in 2008. Invited participants from countries including Russia, South Africa, Nigeria, Mexico, worked systematically through the Manifesto. The detailed report of proceedings was then turned into the materials.

These learning materials derived from the IFLA Manifesto on Transparency were first piloted in India in 2009 (by Kai Ekholm⁶ and Barbara Jones⁷), and then in Vietnam, also in 2009 by Paul Sturges. In order to further reinforce the dissemination of the Manifesto, two more workshops were carried out during 2011. These workshops took place in Iceland and in Buenos Aires. And has the Manifesto been acted upon since then? To suggest the shape of an answer I am going, as the co-author of the project 'Transparency, Good Governance and Freedom from Corruption', to describe my country's experience and offer it as an example of good professional involvement.

3. The Serbian experience

Today, wherever there is need for change or improvement, the Manifesto on Transparency offers the profession a clear statement to guide it. It calls on the library profession to make itself as corruption-free as possible. The fact is that insufficiently respected profession is more vulnerable to corruption, and that is the reason why the Manifesto recommends campaigning on librarians' status and pay. Where a country has freedom of information laws librarians are recommended to make the library a support centre for potential inquirers and where a country does not have information access or freedom of information laws, or such laws are not effective, then to campaign for their introduction. The cooperation with anti-corruption NGOs is also recommended. Training programmes for both librarians and their users are suggested. Transparency is an indispensable requirement for good governance which needs capable professionals to ensure its presence and continuance. An extensive collection of official information materials is also suggested. Most of this will not be easy policy to adopt in countries where corrupt governments repress criticism in a heavy-handed way.

In 2010 the Serbian Library Association identified Serbia as a country perfectly positioned for interventions in favour of transparency, good governance and freedom from corruption. Being conscious of the serious consequences of

⁵ The Swedish International Development and Cooperation Agency

⁶ Chair of FAIFE

⁷ FAIFE advisor and former Secretary

Country Rating Results

TOP 10		BOTTOM 10	
Serbia	135	Austria	39
India	130	Greece	46
Slovenia	130	Tajikistan	51
Liberia	126	Germany	52
El Salvador	124	Jordan	56
Mexico	119	Russia	58
Antigua	117	Italy	58
Ukraine	115	Taiwan	60
Croatia	114	Belgium	60
Ethiopa	114	Uzbekistan	61

To say that Serbia is perfectly positioned does not, however, mean that such an intervention was easy. Effectively acquiring transparency related publications and databases, providing information services that deal with laws, liaising effectively with civil society organisations, all of this requires a certain amount of courage. The challenge was taken up by the SLA, despite a genuine sense of danger. We started the project at a Librarians' Day in the city of Nis, with even 70 participants. Seven libraries (Krusevac, Belgrade, Novi Sad, Pirot, Kladovo, Bor and Pozarevac) were selected to participate.

Cooperation on the project was obtained from:

1. Anticorruption Agency of Republic of Serbia
2. The Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection of the Republic of Serbia
3. Transparency International - Serbia Chapter
4. Individual supporter: Ms Vesna Pesic, Member of Serbian Parliament and well known fighter for human rights in Serbia
5. Ombudsman - Protector of Citizens of Vojvodina
6. Ombudsman - Protector of Citizens of City of Novi Sad
7. US Embassy in Belgrade
8. American Corners in Serbia
9. Goethe-Institute Library - Belgrade

Anti Corruption Agency sent a Board member to six of the events and the Commissioner for Information organised important lectures on the anti-

corruption theme in Belgrade. Without this valuable support, the Project activities would definitely have had much less credibility.

At the beginning of the project realization, FAIFE advisor and Director of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom, Barbara Jones, was invited to visit Serbia. In February 2011, she conducted a workshop on the Transparency Manifesto at the Goethe Institute in Belgrade and gave talks at other locations. The project that followed consisted of a series of activities whose objective was to raise awareness about the problem of corruption by promoting and providing free access information and freedom of expression in the library community in Serbia. Activities included citizens' panels and workshops to train librarians in the use of information that will help citizens in understanding the law and claiming their rights. The Transparency Project activities were conducted in seven public libraries and eight American corners throughout Serbia.

What has been done through the project activities is to ingrain the idea of the libraries as transparency institutions somewhere in the collective mentality of the Serbian library profession. What has been worked on since is trying and making an effort to strengthen that idea through activities including special training programs, arranging talks about fight against corruption, acquiring transparency related publications, cooperating in the creation of anti-corruption portals which link content from official and other relevant sources and so on. And now, almost three years after the completion of the project, it is possible to claim the following:

- The project organisers emerged from this campaign firmly convinced that libraries, especially the public ones, can be centres to support the right of free access to information.
- Both librarians and citizens involved in the activities are grateful to learn more about how to get information about their right of free access to information of public importance.
- Librarians become more aware of their potential role as citizens' advisors on free access to information.
- Librarians also say that they had been shown how they might support this and similar campaigns- particularly by arranging talks about fight against corruption.
- The most important is message that campaigns and discussions on this subject are imperative examples to follow and that they should be continued in the future.

4. Conclusion

Circumstances for libraries are difficult in most parts of the world. There is, among others, a confusion over roles, especially when it comes to library as a transparency institution. In most environments, as it is the case with Serbia, it

will represent an ideal to be pursued over the long term. Times are not easy for libraries, however, the IFLA Manifesto on Transparency, Good Governance and Freedom from Corruption with its accompanying learning materials provides an important lead, and the example of Serbia shows how that lead can be taken further forward.

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