Role of IGF and APrIGF in reference to Libraries in Nepal.

– Winston Roberts[1]

The background :

The international library community became involved in work on Internet governance on the occasion of the two United Nations World Summits on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 and 2005. One of the outcomes of the second WSIS was recognition by all stakeholding sectors - states members of the UN, civil society organisations, business and the Internet technical community - of the need for good governance of the Internet, to which all stakeholders would contribute. The second WSIS in 2005 established the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) which has held annual meetings since that time. This multi-stakeholder global forum was mandated by the UN to discuss all aspects of Internet governance in terms of their importance as public policy issues. The IGF is run by a secretariat located at the UN in Geneva.

The international technical community is heavily involved in Internet governance through the work of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the Internet Society (ISOC), and Internet societies in most countries. One of the governance processes that is visible to the general public is the Internet domain name registration system. National governments are responsible for such things as national communications policies (including cybersecurity), legislation and regulation, and infrastructure. The business sector is concerned because the Internet underpins trade and everyday commercial relationships. Civil society organisations are concerned because the digitisation of society and the now ubiquitous Internet has had major consequences for the media, interactions between governments and citizens, human rights, and relations among all sections of society.

IFLA has been engaging and working with the Internet Governance Forum since it began, to help bring a library perspective, facilitate dialogue, and build partnerships with like-minded stakeholders in policy discussions on how to build a more equitable and inclusive digital environment.

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The IGF is a valuable platform for multistakeholder dialogue on many areas which shape the work of libraries in the digital environment: equitable access to computers and the Internet (including through libraries), digital and media literacy, data privacy, copyright laws governing access to electronic content, Open Access, human rights online, digitising cultural and heritage materials, and more.

IFLA and members of the global library field have taken part in different Internet Governance Forum platforms and processes - the global annual Forum, regional and national IGF initiatives like the Asia-Pacific regional Internet Governance Forum (APrIGF), intersessional activities taking place throughout the year (e.g. Best Practice Forums, Dynamic Coalitions, several phases of the 'Connecting and Enabling the Next Billion(s)' initiative, and many others).

IFLA is a founding member of the Dynamic Coalition on Public Access in Libraries (DC-PAL), which is an open network of stakeholders interested in ways to power and support digital inclusion through shared connectivity and access to ICTs in libraries and similar anchor institutions. DC-PAL fosters an exchange of good practices and innovative solutions, data gathering, and policy dialogue around public access.

- For example, some recent works of DC-PAL include: Public Access Policy Toolkit[2], a 2-part report on the role of libraries in national broadband policies – and case studies on how library-based digital inclusion policy interventions were implemented on the ground, Principles on Public Access in Libraries[3], a draft overview of recent evidence on the impacts of public access in libraries, and more.

- IFLA encourages its members to find out more about the different ways libraries can get involved in the IGF, and why it is worthwhile for libraries to take part: see the Get Into IGF Guide[4].

The APrIGF:

The Asia-Pacific regional Internet Governance Forum (APrIGF) was created in 2010. Its activities are decided and organised by a Multistakeholder Group (MSG) including representatives of the Internet technical sector, civil society organisations, governments, academia, and businesses across the Asia-Pacific region. It currently has an operational secretariat located at Dot. Asia in Hong Kong. The APrIGF has held an annual meeting each year at different venues across the region – physical meetings until 2019, then (due to the Covid-19 pandemic) a virtual meeting in 2020 and a hybrid meeting in 2021. The 2021 meeting was hosted by the Nepal Internet Society in Kathmandu, as had been agreed, but the pandemic conditions prevented foreign participation on site, so the Kathmandu location

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2   Public Access Policy Toolkit: Public Access Policy Toolkit – IFLA
3   Principles on Public Access in Libraries – IFLA
4   Get into IGF (ifla.org)

became a 'local hub' and the APrIGF Secretariat provided remote online access to hundreds of participants from around the region.

IFLA first engaged with APrIGF in 2013 – the APriGF meeting was in Incheon, Korea, immediately after the IFLA Congress in Singapore. I was asked by IFLA to organise and convene a workshop on Internet governance issues important to the library sector. The IFLA workshop was integrated into the 4-day programme of the APrIGF event. The aim of the workshop was to advocate for the interests of the library sector, and to raise awareness among delegates from the technical and other sectors that:

- library and information services rely on the World Wide Web (i.e. the Internet) as a platform for the provision of most of their services,
- libraries and other cultural institutions provide content for dissemination on the Internet,
- the library sector in all countries absolutely needs to be able to rely on a well governed, efficiently run Internet.

The library sector works to promote equitable and inclusive public access to information. In order to achieve this goal, we need the Internet to be available to all persons without discrimination, young and old, whatever their personal circumstances, wherever they may live, at a cost they can afford. Libraries need the Internet to be 'always on', a trusted and neutral service, safe for all to use. These are among the public policy issues which the IGF addresses.

The library sector, like the rest of the population, needs good physical infrastructure to support universal connectivity. In practice, of course, the actual technologies used to provide meaningful connectivity will vary according to economic conditions and geography. The widely accepted standard for meaningful connectivity[5] covers such requirements as sufficient speed, reliability, daily access with sufficient data, and takes into account that users connect to the Internet in a range of different locations: at their work, their home, or their library. Ideally, countries will progress towards having fast broadband services everywhere, fibre connections, Wi-Fi in people's homes, and all users will have a choice of affordable computers and other devices for accessing the Internet.

Many of the technologies and devices which we now take for granted did not exist when the Internet Governance Forum was set up back in 2005. Now, many libraries - where possible - deliver information services adapted for smartphones, and in some countries education services also are delivered by smartphone to young people in rural areas. Libraries are responding to the need to help people of all ages become not only 'information literate' (able to understand and critically evaluate the accuracy and truthfulness of information they find) but also 'digitally information literate' (able to use the digital devices, applications and connections they need to get information from the Internet, to evaluate it, and then use it to improve their lives).

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5   See: the A4AI [Alliance for Affordable Internet) 2022 Meaningful Connectivity report at https://webfoundation.org/2022/02/meaningful-connectivity-a-new-measure-for-internet-access/

Library staff, as intermediaries and teachers of digital information literacy, also know that cybersecurity is vital: staff must ensure that younger users are protected from inappropriate content online, and that all users are taught how to deal with false content, viruses, hack attacks, malicious behaviour on social media, and other evils.

APrIGF and Nepal :

At the APrIGF virtual meeting in 2020, the IFLA libraries workshop was on the theme of 'Access to Information'. IFLA invited Gita Thapa, former president of the Nepal Library Association, to speak about the role of libraries in Nepal – using the Internet in community libraries, teaching digital skills to users. This presentation was so successful, and generated such discussion between the panel and the online audience (mainly a non-library audience), that IFLA invited Ms Thapa to return at the APrIGF hybrid meeting in 2021 and speak at the IFLA workshop on 'Digital Information Literacy'.

This was again an interesting presentation, showing the professional work of public libraries in Nepal; it enabled the audience to compare and contrast that work with library services in two other vastly different situations: services to remote and isolated rural populations in the vastness of Queensland (Australia), and services to citizens of the densely-populated 'hi-tech' city state of Singapore. These demonstrations showed that, while economic and social challenges may differ from country to country, the professional skills and dedication of librarians are similar everywhere. Equally, there are similarities in the roles which libraries across the Asia-Pacific region are taking on to continue facilitating access to information in the digital environment.

As one of the organisers of the recent APrIGF meetings, I listened on numerous occasions to presentations by senior officials and experts from the Internet community in Nepal, discussing their strong desire to host the APrIGF meeting in Nepal, and grappling with difficult questions ranging from national Internet policy, to conference logistics, to the assessment of risks in a global pandemic. They understand the importance of national information services to sustainable national development.

IFLA is fortunate to have the Nepal Library Association among its members. When international conditions improve, it is to be hoped that NLA members will take every opportunity to join in more IFLA activities in the Asia-Pacific region, in person or remotely. But more specifically, they should continue to engage with the Internet community in Nepal, and decision-makers, to ensure that the social, cultural and economic value of libraries is understood, and so that sustainable and affordable access by libraries to the Internet remains a high priority in Nepal.