

I thought I would share with fellow librarians my experiences at the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)'s General Assembly which took place in Geneva from 25 September to 3 October 2006. By invitation from IFLA, I attended from 25-29 September 2006.

The WIPO Assemblies brought together the 183 member states of the Organisation for discussion and debate on a number of very important matters, including the Development Agenda, the Broadcasting Treaty, the Singapore Treaty on the Law of Trademarks, Audiovisual Performances, Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge and Folklore; IP and the Internet Domain Name System; Participation of international non-governmental organisations in WIPO, etc. There were also many international NGOs, intergovernmental organisations, IP experts and observers in attendance at the Assembly meetings. IFLA and eIFL.net are part of the NGO community. Decisions taken at this Assembly are available on the WIPO website [www.wipo.int](http://www.wipo.int).

It was a real privilege for me to attend this prestigious General Assembly which meets annually in Geneva. I have never been to a meeting of a United Nations organisation. It was a real eye-opener to see how such organisations function. Each member country had several delegates who attended different sessions, depending on their areas of expertise.

Formal sessions involved discussions and interventions on specific issues by the various Govt. delegations. This was a long process as sometimes up to 40-50 countries had their say on a particular issue, sometimes even

repeating sentiments or concerns of other countries. It is all done on a consensus basis. NGOs were permitted to observe in the main conference room (space permitting) or in a room set aside specially for NGOs to observe via teleconferencing. When consensus was not reached (e.g. on the Development Agenda and the Broadcasting Treaty), delegations then split into informal discussions where NGOs were not permitted to observe.

Many NGOs, including IFLA and eIFL.net attend WIPO meetings and they play a very important role in the process. During the week, they engaged with Government officials and other NGOs, mainly during session breaks.

They were also given a session to make statements on the evening of 27 September 2006. Several NGOs delivered statements. I delivered a Joint Statement on the Development Agenda on behalf of IFLA and eIFL at this session. These statements will be included in WIPO's General Assembly proceedings.

I got to meet officials from various countries, including South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia, Malawi, Brazil, Botswana, Argentina, Mozambique, Chile, Uruguay, Kenya, Ukraine, Lesotho and Tunisia. I also met representatives from various NGOs, as well as the President of the Association for the Promotion of Intellectual Property in Africa. He expressed interest in communicating online on copyright matters.

All in all, it was a very interesting, educational and worthwhile experience. It also showed how the wheels of change turn very slowly in such a huge UN organisation. For instance, the discussions on the Broadcasting

Treaty have already taken 8 years and will continue with two more SCCR meetings and a Diplomatic Conference next year. Since WIPO works on a consensus basis, it takes a great deal of time, discussion and compromise to reach definite decisions on any matter. The Development Agenda has gained momentum, fortunately, and it is hoped that it will be addressed more expeditiously than many other WIPO matters have been to date. South Africa is a member of the Africa Group and the Group of Friends of Development, which are supporting the Development Agenda.

Briefly I also got to meet the famous Brazilian singer and key person in the Bosa Nova movement, Gilberto Gil, who is the Minister of Culture in Brazil.

What was very clear to me was the important role librarians currently play and can play in the future with regard to copyright issues on the global stage. IFLA, eIFL and EBLIDA, the European umbrella body for library associations, have already done exceptional work in this regard, bringing the needs of librarians and access to knowledge issues to the attention of the WIPO community. These organisations have full accreditation to attend all the WIPO meetings, which gives them the opportunity to make important statements on behalf of librarians around the globe. It was quite clear, though, that librarians from developing countries need to play a more active role in global copyright issues if they want their needs to be addressed in their national copyright laws.

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## Indaba of Friends of Libraries

In August 2002 the Friends of Rondebosch and Bellville libraries in Cape Town invited representatives of other groups of library Friends in the Uicity to an Indaba. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss common problems, share ideas and debate issues, such as enlisting greater community support for local public libraries; the extension of library activities to the benefit of local communities; ways of fundraising, and projects that could make communities more conscious of the importance of reading and their libraries. The meeting was attended by people from 12 associations of Friends, some as old as 30 years. A pilot committee was formed to investigate these issues and take the initiative forward.

The committee met regularly and its minutes were distributed to all the associations of library friends who had access to e-mail. In time it was decided to invite LIASA Western Cape to nominate a representative to the committee, where it has been represented ever since.

During the first year the committee drew up a press release on the activities of Friends, for use by the group as a whole and by individual libraries. It drafted a prototype brochure for recruiting members, in English and in Afrikaans. The committee monitored

the library situation in the metropole and took action when appropriate, for instance at the time of the threat to close Woodstock Library. Responses to events reported in the media, such as the SmartCape project, were published as letters to the editors of various newspapers. The committee devised a strategy for obtaining publicity for public libraries and used contacts with the media, for instance an interview by the chairperson with Radio Sonder Grense. When libraries wanted to start associations of Friends or needed advice, the committee assisted in various ways, such as giving talks or holding discussions with interested groups.

When the second general meeting was held in 2003, it was already clear that the Indaba was fulfilling a useful function, and a proposal was adopted that the committee draft a constitution so that the Indaba could be given a formal structure. By this time groups outside the metropole, such as Paarl, had shown an interest in joining.

The main purpose of the general meeting in August 2004, was to approve and adopt the proposed constitution, which had in the meantime been circulated to all the associations of Friends for whom addresses were available. At the meeting the Chairperson took those present through the draft page by

page to give everyone an opportunity to comment on and question the decisions of the committee. It was decided to name the organisation the Indaba of Friends of Libraries (IFOL). No geographical border was specified, so as not to exclude associations of Friends in neighbouring local authorities who wished to join the organisation, as such a need had already been expressed by the Friends of Paarl Library.

The constitution was adopted and the pilot committee, with the agreement of the members, was formally elected to run the affairs of IFOL for the next year. As at the previous two meetings, this was a much appreciated opportunity for representatives to meet the members of other associations of Friends and exchange ideas about matters such as fund raising and ways in which related libraries could be supported.

The increased attendance at the general meeting for 2005 (17 groups present and apologies for absence from 4 more) indicated that IFOL was seen to fulfil a useful function. The meeting was addressed by Ms Ninnie Steyn, newly appointed Library Manager for the City of Cape Town, who told the meeting of the challenges that lay ahead for her library service and stressed the importance of partnerships with organisations such as IFOL.

