

IFLA '94: The challenge for Cuban libraries

By Barbara J. Ford

*IFLA's 60th General Conference,
Havana, Cuba, August 1994*

Approximately 1,200 delegates from 80 countries and over 400 Cuban librarians attended the first International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) conference to be held in Latin America. "Libraries for Social Development" was held August 21–27, 1994, in Havana, Cuba.

There was an explicit strategy by the Cuban organizers and IFLA to facilitate the broadest possible participation of the Cuban library community by making specific allowances for the use of local currency. Cubans hosted and participated fully in a very successful IFLA conference under economic terms that did not compromise their dignity. When paper was not available, over one million sheets were contributed by an international paper company. Conference delegates arriving in Cuba brought books for Cuban libraries and medicines for general use.

More than 100 librarians from the U.S. and Puerto Rico participated in the conference and formed the largest delegation from outside Cuba. A statement prepared by some members of the delegation summarizes our impressions: "We have seen first hand the determination of our Cuban colleagues to advance their library services despite the hardships, shortages, and material limitations they are now experiencing. We have been deeply impressed by their commitment to common professional objectives and deeply moved by their generosity in hosting librarians from all over the world despite their problems."

Cuban musicians, singers, and dancers at conference receptions and cultural events con-

tributed to a conference described by IFLA president Robert Wedgeworth as "sabroso" ("delightful"). Cuban language students served as translators and provided excellent assistance and explanations. Simultaneous translation was available for the major sessions.

The IFLA Government Information and Official Publications Section and the recently established Women's Issues Section sponsored an interesting program on Government Programmes and Publications on Women. Speakers from the Cuban Federation of Women, World Bank, and the U.N. Economic and Social Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean highlighted materials that are available. Another women's issues program focused on Women in the World of Information and featured provocative papers from Sweden, Finland, Japan, Cuba, and the U.S. Some delegates had the opportunity to visit the office of the Cuban Federation of Women and hear about its work with and advocacy for Cuban women.

The Government Information and Official Publications Section and the Latin American and the Caribbean Section sponsored the Second Latin American and the Caribbean Seminar on Government Information and Official Publications. Papers focused on recent developments in official publications. This built on the first seminar that was held in Mexico in 1991 during the eclipse of the sun. Training seminars on government information have also been held for Francophone Africa and in Asia and are planned for Anglophone Africa later this year. A seminar for Eastern European and Russian libraries is scheduled for 1996.

The University Libraries and Other General Research Libraries program focused on developments in communication and document delivery. Papers on the implications of the Mellon Foundation Report and electronic transmission

of documents in Cuban academic libraries were presented. The Science and Technology Libraries Section's theme was Social Barriers to Access of Scientific Information. Information literacy, linguistic obstructions, and underuse of scientific information were discussed as barriers. The newly established User Education Section's program focused on User Education and Information Skills Development in Public and School Libraries.

Technological developments affecting libraries were very much in evidence at the conference. A listserv computer connection provided conference delegates with information before the conference and provided opportunities to communicate with colleagues while at the conference. All of the documents from the General Conference were available in WordPerfect 5.1 on disks in English, Spanish, and French. Mundo Latino filmed a documentary of highlights of the conference and a copy in any video format was available. Video copies of individual speeches by participants, the closing ceremony, and lectures were also available.

The exhibition area included, among other options, product presentations, book signings, fashion shows, and Cuban films. Over 50 Cuban exhibitors provided an overview of the products available in the country. Books and software of interest to libraries were highlighted at various times.

Poster sessions provided examples of the excellent library programs being implemented in a number of countries with Cuban posters predominating. Cuban posters covered many topics, including training library technicians, computer-aided cataloging, updated information with lower costs, and games to promote reading. The posters illustrated that Cuba clearly has well-developed libraries and library programs offering services for a wide range of users. A statement about conservation at the Jose Marti National Library summarizes the challenges facing libraries in Cuba today: "In spite of economic limitations in the '90s, there has been a growth of human potential in Cuba, and we have continued working with slender resources and material shortage for preservation of our national bibliographic resources."

The 60th General IFLA conference was a very useful event filled with valuable exchanges of information and professional experiences. Delegates learned about Cuban culture as well as libraries and came away with great respect for the dedicated Cuban librarians. ■

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Problems encountered with subject access (i.e., appropriateness of heading, needed subject cross references, etc.) were the primary focus for librarians who assist users interested in information about African Americans.

"The Dynamics of Information Apartheid" explored information access and African world community empowerment using Afrocentric ideas to address information apartheid and post-modern communication consciousness. Information apartheid, defined "as a society in which one group has access to information and the others do not," was positively presented for the creation of building alliances and sharing knowledge for "interconnecting" diversity in our national and international communities.

Tony Brown, host of *Tony Brown's Journal*, was the keynote speaker at the Closing Session. "Telling it to us straight," Brown spoke about the issues affecting the black community today and challenged the audience with solutions of education and economic self-sufficiency for full participation in this struggle. Librarians were, again, empowered with adamant words of strength on their roles as culture keepers in their communities. Brown said, "And the world is a world of people from all groups, people with all languages and different cultures. And we, as Americans, not just African Americans, are going to have to confront diversity and its true meaning and fit into a world in which we all will have to contribute."

There were also two preconferences held in Milwaukee. "Diversity: From Rhetoric to Realities," led by Edith Fisher (Tenge Enterprises), provided a clear and dynamic understanding of the unique characteristics of individuals, enabling people to achieve positive outcomes from interactions. "Team Building for Librarians" by John Tyson (John Tyson Associates), provided an avenue for involving all librarians in the decision-making process, improving morale and product/service quality. Both were educational and applicable to all work settings.

Overall, the national participation of librarians of color at the conference was exciting. It was another historic event and celebration of African American contributions to librarianship and our commitment to the profession.

BCALA is planning to hold the Third National Conference of African American Librarians in Winston Salem, North Carolina, in 1997. Kwaheri (goodbye). ■

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