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# The Role and Activities of the IFLA Libraries for the Blind Section

HELEN BRAZIER

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to introduce some of the issues that blind and other print disabled people face in connection with reading and to explain how this situation influences the role of libraries for the blind. It goes on to describe the structure and purpose of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and its Libraries for the Blind Section, and to highlight the Section's challenges, goals, and activities contained in its latest strategic plan.

## INTRODUCTION: THE ISSUES FACING BLIND AND PRINT DISABLED READERS

There are 161 million blind and partially sighted people in the world (World Health Organization, 2004) who need access to books and information for all the same reasons as sighted people: for lifelong learning, for work, for leisure, and to play a full part in society. To this number, one must add many other people who could benefit from books and information in accessible formats because they are print disabled for reasons other than visual impairment, for example, through motor or cognitive disabilities.

Nevertheless, 95 percent of books in the world are never made available in accessible formats that print disabled people can read, such as Braille, large print, or analogue or digital audio (Kavanagh & Christensen Sköld, 2005). The same situation prevails in all countries, from the poorest to the richest. It is not known to what extent this level of provision meets users' needs, but it is not equitable. Quite simply, it means that readers with print disabilities do not have the level of choice regarding their reading

that is associated with the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions' (IFLA) ambitions to promote unrestricted access to information. Part of the problem is attributable to the cost of transforming print publications into accessible formats, which, despite technological advances, is still high. Also, copyright legislation puts barriers in the way of sharing resources.

The development of the Internet over the last decade has presented new possibilities for information to be delivered to print disabled people at the same time as sighted people. But a survey published by the United Kingdom's Disability Rights Commission in 2004 found that 81 percent of Web sites do not meet even basic standards of accessibility. Print disabled people are also lagging behind the rest of the world in terms of access to computers. Assistive technology typically entails additional capital outlay equivalent to the price of the computer.

Print disabled people are grossly disadvantaged through lack of access to books and information, and, to make matters worse, the digital divide threatens to exacerbate the situation. Both mainstream and specialist libraries can play a big part in addressing this inequitable situation.

## LIBRARIES FOR THE BLIND

It is very difficult to generalize about the origins and evolution of libraries for the blind because the circumstances vary from country to country. Articles published in this journal and case studies that have been presented at IFLA conferences illustrate that there are many different models of governing and funding libraries for the blind. In some countries, such as the UK and Canada, specialist libraries for the blind were established by private benefactors as long ago as the nineteenth century, and to this day they are run as charities or voluntary sector organizations. In parts of Asia and Africa libraries for the blind were established by missionaries. In some countries libraries grew out of rehabilitation agencies.

In the United States the government took responsibility for training and educating blind people, and legislation was passed as early as 1931 to provide equitable public library services with support from the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (see article by Frank Kurt Cylke and colleagues in this issue). In Sweden, too, library services for the blind are guaranteed by legislation: the Talking Books and Braille Library (TPB) exists as a separate entity, but it is integrated into state-funded mainstream library services as part of the public library system. In other countries, such as South Africa, similar models exist where the library for the blind is part of the national library service.

Whatever the political context, libraries for the blind are unique organizations because they not only provide library and information services and concern themselves with the usual professional matters, but in many cases they are also responsible for the publication of the books in acces-

sible formats that they provide to their clients. Without this activity there would be very small collections available because in most countries there is a limited commercial market for books in accessible formats.

The most common scenario is that there is one specialist library for the blind in each country, or sometimes there are a few such libraries, specializing in providing books in different accessible formats or meeting the needs of different audiences (children, students, etc). Either way, there is a limited number of providers because there are economies of scale in making and managing specialist collections for an audience that is relatively small and dispersed. The transformation of print materials into accessible formats imposes a high requirement for specialist equipment and skills, and so it is usually more economical to manage services centrally.

Libraries for the blind have to consider how best to deliver services to a remote and scattered client group; how to assist them with the selection of books and information at a distance; and how to provide them with support and the sense of community that a sighted person would get from their public library. In order to fulfil these functions, specialist libraries work more or less in cooperation with mainstream library services such as public and education libraries. In an ideal world, one might argue, mainstream libraries would meet the needs of all potential users. Indeed, it is typically the remit of public libraries to meet the needs of all members of society in a socially inclusive way, although the reality in many countries falls short of the ideal.

It could be argued that the existence of separate libraries for the blind in this day and age is invidious and indeed unnecessary. It is more likely to be technologically and economically possible for publishers and other mainstream brokers of information, such as public libraries, to provide a comprehensive service for all members of the community. At the IFLA conference in Glasgow in 2002, the Libraries for the Blind Section hosted a lively debate on the motion *that the existence of separate libraries for special populations is a form of censorship*. The arguments raged on both sides. At the end, it was the majority view of the audience that the ideal, inclusive world does not yet exist and that there is still a useful role for specialist libraries for the blind. In practice, models of cooperation between libraries for the blind and public libraries can be quite varied. Presentations at recent IFLA conferences from Trinidad and Tobago, Canada, the UK, Sweden, Korea, and Vietnam have illustrated the different kinds of relationships that exist, ranging from voluntary partnership on occasional projects to full-scale integration backed by government funding.

In the past, libraries for the blind quite naturally tended to focus on the needs of blind people. Increasingly over the years, many libraries for the blind have come to realize that their skills and offerings could be equally useful to people with other kinds of print disabilities. In some cases this

has been reflected in their names—for example the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped in the United States and the Talking Books and Braille Library in Sweden. The following sections will show how IFLA and the Libraries for the Blind Section are attempting to address the issues described above.

### THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF LIBRARY ASSOCIATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS

To set the work of the Libraries for the Blind Section in context, we first examine the objectives of its parent body, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, known as IFLA. IFLA is the leading international body representing the interests of library and information services and their users. It is the global voice of the library and information profession and an independent, international, nongovernmental, not-for-profit organization. Its aims are to

- promote high standards of provision and delivery of library and information services;
- encourage widespread understanding of the value of good library and information services; and
- represent the interests of its members throughout the world.

In pursuing these aims, IFLA embraces four core values:

- The endorsement of the principles of freedom of access to information, ideas, and works of imagination and freedom of expression embodied in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- The belief that people, communities, and organizations need universal and equitable access to information, ideas, and works of imagination for their social, educational, cultural, democratic, and economic well-being
- The conviction that delivery of high-quality library and information services helps guarantee that access
- The commitment to enable all members of the federation to engage in, and benefit from, its activities without regard to citizenship, disability, ethnic origin, gender, geographical location, language, political philosophy, race, or religion

Additionally, in its *Glasgow Declaration* of 2002 (IFLA, 2002), IFLA declared that it proclaims ability to access and to express information without restriction to be a fundamental right of human beings. IFLA asserted that a commitment to intellectual freedom is a core responsibility of the library and information profession worldwide. In particular, IFLA affirmed the following:

- Libraries and information services provide access to information, ideas, and works of imagination in any medium and regardless of frontiers.

They serve as gateways to knowledge, thought and culture, offering essential support for independent decision making, cultural development, research and lifelong learning by both individuals and groups.

- Libraries and information services contribute to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom and help to safeguard democratic values and universal civil rights . . .
- Libraries and information services shall acquire, preserve and make available the widest variety of materials, reflecting the plurality and diversity of society . . .
- Libraries and information services shall make materials, facilities, and services equally accessible to all users. There shall be no discrimination for any reason including race, national or ethnic origin, gender or sexual preference, age, disability, religion, or political beliefs. (IFLA, 2002)

In the *Glasgow Declaration* IFLA called upon libraries and information services and their staff to uphold and promote the principles of intellectual freedom and to provide uninhibited access to information.

IFLA also supports a series of professional priorities:

- (a) Supporting the role of libraries in society
- (b) Defending the principle of freedom of information
- (c) Promoting literacy, reading, and lifelong learning
- (d) Providing unrestricted access to information
- (e) Balancing the intellectual property rights of authors with the needs of users
- (f) Promoting resource sharing
- (g) Preserving our intellectual heritage
- (h) Developing library professionals
- (i) Promoting standards, guidelines, and best practices
- (j) Supporting the infrastructure of library associations
- (k) Representing libraries in the technological marketplace

It can be seen from these various powerful statements that IFLA is strongly supportive of equal access to information, which is a highly relevant issue to people who are blind or print disabled and the libraries that serve them.

As its name suggests, IFLA's membership consists mainly of organizations. At the time of writing, it has 1,700 members. Its work is conducted by these members, chiefly on a voluntary basis, through a program of core activities and through the activities of divisions and sections that focus on geographical or specialist areas of librarianship. IFLA organizes the annual World Library and Information Congress (WLIC) and has an active publishing program.

Comprehensive information about IFLA and its official documents can be found at [www.ifla.org](http://www.ifla.org).

## IFLA'S LIBRARIES FOR THE BLIND SECTION

The Libraries for the Blind Section is one of forty-seven Sections of IFLA and a member of Division III, which represents libraries serving the general public. It is, therefore, particularly well placed to keep up-to-date with developments in, and to engage in cooperative activities with, related areas of library and information work such as public libraries, children's libraries, libraries serving disadvantaged people, and so on.

"Libraries for the Blind in the Information Age" (Kavanagh & Christensen Sköld, 2005) describes the origins of the Section, which came into existence first as a Working Group in 1978, received Round Table status in 1979, and finally full Section status in 1983. It evolved out of the IFLA Section for Libraries in Hospitals because there was an expressed need for professional training for staff of libraries for the blind and a desire to exchange information and develop standards. The Working Group identified the issues at the time to be

- the need for an international inventory of accessible resources;
- the identification and standardization of production formats;
- the need for an effective international loan system; and
- a coordinated approach to the use of technology.

Although the environment has changed markedly in the last twenty years—particularly in relation to the opportunities resulting from technology—it is interesting to note that all of these issues are still relevant today and are addressed in the Section's strategic plan.

At the latest reckoning (2005), the Section has seventy-nine members in forty-one countries, including specialist libraries for the blind, mainstream libraries, and library organizations from around the world. Members of IFLA may join two Sections free of charge and others at a relatively small fee, so for some members the Section is the primary focus of their activities and for others it represents one of many interests.

The members of the Section are predominantly based in Europe, North America, and other developed regions of the world. The highest numbers are in the Netherlands, Japan, Canada, Denmark, Spain, and France. To some extent this picture reflects the number of significant library organizations for the blind in those countries, but it also emphasizes the low representation of organizations in developing countries. It is a goal of the Section's strategic plan to market itself actively to attract new members. The Section also sees value in extending its scope beyond the needs of people who are blind to embrace the needs of everyone who needs accessible library services. Members of the Libraries for the Blind Section believe that blind and other print disabled people should have access to the same books and information at the same time and at the same price as everyone else. The mission of the Section is to encourage

the establishment and development of fully accessible library services to print disabled people.

Like all IFLA Sections, the Libraries for the Blind Section is governed by a Standing Committee of up to twenty elected members led by a chair with assistance from a secretary/treasurer and an information officer. All of these roles are occupied by volunteers, funded and supported by their employing organizations, who receive no remuneration for the expenses that they incur or work that they do for IFLA and who contribute generous amounts of time over and above their paid work. The Section is very grateful to the organizations and individuals who, over the years, have contributed to its activities in this way; indeed, it could not have accomplished so much without them. The Section itself receives only around 300 Euros per year in administrative funding from IFLA and occasional project grants.

At the time of writing, the membership of the Standing Committee consists of 18 people representing libraries for the blind or related organizations in fourteen countries, namely, France (2), Germany (1), the Netherlands (1), Sweden (1), Denmark (1), Finland (1), Russia (2), the UK (2), the Republic of Ireland (1), South Africa (1), Canada (1), the United States (2), the Republic of Korea (1), and Japan (1). As this analysis reveals, there are regions of the world and certain kinds of interests—such as those of developing countries—that are either underrepresented or not represented at all. The need to pay for IFLA membership and fund attendance at meetings and conferences presents a barrier for many organizations in developing countries, and indeed in some developed countries, which restricts comprehensive sharing and participation.

The Standing Committee is responsible for developing and implementing the Section's strategic plan (IFLA Libraries for the Blind Section, 2006), which is monitored twice a year and refreshed every two years in line with IFLA policy. The goals of the Section are

- to work together with partner organizations to establish a global library for people with print disabilities;
- to establish and support guidelines and best practice for accessible library and information services;
- market and act as advocate for library services for print disabled people; and
- to encourage training and continuing development of library staff serving print disabled people.

As can be seen clearly, the Section's mission and goals not only conform to, but also actively support, IFLA's aims, values, and professional priorities and the objectives of the *Glasgow Declaration*.

Its main concerns are with IFLA priorities (c) promoting literacy, reading, and lifelong learning; (d) providing unrestricted access to information;

(e) balancing the intellectual property rights of authors with the needs of users; (f) promoting resource sharing; (i) promoting standards, guidelines, and best practice, and (k) representing libraries in the technological marketplace.

The Section's goals are accomplished through an action plan and various methodologies:

- An open program at the annual WLIC
- Biennial Section conferences
- Occasional meetings
- Project work that might involve conducting research or publishing standards
- Communications program
- Participation in other IFLA activities
- Involvement in the management of IFLA

The mixture of activities varies in response to the changing needs and interests of the Section's members and is strongly influenced by the chair and Standing Committee members. While the Libraries for the Blind Section has many concerns in common with numerous other IFLA sections and a strong track record of cooperation, it also has some unique interests.

## RECENT ACTIVITIES

### *Guidelines and Best Practice*

As mentioned above, one of the Section's goals is to establish and support guidelines and best practice for accessible library and information services. This has been achieved in recent years by a variety of research projects, with direct funding from IFLA more than matched by voluntary contributions in kind from member organizations. The outcomes have been published in IFLA's professional reports series and have a very practical value. Research into interlending resulted in the publication in 2002 of *Resource Guide on Access to and Interlending of Alternative Format Materials* compiled by Richard N. Tucker. A major review of earlier guidelines dating from 1983 led to publication of the acclaimed *Libraries for the Blind in the Information Age: Guidelines for Development*, edited by Rosemary Kavanagh and Beatrice Christensen Sköld (2005). A third major investigation resulted in the publication of *Designing and Building Integrated Digital Library Systems: Guidelines* by Bente Dahl Rathje, Margaret McGrory, Carol Pollitt, and Paivi Voutilainen (2005). Research projects in progress include work on benchmarking performance standards, led by FNB (Dedicon, formerly the Federatie van Nederlandse Blinden Bibliotheken), Netherlands, and an investigation of different models of funding and governing libraries for the blind, cosponsored by the British Library and Museums, Libraries, and Archives Council of England.



Conferences provide a useful showcase for best practice and can serve to reach wide audiences. Apart from the conference programs mentioned above, other relevant case studies have been presented at "Accommodating All: Libraries and education in the Digital Age: Serving People Who Are Blind and Print Disabled in the Caribbean and Latin America" (an ACURIL/IFLA LBS conference, 2002); "Partners in Lifelong Learning: Working with Print Handicapped Users" (WLIC, 2003) and "Think Access—Think Libraries," a workshop organized by the Section for consumers at the World Blind Union Congress 2004.

These standard-setting initiatives have proved very useful for both specialist and mainstream library services by providing a ready source of information and a benchmark by which to assess progress.

*The Impact of Digital Technology on Product Development and Delivery*

Digital technology has changed the way that all library and information services are organized and delivered, not least library services for the blind. With many libraries for the blind in the unusual position of having to make their own books, the Section has always taken a considerable interest in technological developments that make this process more effective or efficient. Over the years, Section conferences and related exhibitions have demonstrated many innovative projects in the field of Braille production, tactile images, large print, and so on.

Preeminently, the Section was the birthplace of the digital audio book that became known as DAISY, now adopted by over seventy organizations in forty countries worldwide. The development of DAISY into an international standard for digital accessible media by the DAISY Consortium is described in another article in this issue by Elsebeth Tank and Carsten Frederiksen.

The Section continues to focus on harnessing new technologies to deliver better products and more convenient delivery mechanisms. Section members are currently exploring the potential of digital products, digital interfaces, digital file repositories, production and delivery of books on demand, e-delivery, and indeed the future role of libraries in the digital age.

With new and cheaper technology, the traditional model of transcription in anticipation of demand could be replaced by a new model, so that any book could be produced in an accessible format and/or delivered to the customer on demand. The impact would be that 100 percent of customers' needs could be met, regardless of the actual number of books transformed. But full realization of this ideal scenario is a long way off, even in many industrialized countries. In the majority of the world, publishers are still reluctant to entrust files to well established and for the most part highly respected organizations such as libraries for the blind.

The Section held workshops in Stockport (1999) and Glasgow (2002) dedicated to sharing experiences of digital library development. This topic

is now so fundamental that it is a regular component of all Section conference programs. The pioneering work of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) in developing an integrated digital library system, with support from Microsoft, is described in another article in this issue by Margaret McGrory and colleagues; this project was an impetus for the publication of the Section's guidelines, *Designing and Building Integrated Digital Library Systems*, mentioned above (Rathje et al., 2005). The new system was demonstrated at a forum hosted by Microsoft in Redmond, Washington, in November 2004 for members of the DAISY Consortium and the IFLA Libraries for the Blind Section.

### MAINSTREAMING OF ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES

An emerging trend in recent years has been for the importance of accessibility issues to be recognized by mainstream libraries, at least in part due to legislative steps in North America and Europe toward social inclusion. IFLA itself has taken the point on board with two relevant resolutions recently adopted by Council:

IFLA encourages the use of guidelines on typography and lay out that would make documents and presentations more accessible to the partially sighted. (2004)

Council urges IFLA's Governing Board from now on to make all IFLA information and publications as well as the website accessible for print impaired people. (2005)<sup>1</sup>

It is pleasing to see that the international organization of libraries wishes to set a good example to its members.

With their constantly evolving interest in making information accessible, libraries for the blind have become experts in the accessibility of Web sites. See, for example, "Making Websites and OPACs Accessible," an article by Marijke van Bodengraven and Carol Pollitt based on a 2003 conference presentation, as well as examples shown at the Section's Gothenburg conference in 2005. Due to popular demand for up-to-date advice and demonstrations of good practice, the theme was revisited at WLIC 2006 in the Section's program on "How to Make Your Website Accessible: Issues and Experiences."

In addition, the Libraries for the Blind Section has frequently cooperated with other IFLA Sections to make sure that new guidelines and standards in all fields of librarianship take into account the needs of print disabled people, for example, by contributing to the Public Library Section's guidelines and to the Cataloguing Section's OPAC standards, joint lobbying on copyright issues with the Copyright and Legal Matters Committee, and joint meetings with the Libraries for Disadvantaged People and Public Libraries Sections.

The Section does not confine its collaboration to IFLA but also has

relationships with other relevant international and regional organizations including the World Intellectual Property organization (WIPO), the Universal Postal Union (UPU), UNESCO, the International Publishers' Association (IPA), the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), and certain European projects such as the European Accessible Information Network (EUAIN).

Consultation with user groups at an international level is achieved mainly through cooperation with the World Blind Union's Committee on Copyright and the Right to Read, which is responsible for relations with IFLA and the DAISY Consortium. At the Union's Congress in Cape Town in 2004, the Section not only consulted with users at the workshop mentioned above but also contributed to a plenary session on the right to read and library issues.

It is notable how the work of the Libraries for the Blind Section has, in recent years, expanded from the consideration of the issues of concern to special libraries for the blind to those affecting service to blind and print disabled people in mainstream settings and also examining the relationships between specialist and mainstream organizations. Examples include the Section's workshop in Berlin in 2003 entitled "What All Libraries Need to Know about Serving Print-Handicapped People" and the program in Oslo in 2005 on "Achieving Inclusion through Partnership."

#### *Lobbying and Campaigning*

At national and international levels the Section has worked very actively to win support and secure practical measures from governments and international organizations. Affiliation with IFLA lends a great deal of credibility to the Section's initiatives in this area. It has been a key goal to influence copyright legislation so that it does not prevent the transformation of information into accessible formats or the international exchange of resources. Working together with the DAISY Consortium and IFLA's Copyright and Legal Matters Committee, the Section has influenced both the European Union and WIPO. As a result, the latter organization has introduced a model copyright law containing exceptions for print disabled people. Johan Roos (2005) describes the issues in detail elsewhere. Relevant papers can be found amongst the Section's conference programs "Rights Management in the Age of Digital Content: Enhancing Access for Print-Handicapped Readers" (IFLA Conference 2001) and "The Balance of Copyright and Licensing" (WLIC 2004). A conference paper by Johan Roos entitled "Copyright Protection as Access Barrier for People Who Read Differently" was also published in the *IFLA Journal* (2005). The Section has also successfully collaborated with the World Blind Union to influence the Universal Postal Union to protect the international free post arrangement for blind people.

*Working Toward the Global Library for the Blind*

There is no country in the world where it can be said that print disabled people have access to an equitable library service, and all libraries for the blind suffer from a lack of resources. Therefore, it is all the more important that libraries for the blind work together to share access to resources. At a forum hosted by Microsoft in Redmond, Washington, in November 2004, members of the DAISY Consortium and the IFLA Libraries for the Blind Section agreed that both organizations wanted to work together toward a virtual global library for the blind and forcefully articulated their vision and the steps that will be required to bring it to reality (DAISY Consortium, 2004). These include joint collection development, better access to catalogs of other libraries, and clear interlending arrangements. The result will be that clients can obtain easier access to books worldwide, and there will be reduced duplication of resources at the organizational level.

There is already a strong precedent for information sharing and collaboration among IFLA and DAISY members. Both networks bring organizations together, and there have been many examples of bilateral and multilateral arrangements of different kinds to share resources and expertise. Libraries have learned directly from each other about library management systems, new technologies, professional practice, and so on. The Section also has a regular francophone subgroup. Any organization seeking new contacts may use the Section's smartgroup<sup>2</sup> or online directory ([ifla.jsrpd.jp/](http://ifla.jsrpd.jp/)).

*Developing Countries*

The Section has always had a strong interest in supporting developing countries. Funding barriers may prevent people from participating in Section events, but IFLA's Action for Development through Libraries Programme (ALP) has attempted to address this issue by providing grants, as has the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and the Force Foundation. The Section seeks interaction with, and stronger participation from, poorer parts of the world. For many years, mid-year Standing Committee meetings were organized in developing countries by invitation from local libraries or associations. The meeting usually acted as a catalyst for a local or regional workshop or meeting. Arrangements of this kind took place in Rabat (2002), Zagreb (2003), and Vilnius (2004). The Section also cooperates with the FORCE Foundation, whose activities are described elsewhere in this issue, by participating in development projects. The Section's Web site and smartgroup are freely open to all.

The Section has recently teamed with the Ulverscroft Foundation in the UK to offer a global "best practice" award. Two of the award winners so far have carried out useful projects in support of developing countries; Professor Morayo Atinmo of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, describes

her project elsewhere in this issue. And through this award scheme, Suvida Ruvic, a Bosnian librarian living in Norway, secured funding to help develop the library for the blind in Bosnia.

### *Staff Development*

A key element in all of the work described above is a commitment to train and develop staff. In general, there are no more than a few libraries for the blind or similar centers of expertise in each country, so the Section's activities and offerings provide a vital means of support for the development of organizations and individuals alike.

Starting from the first expert meeting in Marburg in 1983, the Section has organized a specialist conference every two years, most recently in Washington, DC (2001), Marburg, Germany (2003), and Gothenburg, Sweden (2005). The next one will be in Grahamstown, South Africa (2007). Papers are generally posted on the Section's smartgroup. Attendance is usually about 100 to 150 people. The Section's conferences, in particular, are an ideal forum for learning and gaining inspiration from peers.

The "best practice" awards organized jointly with the Ulverscroft Foundation in 2003, 2004, and 2006 (mentioned above) have provided an unusual opportunity for an individual to work for a short period with another library for the blind in a different part of the world. To date, there have been five individual award winners, from South Africa, Nigeria, Norway, and the UK. These work placements have led to strengthened relationships between the libraries involved and provided personal development opportunities for the people concerned.

It is recognized, of course, that not everybody has the option to travel to international conferences or to have experience of meeting colleagues in other countries face-to-face. The Section uses both new and traditional methods to provide alternative means of support. It publishes a newsletter twice yearly in English, Russian, and Spanish that is freely available on the IFLA Web site and the Section's smartgroup and also available in DAISY audio or print. Official papers appear on the Section's pages of the IFLA Web site ([www.ifla.org/VII/s31/index.htm](http://www.ifla.org/VII/s31/index.htm)). The Section also maintains a smartgroup for informal communications and as a file archive, both open to anyone who is interested on request. Cheaper telecommunications mean that multilateral meetings by teleconference are also a reality.

### CONCLUSIONS

Progress toward the Section's goals can be slow because of the limitations of a miniscule budget and reliance on the goodwill of members who are all volunteers. But the positive impact of these constraints is that the strategic plan is closely aligned with members' concerns and focused on practical outcomes. And despite the difficulties, the Section has been ex-

tremely active for over twenty years. Has it made a difference to the provision of library services for blind and print disabled people in that period? Members speak warmly of how it has been a meeting point for information and ideas, facilitated learning, and acted as a catalyst for change. It has also acted as a champion within IFLA for the needs of print disabled people, reminding public, academic, and other kinds of libraries around the world that they have print disabled users with needs to be met and demonstrating imaginatively how this can be done.

The Section has also had an immensely important offshoot in the form of the DAISY Consortium. The development of the DAISY standard has been an overriding concern for many Section members in the last decade. All libraries are grappling with the advent of the digital age, and members of the Section have been challenged likewise to find new and relevant solutions by the work of the DAISY Consortium.

But libraries for the blind are facing a few very interesting issues of their own. Can they afford to meet increasing needs from a growing number of people? How can the needs of print disabled people be addressed effectively where existing organizations have a limited mandate to serve visually impaired people? And to what extent can customers really be provided with "the right book at the right time"? Whatever savings can be made through digital management and delivery, it can be anticipated that demand will continue to outstrip supply and rationing may persist in one form or another. There will be a need for advocates to fight for the rights of print disabled people for years to come.

Does the ideal of inclusive library services mean that libraries for the blind will increasingly become production centers, leaving the customer interface and distribution functions to public and other libraries? Or are they destined to become resource and advice agencies specializing in accessibility issues? In Sweden, where this model is most fully developed, the distribution of Braille books has remained part of the specialized central service. Does this pragmatic solution suggest that there are economic or other limits to the level of integration that can be achieved?

There has been much talk about establishing a global repository of accessible books available to all print disabled people who could benefit from them. How are these efforts likely to be affected by the establishment of private repositories by individuals and publishing companies, and by the integration of libraries for the blind into local and national public library systems? And who will pay? Will global aspirations to share resources make it more difficult for libraries for the blind to secure national government funding?

As for the ever-evolving range of formats that provide access to printed materials, what does the future hold? How will blind children acquire literacy? And how will older people who are losing their sight retain it? Braille usage appears to be declining in some industrialized countries

where teaching and support are under threat, but reading Braille confers independence and identity and carries powerful emotional connotations. Blind students generally prefer more navigable digital text. Will the DAISY standard be adopted by mainstream publishers?

There are many pertinent questions, and there will be many different answers in different parts of the world at different times. IFLA's Libraries for the Blind Section is likely to be the best means at the disposal of librarians around the world to anticipate and respond coherently to change and turmoil. It has already benefited libraries for the blind and millions of readers around the world, and its continued activity provides hope that we can face an uncertain and challenging future with equal success in the future.

## NOTE

1. See the IFLA Web site.
2. Contact the Section's Secretary for details; current information is available at [www.ifla.org/VII/s31/index.htm](http://www.ifla.org/VII/s31/index.htm)

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Helen Brazier, MA, MCLIP, joined the National Library for the Blind (NLB) in 1997 and was appointed Chief Executive in 2001. She previously worked in a variety of library and information management roles in the public and private sector and for two years worked as a United Nations Volunteer Librarian in Hanoi, Vietnam. She is a board member of Share the Vision and Secretary of IFLA Libraries for the Blind Section.