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Presentation of the Report of the Free Access to Information and Free of Expression (FAIFE) Committee

Paul Sturges

Chair

FAIFE Committee

1. During the period August 2003 to August 2005, the FAIFE Core Activity was under new Chairmanship for the first time, following Alex Byrne's two distinguished terms of office. Continuity was assured by the presence of Susanne Seidelin as Director of the FAIFE Office, with the assistance of Stuart Hamilton, research student at the Danish Library School. A new FAIFE Advisory Board, consisting of Barbara Schleihagen, Frode Bakken, Bob McKee and Ellen Tise (representing the Governing Board), was appointed in 2003 and will remain in office until August 2007, with the exception of Ellen Tise who is leaving the Governing Board. Ellen's excellent contribution to the work of the AB should be noted here. In August 2004, at the Buenos Aires WLIC, the existing Committee's period of office came to an end. The Governing Board selected a new Committee on the basis of the Chair's recommendations from the nominations received after a call for names. New members of the Committee attended the FAIFE meetings in Buenos Aires and made positive contributions on the subject of how they could most effectively forward FAIFE's mission. As a result, a mid-term Committee meeting was scheduled on March 14th 2005 in The Hague. A reasonably well-attended meeting resulted and it has been

resolved to hold a debate meeting to re-examine any aspects of the FAIFE activity that Committee members wish on 18th August 2006, during the WLIC in Oslo.

2. FAIFE is fortunate that, because it has from its foundation had full-time staff, it has been able to develop a strong and consistent programme. The programme includes both a global, research-based approach to library-related access and expression matters, and a response capacity for matters of immediate concern. The Advisory Board has proved its value in relation to both of these, but particularly in relation to FAIFE's response capacity. This small, expert and highly committed group meets three times a year (at WLIC, and in December and March in the Hague). Attendance has always been 100%, and all members have made substantial contributions to discussion. More than this, however, they have proved their capacity to provide swift electronic communication between meetings. This has made them a highly reliable resource of ideas and criticism in support of the Director and Chair. The existence of an Advisory Board with a proven capacity to provide immediate support has been highly important, but the growing ability of the Committee to provide long-term guidance on FAIFE policy and activities is also much appreciated.
3. Finance has proved a great concern over the period under review. Quite simply, FAIFE has only the bare minimum of core funding from assured sources to pay for staff, premises, office expenses, etc. This problem has diverted the attention of staff and officers towards fund-raising to the potential detriment of the activity's mission. We are happy to report that Swedish Sida has agreed to provide a substantial grant spread over the next few years to support a range of projects that fit with their own mission (which fortunately meshes very effectively with that of FAIFE). However, obtaining the grant required a great deal of time and energy, and it must be stressed that this is project funding. At more or less the same time as the prolonged negotiations were taking place with Sida, FAIFE entered into the IFLA Peer Review process. As the pilot review, FAIFE spent time working on methodology as well as applying it. The review was thorough, frank and very positive. We believe that it demonstrated that IFLA, and the professional community get very good value from the money spent on FAIFE. We look forward to the results of the review process when applied to other IFLA activities.
4. One of the great benefits that will follow from the Sida grant is that it calls for a closer working relationship between FAIFE and ALP, which are in effect the joint recipients of the grant. The grant conditions call for a training seminar for staff and officers of both activities in Uppsala in October 2005. FAIFE welcomes this opportunity to cement a fruitful link between our financial sponsors and a core activity (ALP) whose work complements our own to such a great extent. Another considerable benefit of the grant is that it supports FAIFE's intention to develop its activities with a more specific focus on matters such as women's access to information and the better dissemination of information relating to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Amongst other effects, this will allow important new programme input from FAIFE to future WLICs.
5. Whilst comment on FAIFE activity and, it is important to recognise, criticism of FAIFE concentrates on FAIFE's response to issues of current concern, it is vital to draw attention to FAIFE's long term, global programme. This is expressed through its published World Report series (the World Report published every second year and the Theme Reports published in the alternate years). The FAIFE Office cannot be praised too much for this evolving body of meticulously assembled baseline data on freedom of access to

information and freedom of expression worldwide as it impinges on library and information work. Obtaining the responses from the professional community for these volumes has proved extremely demanding, but we express our hearty gratitude to everyone who has sent information for the World Reports and written articles for these important and highly informative volumes. This report provides yet another opportunity for us to call on the professional community to tell us about the situation in their own countries.

6. On the question of FAIFE response: a number of carefully researched responses have been made on issues of current concern, in the form of press releases. The important thing to note is that we do not put out a press release unless we have reports about the problem from more than one independent source, and that the releases are made on the responsibility of the Chair of FAIFE and of the Secretary General of IFLA, and when appropriate, after consulting President and/or President Elect. Although the unfavourable comment received in relation to some of these releases gives us cause to check that we have responded fairly and in line with IFLA and FAIFE's mission, we are encouraged that criticism does not come only from one specific direction. In addition to responding to reports of cases in specific countries, FAIFE also responds to broad problems of immediate concern and has, for instance, directed considerable effort towards the question of the detrimental effects of the anti-terror legislation (most notably the USA PATRIOT Act) planned and passed in many countries. FAIFE is not merely a responding activity, but I believe that its response capacity is effectively and responsibly used.
7. The future of the FAIFE activity is clearly within a broader IFLA advocacy capacity that it is planned to develop. All those connected with FAIFE welcome this and believe that FAIFE's accumulated expertise has a great deal to offer to advocacy throughout the range of IFLA's concerns. Close cooperation with ALP is already in the process of being cemented. Cooperation with CLM is natural and will be fruitful. Beyond that there is great potential for synergy in many areas. FAIFE is already engaging with the issues that are high priorities for IFLA. For instance the 2004 Theme Report directly supported the Presidential Theme of 'Libraries for Lifelong Literacy'. The physical and financial integration of advocacy will undoubtedly call for difficult decisions in relation to FAIFE (located away from IFLA HQ, in Copenhagen, as it currently is). We believe that with the proven goodwill from all directions this can be a harmonious and successful process.

Paul Sturges
Chair of FAIFE
August 2005