

# IFLA AND REGIONAL PARTICIPATION: an interview with Joseph S. Soosai

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Joseph S. Soosai recently retired from the Rubber Research Institute of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, after twenty-eight years as its Chief Librarian and seventeen years of involvement with the regional programmes through which the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has attempted to direct its support to developing countries and to involve them in its work. During an interview which took place on September 2, 1988, in Sydney, Australia, during the 53rd IFLA Council and General Conference Mr. Soosai was asked to describe the growth of regionalism in IFLA and to comment on some of the personalities and problems involved in this aspect of its work.



Joseph Soosai at the 52nd. IFLA General Conference, Tokyo, 1986.

C: When did signs of regionalism appear in IFLA?

S: There had been a few developing countries in IFLA—about a dozen—in the fifties and sixties. But regionalism started with IFLA's taking a particular interest in the Third World with the first pre-session seminar in Liverpool in 1971. That was the first time ever IFLA organized a pre-session seminar and we had about thirty delegates from Asia, Africa, Latin America—English speaking countries. We discussed the organization of the library profession in parts of the world, and I remember having done a paper on South East Asia for that particular session. It was there, I think, that most of us had our first exposure to what IFLA is all about. They made us look at how things were being done.

After the seminar was over, we were given permission to attend the General Conference; and there we were more or less silent spectators at a show being enacted by the developed countries.

Most of us were not members of IFLA as yet, and we were made to witness the discussions and deliberations going on without being able to participate ourselves. When this happened we decided we had to seek some redress. I remember my paper was coming up in a plenary session in a day or two; and I said, 'To do justice to my first experience of IFLA, I've got to do something more than reciting the paper'. What I did was to write a brief statement and keep it ready. Dr. Herman Liebaers, who was then President of IFLA and who was responsible for getting me involved, was chairing the plenary session—there were more than one thousand participants in that particular session—and I begged his indulgence to allow me to say a few words over and above my paper. So after my paper I read my prepared statement, in which the basic point was that the Third World participants, in this session, had watched a show being enacted by the developed countries who had far more experience in IFLA. We said 'We do not want to be mere spectators, we want to be active participants in IFLA's activities; and if that is going to be achieved, IFLA will have to take very positive and tangible steps to identify the problems of Third World countries and try to integrate these problems within the framework or activities of IFLA'.

The statement was very well received. I expected to be branded as *persona non grata* within IFLA after that and banned from IFLA, but instead I had a really great ovation; and Herman said, 'It took IFLA thirty-seven years before a young librarian from Malaysia should come and tell us where we have lost our track and I think this will be well-supported by all his other colleagues from the Third World countries'. I was congratulated by the presidents of all the big library associations—the Americans, the Russians, the British, and so on. Herman asked me: 'Now, how do you translate this statement into action?'. I said, 'Well, the simple thing to do would be to establish a Working Group for Developing Countries'. He said, 'You know that IFLA is structured according to types of libraries or types of library activities [its vertical structure under each type is a working group, section, division, board]'; and he continued saying that my proposal was cutting right across IFLA, dividing the 'haves and

the have-nots'. I insisted that IFLA's structure needed to be compromised to serve Third World needs. I said, 'You have asked me for my views and since IFLA has tried so many different formulations in the past to interest Third World countries and failed, my proposal must be given a chance. If the large amount of money spent on these thirty candidates from all over the world to come to Liverpool is not to be a total waste, if something concrete is to take place in Liverpool, we have here and now to make a decision to establish a Working Group for Developing Countries. The terms of reference must be to identify major problems in Third World countries and see how best they can be incorporated into the IFLA programme of activities'. Herman didn't give in easily to this because it was quite a radical proposition and he didn't want to accept it. After a fairly long discussion he finally agreed and appointed Dorothy Anderson, Director of the Office of UBC (Universal Bibliographic Control), to be the coordinator and convener of the group. I think the people involved at the time were Dr. Tze Chung Li, who was then in Taiwan, now in the United States, and David Cornelius from Ghana and a few people like them. We got together and formed the Working Group. The resolution was carried unanimously after an explanation by Herman.

When I was leaving Liverpool to go back home, I felt that having come all the way for the first IFLA, I had at least aroused interest in IFLA in Third World countries and put the Third World countries in some focus. So I went back, quite happy that I had done my job. But hardly three days after my return I got a telex from IFLA stating that the Executive Board, in the last meetings in Liverpool, had unanimously elected me as Chairman of the Working Group for Developing Countries! That was the beginning of my involvement in IFLA's regional activities programme; and after that I had to start moving.

C: Would you identify it as a grassroots movement or was it from the IFLA top down?

S: I think the planning of the Working Group for Developing Countries was a grassroots attempt because it came from the participants, whereas the pre-session seminar was from the Executive Board and planned by them. It was Herman's initiative. Before I came to Liverpool, Herman had met me in Kuala Lumpur; he had come on a visit to Southeast Asia, and I was then the President of the Library Association of Malaysia. He invited me to his hotel, and we sat at the poolside and discussed IFLA for a long, long time.

C: But you had never been to an IFLA meeting?

S: I had never been to an IFLA meeting before that. I told Herman, 'IFLA is hardly known in the Third World, and there's no money available in Third World countries for them to come and participate at IFLA. And nobody's going to pay you

subscription fees unless they can see some tangible benefit. You must interest them directly'. And then he said, 'Why don't we do this: at every general meeting we organize a pre-session seminar on a certain subject and invite selected librarians from the Third World?' That's how the idea of the pre-session seminar was conceived. A proposal was formulated by IFLA and presented to Unesco for financial support. Unesco was convinced that the idea would definitely contribute to greater participation of Third World librarians in international librarianship as represented by IFLA. They agreed to give a grant, and so the whole pre-session seminar programme started.

C: Do you have other sources of financial support?

S: When we started on the pre-session seminar, Unesco provided the main financial support. A few years later, Harry Campbell, then first Vice-President of IFLA, working through the good offices of the Canadian Library Association, established a valuable rapport between IFLA and CIDA (Canadian International Development Association), which proved to be one of the main sources of financial support for IFLA's programme in Third World countries. Their support for our programme is still regular and substantial and without it the IFLA programme would have been severely restricted.

C: Are there others you would mention as supporters?

S: As far as the original Third World programme was concerned, Herman Liebaers was definitely the architect. His unprecedented performance made IFLA truly international. I would add Margreet Wijnstroom, Secretary General of IFLA. There's no question about it - they really went out of their way to have the Third World countries brought into IFLA. Margreet especially did a marvellous job finding sponsors for membership and helped Third World countries in any way she could. The Martinus Nijhoff Study Grant was another development in IFLA that assisted Third World countries.

Today, it's difficult for me to say who in IFLA has the greatest sympathy for the Third World countries. I think they all claim to have interests in one form or another; but I know from my own experience, when I was sitting on the Executive Board it was very difficult to discern evidence of support. The establishment of the Regional Development Fund was something I had to fight for at great length on the Executive Board. We wanted to establish a mechanism in IFLA where people who want to give money to support the Third World programmes can give it without having to complicate the existing accounting system. The Regional Development Fund was very much conceived as a mechanism within IFLA that will help to bring in money to support Third World programmes. There was no compulsion on the

part of anyone to contribute towards the Fund—it was based on voluntary contributions. When I first brought the idea up at the Executive Board, the majority of Board members vehemently opposed it because most of the developed countries were not keen on making an additional financial commitment to IFLA. Else Granheim, President of IFLA, 1980-1985, was chairing that session, and at first the idea was virtually thrown out. Then I appealed to Else to reconsider since I thought the fund was very important. The only person supporting me was the Secretary General. Else said, 'OK, I'll adjourn the meeting; you go during tea and explain this to every individual Board member, and come back'. She adjourned the meeting. I went and explained to every individual Board member the rationale for supporting the fund. Then we came back to the discussion; Else said, 'Is there any objection to the establishment of the Regional Development Fund?'. Everybody looked at me and kept quiet and said, 'No, no objection'. So the Fund got established. And having established it, I think there are a few people who keep on contributing to it; quite a few organizations are willing to support it in the interests of Third World countries.

C: So it's been very successful?

S: It has been useful. It has helped several Third World librarians to participate in IFLA. Some participants manage to find the money for their passage, but are unable to pay the registration fee. The Secretary General has power to help such deserving cases by using the Regional Development Fund. The Fund has been useful in many little ways to help Third World countries. It is within the prerogative of the Secretary General to use that money and report to the Board.

C: And you're happy with that?

S: I'm very happy with that. Certainly, I think it was a good development in IFLA.

C: We have discussed regionalism as it materialized in IFLA and at least one major accomplishment after IFLA recognition. Regionalism is often considered an evolutionary step to internationalism. This is not the way it happened in IFLA although its emergence assisted IFLA to become more international. The definition of regionalism usually gives four ways that the grouping of the nations may occur: social and cultural homogeneity, similar political attitudes and institutions, economic interdependence, and geographical proximity. (1) How do you define it? How does IFLA define it?

S: When we met in Liverpool and established the Working Group on Developing Countries it was all English-speaking countries. Then there was a meeting in Grenoble in France in 1973, and there the French made a point of bringing French-speaking librarians from francophone Africa, from the Middle East countries, from Vietnam, from all over the world. They had a French-speaking

librarians' pre-session seminar in Grenoble and formed the French Working Group for Developing Countries. Then in 1974, in Washington D.C., where Spanish-speaking librarians were present in large numbers, they had a Spanish-speaking Group as well.

C: In Chicago, in 1985, IFLA had a number of Latin American participants, and Spanish was added to the languages of simultaneous translation and translated papers for the first time. (2) The emphasis on language would seem to indicate organization on the basis of cultural attraction.

S: Part of it was language, but we decided it was not feasible or practical to go on on that basis. It has to be based on geographical, cohesive regions. We defined at that time three distinct areas of development—areas where developing countries are: Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia. Oceania was not included at that time, but it has been included in the last two years in the Asian region.

C: Do you think it should have been a separate region?

S: No, there's no need for it as far as we can see. There were three distinct regions identified from the beginning, and IFLA didn't want to increase the number. They established a regional secretariat in each of the three. If they made another region somewhere, they would have to pay for an additional office which they couldn't afford.

C: Does political affiliation present any kind of basis for the formation of a region?

S: No.

C: Or other affiliations such as the Commonwealth?

S: No. The whole identification of the Third World in the three regions of Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean was the reason for sticking to the three. But when we developed the subregions we said, we won't have more than five subregions in a region. We divided Asia into Southeast Asia, South Asia, East Asia, West Asia, and Oceania. And the same thing in Africa and in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Caribbean forming one of the subregions. Some of these subregions may happen to have some political affinity and some political constraints, but subregions are still formed geographically.

C: For the formation of the region the first criterion is geographic, with economic need a major characteristic; in the subregions cultural and/or political influences may be evident. With activities there is the pressure of pragmatism. Can you do what you think is best?

S: Oh yes, each region decides its own priority of action. There's no way that one region should lead the others or for any reason influence the thinking of the other regions. Even within the region wide disparity exists between countries in terms of library development, and priorities for one country may not be the same as for other countries. That

is why the programmes for developing countries will have to be tailor-made according to the needs of individual countries. One example would be publications in national languages. Many countries trying to promote their own languages don't seem to have enough reading material. And the libraries won't exist without reading material. This is one area in which IFLA doesn't do anything because it's got nothing to do with it really. It does not mean that the present programmes of IFLA are not relevant to Third World countries.

C: No, because within the IFLA structure there are now several ways to reach Third World needs, through the Division and Standing Committees and the core programmes on Preservation and Conservation (PAC), Universal Availability of Publications (UAP), Universal Bibliographic Control and International MARC (UBCIM), Universal Dataflow and Telecommunications (UDT) and, of course, on the Advancement of Librarianship in the Third World (ALP), as well as through the Standing Committees of the three Sections (Regions) of the Division for Regional Activities and the Regional Secretariats.

S: Yes. Each division and section in IFLA—public libraries, cataloguing, etc.—has its own terms of reference and its own approach to assisting Third World countries.

C: And the core programmes cut across IFLA horizontally.

S: Yes. Some of the other core programmes that are in IFLA today are perhaps too sophisticated for many countries; for example, if you go to Nepal and talk about Universal Dataflow, it doesn't make any sense at all; if you talk about Preservation and Conservation, it's very relevant in most developing countries, particularly when they've got high humidity and high temperatures. Many of the core programmes of IFLA are relevant to the Third World only to the extent that they can be really down to earth.

C: What other changes have you seen?

S: If you ask me what has happened in the years from 1971 until now—what has been the major transformation in IFLA in terms of developing countries—I think the main thing, quantitatively speaking, is the number of Third World countries who are members of IFLA. Third World membership of IFLA has increased by about 400 percent in the last fifteen to seventeen years, and this has made IFLA far more international today than it ever was in the past. There are still a few countries who are not yet members, like Burma, Vietnam, Laos, a few countries in Africa, and so on; but I think they will eventually come in.

IFLA has made a commendable effort to find countries to sponsor Third World membership and the Dutch Library Association, the British Library Association, and several others have come forward to pay for subscriptions of the developing

countries for one, two, or three years to give them an opportunity to be an IFLA member and hopefully to continue on their own afterwards. That way many developing countries who would otherwise never have become members managed to do so. Having got that far, these members have still not solved the basic problem of participation in the true sense of the word. They have become members, they receive IFLA publications perhaps; but when it comes to participating in conferences, there's always a big problem for them to find the necessary funds to travel, especially with long distances, and with all the foreign exchange problems. In many of the committees and conferences there is, on paper, the name of a librarian from a Third World country; but in practice he doesn't come to the meeting because he can't afford it. He's virtually a corresponding member, and a corresponding member can't participate when decisions are taken. The registration fee here in Australia is the equivalent to three months' professional salary in India, for example. So the limitations of participation are still very serious. This is one big drawback, and I can't find any simple answers to it. Even with the pre-session seminars, at the most we can invite about twenty librarians from Third World countries; but that does not represent everybody who is actively involved in the various IFLA committees. More and more are getting involved now; but when they go back home, they feel frustrated that they are not able to come to subsequent meetings. The membership has increased and a lot of expectations have been aroused in Third World countries. With the preferential low subscription offered to attract them to become members, the amount of money IFLA receives in dues is not sufficient to meet rising expectations of the new members.

C: If not answers, surely ideas, Mr Soosa...

S: Well, in terms of the future of IFLA I feel there is some overlap between IFLA and the many regional organizations around the world today. These regional organizations are doing some very good work in their own right; and I think IFLA will, sooner or later, have to review its structure in such a way that these organizations and any new ones that are formed should become an integral part of the overall worldwide structure of IFLA, contributing to closer cooperation and interaction with IFLA. This will be a positive step to avoid duplication of effort. Resources are very limited, and IFLA should not allow itself to be dragged into unnecessary competition with these regional organizations.

I gave a paper in Tokyo in 1986 where I discussed the possibility of resurrecting AFLA—the Asian Federation of Library Associations. Now, my feeling is this: if you work out a pyramid structure, with IFLA at the apex, the next level

should be the Asian Federation of Library Associations, the African Federation of Library Associations, the Latin American/Caribbean Federation of Library Associations. Then will come the subregions like CONSAL (Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians), and similar regional organizations elsewhere, then the national library associations, all forming part of a colossal network of organizations that work towards the development of library services throughout the world.

C: It seems like that system would work, but how do the Standing Committees of each of the Sections for the three Regions and the three Regional Secretariats fit into it?

S: Each of the Regional Secretariats has been turned into an IFLA regional office, and the manager is supposed to look after that office and promote IFLA in that region. The person also has to produce a newsletter, be in charge of the Clearing House for IFLA Publications, and undertake any other responsibilities given to him in that region. He may be asked to go and represent IFLA in certain meetings in the region. They can't send representatives from The Hague, so they can ask the regional manager to go. The regional manager is just the manager of the IFLA office in the region and has nothing to do with the professional programme as such. The chairman of the Standing Committee is really the one who develops the professional programme and coordinates it. The present situation is that there is a Standing Committee for each regional Section on which there are supposed to be two members representing each of the five subregions. The ten members meet as often as possible depending on the availability of funds.

C: The Chairman and Secretary of the Standing Committee will be elected from among the Committee members.

S: Yes; and the members of the Standing Committee are also members of their subregional organizations.

C: The manager will be ...?

S: ...appointed by IFLA. My suggestion is that IFLA should make an effort to invite the Presidents and Secretaries of other regional organizations to attend when IFLA meets in their region, and so to try to meet the people in the different regions, talk to them, and find out what are the problems, what sort of programmes they are doing, is there any way IFLA can interact with them. IFLA should extend an arm of cooperation to these organizations. They've come to Asia twice already—this is the third time—but they've not made an attempt to meet the members of any organizations in the region to have a dialogue established.

C: Membership increased quickly; will restructuring be that rapid?

S: IFLA's major reorganization will come when regional associations such as the proposed AFLA (Asian Federation of Library Associations) get established. An attempt was made to form AFLA in 1957 but, as Herman Liebaers called it, it was a stillborn child. It failed because the countries had just got independence or were getting their independence and were not ready yet for regional and international participation. Today the situation is different; all the countries have their independence and they're looking to establish relationships within the region and internationally. Such a development in Asia could also act as a pace setter for the other two regions.

C: What about the idea that developing countries would have made a more successful entrance into IFLA if they didn't have regional groups at all but just went in with the rest of the Standing Committees? Do you think that would be the ultimate sign of success?

S: Everybody hopes that some day the disparity in economic development between the developed and developing countries will disappear and the developing countries will participate in IFLA with the same strength and authority as the developed countries. But it is highly speculative at this time, and I think it will take a long, long time. I think Third World countries will still have to be given preferential treatment if their participation is going to be sustained. If IFLA says, 'We will remove the preferential arrangements for Third World countries, they've all got to become equal', I think we'll go back to the pre-1971 period. There's no question about that. Even with the slight increase in fees going on now, many Third World countries are saying, 'We can't afford it', and getting out 'what are we getting in return, we are getting just the publications, we're not able to participate, we don't have the funds to travel, so what's the big idea of paying IFLA large sums of money?'

C: As far as you're concerned regionalism is not only necessary but it is a step that has to be taken towards greater internationalism in IFLA.

S: Oh yes, very much so. I think **without the regional programme** IFLA wouldn't have been international to the extent that it is today. Their credibility has been established now, but in pre-1971 when IFLA talked of the Third World, nobody listened. In IFLA, 'regional' means 'developing countries in a particular geographical region' which have been brought together for expediency to coordinate and develop library programmes. Regionalism only exists for Third World countries because all the countries are having more or less similar problems of economic development. IFLA needs to deal with the region as a whole, to delegate its responsibilities to the regional offices to continuously monitor the developments in the region, to formulate programmes, and to keep IFLA informed.

C: Would you please say a few more things on ALP?  
 S: When the core programmes were launched some years ago, they started originally with five. [Two have been combined recently]. The Board decided to include a sixth programme known as ALP (Advancement of Librarianship in the Third World). Unlike the other programmes, which are clearly subject-oriented, the programme for Third World countries was mission-oriented. It was an ongoing mission. From the day that IFLA existed, work had gone on for Third World countries and much has been done but much more has got to be done. The ALP needs a massive input to see any immediate results. The other core programmes are hosted by reputed international organizations or national libraries in many well-developed countries. The ALP is like a step-child in IFLA, trying to find a home to stay. It's now hosted by the IFLA Secretariat. How does one translate ALP into a meaningful and cohesive programme for Third World countries, from the grass roots work of the barefoot librarian to the application of the most sophisticated information technology in libraries? There's clearly a wide spectrum of subjects to be covered, and to see tangible evidence of improvements will take a long time because different countries have different constraints and priorities and there's no simple formula that you can apply to any one place and to any one region. The ALP programme has been established, and for four years there have been a lot of misgivings about it; some articles have appeared that are not so complimentary to IFLA in terms of the ALP. More recently there has been commendable effort on the part of the Nordic countries to try to establish a coordinating centre to develop the ALP programme. The Nordic proposal should not in any way exclude other countries who want to assist the Third World. There could be one, two, three or more coordinating centres to help Third World countries. Funding agencies may be more receptive to such regional coordinating centres which may be able to provide cohesive and convincing programmes for library development in the various regions. I think this is a step which will help to translate ALP into a more meaningful programme. It doesn't mean these people are going to take this support and leave IFLA. All these coordinating centres must be tied up with IFLA.

C: Or else IFLA would lose the whole concept of it being the one point for international librarianship?  
 S: That's right.

C: If, as urged by the 1985 Resolution presented to IFLA Council, consultancy status is conferred on regional library organizations in programme implementation, I am reminded of advice given on regional planning: to secure structures that will function in line with appropriate rules for making and implementing collective decisions; consensus

on principles of regional cooperation expressed in trust and goodwill with norms of cooperation and with informal accountability, (3) somewhere between the 'adequate' communication upward and downward as in any organization (4) and the full legal relationships of the United Nations to non-governmental organizations

S: Regional library associations like CONSAL, ACURIL [Association of Caribbean University and Research Institute Libraries], the East African Library Association and other similar organizations, particularly in the developing regions, have played a very significant role and proved more effective than IFLA in dealing with common problems in a region as far as library and information development is concerned. It will certainly be in the best interests of IFLA to try to establish a symbiotic working relationship with such organizations in promoting their regional programme.

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**Abstract**

**Edited text of an interview with Joseph Soosai, former Chief Librarian, Rubber Research Institute of Malaysia, about his seventeen years' involvement with the regional activities programmes of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). Discusses the origins and organization of the programme, the establishment of the Regional Development Fund and IFLA's core programme for the Advancement of Librarianship in the Third World (ALP). Emphasizes the important contribution which regional and subregional library associations can make to library development in the Third World and proposes the establishment of a worldwide network of national, subregional**