

The Prague declaration

Towards an information literate society

Inequities among nations and individuals in today's information society were targeted at a historic, first-of-its-kind meeting in Prague, The Czech Republic, in September 2003. Forty participants from twenty-three countries met to discuss information literacy. With the support of UNESCO, and organised by the US National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) and the National Forum on Information Literacy (NFIL), participants wrestled with the fundamental challenge of how to empower people to benefit from information and communication resources and technologies.

Information literacy was defined as the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organise and effectively create, use and communicate information to address an issue or problem.

To date, advancements in information and communication technologies have only increased the divide between the information rich and the information poor. Prague participants acknowledged the need for three elements to improve this situation:

- 1 ready access to information and communication technologies;
- 2 unrestricted availability of needed information; and
- 3 an information literate citizenry.

They agreed that an information literacy citizenry is required to mobilise an effective civil society and create a competitive workforce.

More than thirty papers were commissioned for the Prague meeting and served as a basis for the discussions. Both abstracts and the full papers are available at <http://www.nclis.gov/libinter/infolitconf&meet/infolitconf&meet.html>. Participants issued 'The Prague declaration: Toward an information literate society' [see below].

The Prague declaration

Towards an information literate society

We the participants at the Information Literacy Meeting of Experts, organised by the US National Commission on Library and Information Science and the National Forum on Information Literacy, with the support of UNESCO, representing twenty-three countries from all of the seven major continents, held in Prague, the Czech Republic, 20–23 September 2003, propose the following basic information literacy principles:

- *The creation of an information society is key to social, cultural and economic development of nations and communities, institutions and individuals in the 21st century and beyond.*

- *Information literacy encompasses knowledge of one's information concerns and needs, and the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organise and effectively create, use and communicate information to address issues or problems at hand; it is a prerequisite for participating effectively in the information society, and is part of the basic human right of life long learning.*
- *Information literacy, in conjunction with access to essential information and effective use of information and communication technologies, plays a leading role in reducing the inequities within and among countries and peoples, and in promoting tolerance and mutual understanding through information use in multicultural and multilingual contexts.*
- *Governments should develop strong interdisciplinary programs to promote information literacy nationwide as a necessary step in closing the digital divide through the creation of an information literate citizenry, an effective civil society and a competitive workforce.*
- *Information literacy is a concern to all sectors of society and should be tailored by each to its specific needs and context.*
- *Information literacy should be an integral part of Education for All, which can contribute critically to the achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, and respect for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.*

In the above context, we propose for the urgent consideration of governments, civil society and the international community the following policy recommendations:

- *The September 2003 Prague Conference Report should be studied and its recommendations, strategic plans and research initiatives implemented expeditiously as appropriate.*
- *The progress in, and opportunities for implementation of the above should be assessed by an International Congress on Information Literacy, which could be organised in the first half of 2005.*
- *The possibility of inclusion of information literacy within the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003–2012) should be considered by the international community.*

Volunteer in South Africa!

Announcing the 2004 'Inform the World' Library Skills Exchange

Have you considered spending part of 2004 helping communities gain access to the information that they need to build a better future? The ITW Library Skills Exchange is a four-week hands-on volunteer program primarily for librarians, library science students, and retired professionals. The program provides structured training and assistance to South African librarians and others with little or no formal librarian training, while offering volunteers the opportunity to use their skills and experience the vibrant culture of rural South African communities.

The program is called a 'skills

exchange' because African and international librarians bring their expertise together to create unique answers to the information needs of rural African communities. Sometimes the solutions are based on international standards, other times, they are unique adaptations to local conditions, like delivering books by donkey cart or making paper from elephant dung. Each volunteer and African librarian contributes to creating a library as special as the community it serves.

There are two groups going to different locations: Limpopo Province: 12 July – 12 August, and KwaZulu Natal

(KZN) Province: 16 July – 17 August.

The World Library Partnership (WLP) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to building global understanding by promoting literacy, learning and access to information. The WLP advocates for sustainable, community-based libraries in developing areas. Visit the WLP website at <http://www.worldlibraries.org> for more information.

Applications are welcome from interested volunteers around the world. For more information and to apply, see <http://www.worldlibraries.org/itw/southafrica/saprogram.shtml>. ■