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Content Analysis and Implications of the IFLA 2021 Annual Report

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Abstract

IFLA has always been committed to leading and promoting the development of the global library profession. In late 2022, the IFLA 2021 Annual Report was officially released, themed “Global Voice of the Library and Information Industry,” summarizing IFLA’s major contributions in 2021 from four aspects: enhancing the global voice of libraries, inspiring and strengthening professional practice, connecting and empowering the professional field, and optimizing organizational structure. Through analysis of the main content of the IFLA 2021 Annual Report, this article provides corresponding insights for the future development of libraries in China and their better integration onto the world stage, namely: continuing to strengthen the social responsibility of libraries, better demonstrating the professionalism of library services, enhancing connections among libraries, and continuously improving librarians’ skills and strengths.

Full Text

Analysis and Insights from the IFLA Annual Report 2021

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Abstract

IFLA has consistently dedicated itself to leading and advancing the development of libraries worldwide. At the end of 2022, the *IFLA Annual Report 2021* was officially released under the theme “The Global Voice of the Library and Information Profession,” summarizing IFLA’s major contributions in 2021 across four strategic areas: strengthening the global voice of libraries, inspiring and

enhancing professional practice, connecting and empowering the field, and optimizing organizational structure. Through an analysis of the report's main contents, this paper offers corresponding insights for the future development of Chinese libraries and their deeper integration onto the world stage: continuing to strengthen libraries' social responsibility, better demonstrating the professionalism of library services, enhancing connections among libraries, and continuously improving librarians' skills and competencies.

Keywords: IFLA; Annual Report; Library; Global Voice

Chinese Library Classification: G250

Introduction

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), founded in 1927 and headquartered in The Hague, Netherlands, stands as the most authoritative and influential international non-governmental professional organization in the global library community. In 2021, IFLA underwent institutional reforms, establishing a new governance structure under its Management Committee comprising three bodies: the Professional Council, Regional Council, and Advisory Committee. The Professional Council, formerly the Professional Committee, includes eight divisions; the Regional Council was elevated from regional offices; and the Advisory Committee consists of four specialized advisory committees covering standards, copyright and other legal matters, free access to information and freedom of expression, and cultural heritage.

As the global advocate for libraries, IFLA represents the interests of the library profession and is committed to building a strong and united global library community that leads the direction of library development worldwide. Since 2000, IFLA has compiled and published annual reports that detail its activities, achievements, and financial status, providing guidance for library planning and professional development globally while demonstrating strong contemporaneity and professionalism. For instance, the *IFLA Annual Report 2007* emphasized the importance of advocacy and marketing for library development, urging libraries to recognize the need to promote their services alongside delivering them. The *IFLA Annual Report 2010* advocated for libraries to provide information literacy services to society and to conduct corresponding education and support, guiding libraries to effectively fulfill their information functions in the digital age. The *IFLA Annual Report 2014* positioned libraries as a solid foundation for social development, arguing that as public cultural facilities, libraries should assume greater social responsibilities. The *IFLA Annual Report 2020* summarized the challenges posed by COVID-19 and libraries' responses, highlighting how libraries demonstrated greater resilience when facing emergencies and new societal expectations.

On December 5, 2022, the *IFLA Annual Report 2021* (hereinafter referred to as "the Report") was officially released on IFLA's official website

(<https://www.ifla.org/>). The Report documents the growing voice and role of libraries at the international organizational and social affairs levels, reflecting the value and mission of libraries in the information society. This paper analyzes the Report's main contents and summarizes its implications for the future development of Chinese libraries.

1. Analysis of the Report's Main Contents

The year 2021 marked a period for IFLA to consolidate achievements and services on behalf of its members. Building upon the resilience and innovation demonstrated by the library field during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, IFLA became more effective, inclusive, and transparent. The Report therefore proposes that this moment represents not only an important time to envision the future but also a critical starting point to begin realizing and creating that future. Centered on the theme “The Global Voice of the Library and Information Profession,” the Report highlights strategic content across four key dimensions.

1.1 Strengthening the Global Voice of Libraries

In 2021, against the backdrop of continued global challenges posed by COVID-19, IFLA played a crucial role internationally on behalf of libraries. Through active engagement in relevant international affairs, IFLA ensured that professional perspectives from libraries and librarians were absorbed and applied, with professional strengths and needs increasingly reflected in various initiatives. This approach clarified to funders, partners, and communities the value and importance of libraries' work, demonstrating the potential for strong, inclusive, and sustainable library development while further enhancing libraries' global voice.

As a UN observer, IFLA intensified its participation in international affairs. First, its relationship with UNESCO strengthened significantly. IFLA collaborated closely with UNESCO in revising the *IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 2022* (hereinafter referred to as the *Public Library Manifesto 2022*), soliciting suggestions from libraries worldwide beginning in 2020 on issues such as emphasizing libraries' roles in information services and cultural preservation and focusing on users' learning and creativity development. IFLA continued its involvement in revising the Manifesto throughout 2021 until its official release in 2022. Second, IFLA fully participated in developing the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and in promoting the Sustainable Development Goals, enhancing libraries' visibility and role in these initiatives and ensuring that the world's voice of libraries was heard.

The year 2021 also set a record for IFLA's participation in regional sustainable development forums, providing valuable insights on critical policy and skills development issues for libraries across different world regions. Libraries began playing a central role in more initiatives and activities, becoming hubs

for information sharing, behavioral change, community building, and research support. IFLA's major engagements in 2021 included: first, participating in multiple activities at the 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in the UK, preparing for the G20 Culture Ministers Meeting and the Urban 20 (U20) Mayors Summit, where libraries served as a pillar in the *G20 Culture Ministers Declaration*, further strengthening protection for cultural diversity and heritage and bridging the digital divide through digital tools supported by media and information literacy training; second, strengthening connections with local government organizations through the 4th UCLG Culture Summit, emphasizing libraries' critical role as key pillars of community cultural infrastructure and IFLA's broad contributions to strong and inclusive development; and third, actively participating in the Internet Governance Forum at the core meetings of the World Summit on the Information Society Forum and taking a leading role in compiling reports on the impact of public internet access in libraries and libraries' position in broadband strategies.

1.2 Inspiring and Enhancing Professional Practice

IFLA exists for libraries and serves as a leading international organization where professionals worldwide gather to share ideas and experiences while developing standards, guidelines, reports, and tools that enable libraries globally to improve in more professional directions. In 2021, IFLA achieved significant results in both professional governance and practice.

First, IFLA's governance review was implemented. This initiative provides greater support for IFLA volunteers while continuing to expand its reach, particularly in facing contemporary uncertainties, to make greater contributions toward building a strong and united library field and providing more momentum for achieving the vision of a literate, informed, and engaged society. Simultaneously, as a vehicle for disseminating ideas and best practices, libraries will more broadly support development and research.

Second, IFLA launched its new website. This development demonstrates IFLA's heightened attention to the needs of its volunteers and new community members while delivering a fresh appearance and exciting new experience for all users. The new site provides a more engaging professional service platform for all who contribute their time and energy, making IFLA's functions and roles easier to understand and its services and resources more accessible, thereby reflecting IFLA's professionalism.

Third, IFLA officially launched the *IFLA Newsletter*. Each issue features a theme reflecting a key issue within or beyond the library profession, typically connecting with global agendas where libraries have strong interests or can make significant contributions to enhance professional practice. For example, the inaugural issue focused on sustainability, which was highlighted at the 26th UN Climate Change Conference.

Fourth, IFLA developed new standards, collaborating with UNESCO to release

the second edition of the *UNESCO PERSIST Content Selection Guidelines*. This framework and its appendices convey key concepts and tools, advocating for the development of digital preservation policies to help libraries and other memory institutions fulfill their mission of accessing and preserving digital heritage, reflecting global consensus and future trends regarding libraries' deep involvement in safeguarding and transmitting human civilization and intellectual achievements.

Fifth, the Full Implementation of the Namespaces Programme was completed. This program aims to facilitate librarians worldwide in working according to IFLA standards, providing critical updates around resources from the IFLA Risk Register to offer stronger support for libraries' heritage preservation efforts.

1.3 Connecting and Empowering the Field

Building upon professional practice, IFLA is also committed to providing a necessary platform for exchange and collaboration among library and information workers worldwide, creating closer and more valuable networking opportunities for institutions and individuals. Through this platform, from formal webinars and training to simple conversations and exchanges, users gain flexible learning opportunities that enhance industry connections, facilitate sharing of new perspectives and insights, and demonstrate IFLA' s role as a central node.

First, the IFLA World Library and Information Congress (WLIC) was held online for the first time. Despite the pandemic, IFLA persevered in organizing this historically most inclusive and accessible annual conference. The 2021 congress was scheduled across different time slots to accommodate global time zones, and registration costs were extremely low, facilitating the gathering and participation of professionals worldwide to rekindle old connections and develop new ones, helping the library and information field achieve broader goals.

Second, IFLA volunteers regularly organized online activities within their professional domains, enabling global audiences to more broadly understand IFLA' s work. For example, a webinar series in December 2021 specifically for International Volunteer Day (December 5) discussed whether volunteer activities by library and information science students in libraries, library associations, and other library institutions benefit users' professional development or how volunteer activities affect libraries and users, thereby strengthening connections between libraries and users.

Fourth, IFLA continued to implement its advocacy and outreach action plan to fulfill commitments in its global vision, ensuring its work effectively responds to regional needs. Meanwhile, IFLA' s regional offices and language centers continue supporting members and the broader field, playing invaluable roles in achieving more regionally appropriate goals. This demonstrates IFLA' s increasing emphasis on industry connectivity and providing more valuable support for regional development.

1.4 Optimizing Organizational Structure

To support its development vision and mission, IFLA has consistently focused on management efficiency and service effectiveness, undertaking institutional reforms as appropriate. In 2021, the new management structure was formally completed, marking the official launch of a new development cycle. As IFLA's new President Barbara Lison emphasized, this represents a critical step toward sustainable development.

First, IFLA welcomed its first directly elected Treasurer—Perry Moree. As a member of the Governing Board, Moree strengthens financial security and management, providing more robust financial support for IFLA's development. This demonstrates that the optimized organizational structure can ensure IFLA's strong development momentum despite financial uncertainties.

Second, IFLA proposed continuing to deepen and strengthen activities and outreach with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This includes continuing to implement the Library Map of the World project, launched in 2017. Additionally, with support from the Arcadia Fund and as a partner in the Knowledge Rights 21 (KR21) project, IFLA has strengthened copyright advocacy capacity and enhanced libraries' voice by establishing connections with the Association of European Research Libraries (LIBER) and SPARC Europe.

Third, IFLA Headquarters continues leading global advocacy to achieve its development goals by supporting volunteers, managing memberships, and coordinating the Library Map of the World project, such as amplifying libraries' voices on social media platforms like LinkedIn and Instagram and providing information to current and potential members and anyone interested in library work through the *IFLA Newsletter*.

2. Insights for China's Library Community

The Report represents a review and summary of IFLA's work over the past year under special social circumstances, embodying the voice of the global library community. China's library community should carefully absorb these insights, strengthen connections with global libraries, better integrate China's library cause onto the world stage, participate more extensively in IFLA organizational development, win discourse power, tell China's stories well, and disseminate China's voice effectively.

2.1 Continuing to Strengthen Libraries' Social Responsibility

IFLA has maintained close working relationships with relevant international institutions, regularly exchanging materials and opinions on issues of common concern, reflecting libraries' social responsibility. For example, IFLA holds formal consultative relations with UNESCO and serves as an observer to the UN,

UNESCO, ISO, and WTO. In 2021, IFLA collaborated with UNESCO to revise the *Public Library Manifesto 2022*, participated in developing the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, attended the 25th anniversary conference of Blue Shield as a founding member, and participated in the 2nd World Memory Global Policy Forum, among other activities, beginning to leave its mark on the international stage. This reflects IFLA's social responsibility in international affairs, strengthens libraries' global voice, and consequently wins more development opportunities—experiences worth learning from for China's library community.

China's library community has always been active at the forefront of user services, focusing on expanding service content. In 2014, China first included nationwide reading promotion in its government work report, and in 2021, smart library construction was incorporated into the national 14th Five-Year Plan, reflecting the state's emphasis on the library cause and libraries' growing "feedback" to society in more diverse forms. In 2020, the case of Wu Guichun, a migrant worker from Hubei, leaving a message at Dongguan Library attracted widespread social attention, refocusing public attention on libraries' social education role and status. Wu Guichun's statement that "the best place is the library" represents the highest praise and affirmation for libraries, reflecting their social inclusiveness. Libraries should demonstrate their social responsibility through shaping their social education image and transmitting values. In 2021, when Zhengzhou experienced catastrophic flooding, Zhengzhou Library "stood guard through wind and rain," creating a social safe space for users who remained in the library and nearby residents. This demonstrates the deepening relationship between libraries and society and libraries' assumption of a new social responsibility—as social safe spaces that will play a balancing role in providing guarantees for social harmony and stability. Cases like Dongguan Library and Zhengzhou Library show that China's library community has begun assuming greater social responsibility. In recent years, Chinese libraries have played professional roles in projects such as rural library construction, cultural poverty alleviation, and ancient document preservation. However, facing the VUCA era characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, libraries must assume more temporary and unknown social responsibilities, providing society with greater certainty, stability, and security, thereby enhancing libraries' visibility and discourse power.

2.2 Better Demonstrating Professionalism in Library Services

In recent years, the professionalism of libraries has become a hot topic among library scholars and practitioners, representing a key element for sustainable, high-quality library development. IFLA has consistently promoted a professional orientation for global librarianship by developing frameworks to facilitate the specialization and standardization of information/digital literacy education. Examples include UNESCO's *Global Media and Information Literacy Assessment Framework* and *Digital Literacy Global Framework*, the EU's *European*

Digital Competence Framework for Citizens and *European Digital Competence Framework for Educators*, and the Association of College and Research Libraries' *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. In the legal domain, laws and regulations safeguard libraries' rights and professional development, such as the U.S. *Library of Congress Act* and state library laws, the UK' s *British Library Act*, Japan' s *Library Act*, and China' s *Public Library Law*. These frameworks and laws provide fundamental guidance for professional interpretation and services at all levels and types of libraries.

Over the past three decades, Chinese libraries at all levels have experienced rapid development supported by national economic policies, with significant improvements in building numbers, spatial facilities, collection systems, and talent teams. However, new contradictions have emerged with social development: the growing demand for cultural information versus relatively backward library service capacity and creativity—essentially a lack of professionalism and a disconnect between practice and academia. Therefore, on one hand, we must strengthen the formulation and implementation of relevant frameworks, standards, and laws to lay the foundation for professional library development, such as developing information/digital literacy frameworks, establishing reading promotion systems, and formulating smart library construction standards and systems to continuously improve the institutional framework. On the other hand, we must strengthen connections and integration with academia to broaden professional perspectives, enhance theoretical understanding, and promote systematic and professional library development. For example, Dongguan Library has held open forums with Peking University' s Department of Information Management since 2006 to provide professional guidance for its development, conducted joint project research and practice with Nankai University, Sun Yat-sen University, and Wuhan University to promote professional exploration of services, and worked closely with Professor Ke Ping' s team from Nankai University' s Department of Information Management to compile 13th and 14th Five-Year Plans, providing strategic guidance for the library' s professional development.

2.3 Enhancing Connections Among Libraries

In recent years, IFLA has advocated for the transformation from “libraries of books” to “libraries of people.” As early as the *IFLA Strategy Report 2019-2024*, IFLA began emphasizing and valuing communication and collaboration among libraries, which not only promotes individual library development but also provides new momentum for the overall development and progress of global libraries. The 2021 Report further demonstrates the advantages and trends of connectivity and empowerment among libraries. For example, the Australian Library and Information Association has consistently strengthened professional practice and connected libraries through specific initiatives to enhance diversity and professionalism. Additionally, there are connections between libraries and other organizations, such as IFLA' s media literacy project within the EU' s “Media Literacy for All Preparatory Action” framework, aimed at strengthening

connections with communities and promoting digital inclusion and information access.

Although COVID-19 prevented the 86th World Library and Information Congress from being held in person, the online conference still provided opportunities for connection and exchange among librarians worldwide, gathering together to discuss major library issues. China's library community should actively overcome adverse external factors and further strengthen connections and collaboration among libraries, moving beyond organizational or theoretical levels such as societies, associations, and alliances to achieve substantive progress. On one hand, we should participate more in international affairs and activities to enhance Chinese libraries' global voice, strengthening connections with international libraries through participation and exchange to secure more development resources, explore greater development potential, and lead more development trends. On the other hand, we should enhance the practicality of connections and collaboration, genuinely promoting coordinated cooperation among libraries in resources, technology, and personnel. For example, facing the general tightening of resource construction funding, how can we use technical and policy means to reduce low-quality redundant resource construction nationwide, strengthen characteristic resource development, promote digital resource transformation and document delivery, and improve resource service efficiency? In terms of librarian training, how can we share training faculty through online seminars?

2.4 Continuously Improving Librarians' Skills and Competencies

Future library staff must possess the necessary knowledge, confidence, and skills to respond to organizational and technological changes, enabling libraries' roles, missions, and values to be realized. In 2021, IFLA continuously enhanced librarians' professional capabilities and promoted its own sustainable development through organizational restructuring. In the VUCA era, libraries face more challenges, and librarians, as the decisive factor in libraries' survival and development, require critical capacity building.

Librarian competencies have gradually attracted attention from library communities both domestically and internationally. The Association of College and Research Libraries listed "new skills for new leadership" as a library development trend for the first time in its *2020 Top Trends in Academic Libraries* report, emphasizing the cultivation of new talent capable of leading industry innovation. The Public Library Association stressed in its *Strategic Plan 2022-2026* the need to provide comprehensive support for library practitioners' career development, including knowledge, skills, and values that lead the library field. China's library community has also begun focusing on librarians' professional capacity building. The Steering Committee for Academic Libraries of the Ministry of Education specifically emphasized in its *Compass Report on the Modernization of University Libraries* released at the end of 2021 that team building is the primary issue for high-quality library development, including the

specialization and management capabilities of leadership teams and librarians' professional competencies.

Overall, librarians' skills and competencies are gradually becoming a core force driving library development and are moving to the forefront and center. Future development should focus on the following aspects: first, professional spirit, primarily cultivating librarians' professional ideals, attitudes, beliefs, consciousness, and confidence; second, professional capacity, fully demonstrating irreplaceable library service professionalism, including expanding and enhancing disciplinary knowledge services, information/digital literacy education, cultural promotion, intelligence analysis, technical support, and resource development capabilities; third, research capacity, primarily strengthening librarians' own academic research and scientific research abilities to promote service skill enhancement through professional research; and fourth, management capacity, improving library governance levels and capabilities from different dimensions, including leadership decision-making, departmental coordination, and staff execution capabilities.

3. Conclusion

The release of the Report represents not only IFLA' s review and summary of global library work in 2021 but also its guidance and promotion of future library work. It once again demonstrates to the world the functions and value created by libraries in international society and affairs, and conveys libraries' firm confidence in enhancing their social value and cultural mission. Through analyzing the Report' s main contents, we have witnessed libraries' resilience and vitality in overcoming difficulties and seeking development, while also gaining insights for the future development of Chinese libraries. This analysis further clarifies the strategic direction for library development in the coming period. Particularly in the context of Chinese modernization, libraries must both suit China's national conditions and reflect Chinese characteristics while maintaining an international perspective and integrating onto the world stage, focusing on both libraries' social roles and professional strengths to continuously amplify libraries' social voice and value output.

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