



International Federation of
Library Associations and Institutions

Address by Gerald Leitner, Secretary-General, IFLA, to the General Assembly of the Blue Shield

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Dear President, Chair, [Director General], Board Members, Ladies and Gentlemen, colleagues, I am pleased and honoured to be with you here today.

I speak on behalf of IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. We are an organisation representing millions of institutions worldwide, from the grandest national libraries to those embedded in schools or communities.

Individually, many of our members hold irreplaceable books, manuscripts and other materials. Together, they form a network which collectively safeguards much of the world's historical record.

IFLA also represents many millions of professionals. People who have dedicated themselves to preserving and giving access to knowledge and heritage. They believe in the unique social mission of libraries – that everyone should have has the access to information they need to develop. That access is key to a literate, informed and participatory society. Preserving heritage is essential to this.

The mission of the Blue Shield is dear to libraries, and its work perfectly in line with our own. Born out of the first international treaty to recognise the idea of a shared global heritage, it supports this concept both in spirit and through practical actions. In doing so, it embodies this core role of our institutions – to recognise, preserve, and celebrate all heritage – and offers invaluable support.

To my mind, the last twelve months underline why the work of the Blue Shield is so necessary.

We have seen both good news and bad news, damage and preservation, evidence of the harm that disasters can do, and proof of the difference that an effective response can make. From the tragic destruction of the library of the University of Mosul, to the safeguarding of the collections of the Louvre as river levels peaked earlier this year.

The struggle is ongoing. Even now, libraries in the Caribbean and southern United States are working hard not only to serve the immediate needs of their communities, but also to safeguard heritage. They have been joined by experts from the Library of Congress, bringing their knowledge and skills to support them. In doing this, they are laying the foundations for recovery and rebuilding.

Yet in terms of readiness and resources, not everywhere is so lucky. There is a serious need to develop capacity, and ensure that governments and actors are playing their part.

IFLA is answering the call. Through dedicated committees on rare books and special collections, and preservation and conservation, as well as through a network of sixteen preservation and conservation centres – PAC Centres – we are working to raise awareness and readiness levels at the global and regional levels.

These PAC Centres have organised workshops on everything from environmentally secure storage and insect-proofing to dealing with earthquakes and water-logging. They are setting up online courses on disaster preparedness, and creating dedicated spaces to train professionals.

Our Risk Register brings together vital information about collections, to be used in time of disaster to help locate key documentary heritage. We continue to promote this around the world, especially in regions where the need is greatest.

We held our most recent World Library and Information Congress in Poland, a country which has seen more than its fair share of destruction of heritage. We heard practical stories of how to make a success of the moving of collections, of how libraries can work across borders to safeguard and give access to rare books, and of how libraries have responded to disasters historically.

Our efforts to develop and harmonise preservation standards continue. We are keen to ensure our work is relevant for all. In July, IFLA organised a workshop on Palm Leaf Manuscripts, which form the core of the documentary cultural heritage of many Asian countries, and which can be particularly vulnerable.

The discussions showed the value of working together, and the need for joined-up approaches. And we have followed up on work on the theft and trafficking of cultural heritage by opening discussions with associations of booksellers.

Finally, and at the political level, we have underlined the central role of libraries in safeguarding cultural heritage in a statement, agreed last April. This calls on governments to ensure that the right laws, and tools, are in place for libraries to realise this potential.

But we cannot do this alone. Fortunately, here we are among friends. We share the same goals. We work alongside ICA and ICOM at the World Intellectual Property Organisation to ensure that copyright does not stand in the way of protection and reconstruction of cultural heritage. We work with ICA in particular on safeguarding digital heritage, through the UNESCO PERSIST Initiative, as well as in work we are undertaking on digital unification.

At the national level, IFLA's members are active on Blue Shield committees, contributing expertise and energy to organising events, producing guidance, and spreading the word. This comes on top of their day to day work, ensuring that citizens can access and enjoy the heritage that is preserved.

Their engagement is testimony to the readiness of the library field to build partnerships and alliances. As the library field looks to the future, it is clear that these partnerships will make us stronger.

And of course we are here today, happy to work with you to determine what more the Blue Shield can do at the global level to support our members and the broader community.

With climate change playing a growing part in our lives, and conflicts continuing around the world, the threats to cultural heritage are as clear and present as ever.

Yet we have never been in a better position to respond.

We have the political commitment. Sustainable Development Goal 11.4 calls for the safeguarding of cultural heritage. The UN Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights has made a priority of issues surrounding deliberate destruction of culture, and how to respond.

We should not hesitate to use these commitments and arguments in making the case to governments and other partners for them to do their bit.

In each of our organisations, we are developing and refining our own tools, and working from the global to the local level to achieve our missions more effectively.

Thanks to the Blue Shield, and particular under the leadership of Peter, we also have a great framework for advancing this work globally. I look forward to doing so.