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Disaster Planning : why it is important

by

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Most librarians are well aware that no week passes by without hearing from a flood, a fire or another disaster striking a library. Small incidents may turn into huge disasters. This is particularly true for national libraries which are the keepers of the national heritage, an heritage which may disappear forever, in the event of a disaster, thus depriving future generations from their national memory.

Let us remember Florence, 1966, with 1.200.000 books flooded and damaged. Some of them are still waiting to be restored. Sarajevo where the whole building was set to fire and the collections and catalogues entirely destroyed. More recently German, Czech and Polish libraries underwent severe floods, a fire destroyed the magnificent library Anna Amalia in Weimar, not to mention the South East Asian libraries damaged by the tsunami last December.

Considering that such disasters cannot be avoided but that there exists means to mitigate their consequences, IFLA Preservation and Conservation (PAC) Core Activity took the initiative, immediately supported by the IFLA Sections of National Libraries and on Preservation & Conservation, to propose the following resolution for approval by IFLA Council, Glasgow 2002.

"Be it resolved that, considering the many risks that threaten the cultural heritage, all libraries responsible for collections of national significance, should set up, test, implement and regularly update a disaster plan". Council adopted the resolution, with no votes against and 10 abstentions.

In 2003 a pre-conference was co-organised by the Section on Preservation & Conservation , PAC, the Akademie der Wissenschaften and the Staatbibliothek zu Berlin on the following theme: *Preparing for the worst, planning for the best: protecting our cultural heritage from disaster*. The conference gathered 90 participants from 25 countries. Discussions indicated that there was a continued need to disseminate information on suitable and effective strategies and techniques concerning disaster prevention, planning and recovery, and to develop interdisciplinary collaborations. Proceedings are available in IFLA Publications N°111.

Following this, PAC decided to launch a world wide survey to investigate how many national libraries had a disaster plan. A questionnaire was sent to 177 national libraries, 73 libraries answered (41%) among which 39 (53%) had a disaster plan and 28 (38%) had the intention to have one and only 6 were not interested. Among the risks more frequently quoted stand fire (61%), flood (41%) and earthquakes (32%).

The complete results of the survey were presented last year in Buenos Aires during the IFLA conference and are available on the IFLANET http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla70/papers/142e_trans-Varlamoff_Plassard.pdf or in International Preservation News N°34. As could be expected there is a divide between national

libraries depending on their geographical location and on the economical situation of their country. What is surprising and unexpected is that some major libraries do not have a disaster plan.

Why should national libraries have a disaster plan? The first reason is obvious: to avoid that minor incidents turn into disasters. Second, all preventive measures are useful not only in case of a disaster but in the daily management of the library and, last but not least, the money spent on establishing and updating a disaster plan is nothing compared to the money you will have to spend to recover from a disaster, not to mention the loss of valuable and irreplaceable collections, and the time during which your library won't be able to open and resume its daily tasks.

Some of the directors answered that they have had to face a number of difficulties helping them from developing their disaster plan, among them:

- a lack of financial resources, especially to buy emergency kits that might never be used;
- a shortage of staff and the impossibility to designate one person responsible for the elaboration and updating of the disaster plan;
- lack of time;
- low interest for the subject;
- difficulty in finding a model to copy.

This last reason quite surprised me. There are tens if not hundreds of models, some of them are very sophisticated. Nevertheless they are mostly issued from western libraries, written in English and not easily adaptable for libraries with low resources or non English-speaking countries.

Considering the results of the survey and the discussions which took place during the three seminars on disasters organised by PAC in Mexico (October 2003), Trinidad and Tobago (May 2004) and Cuba (February 2005), PAC decided to contribute to the already long list of publications dealing with disaster planning. A basic and practical manual on the model of *IFLA Principles on the Care and Handling of Library Material* is being elaborated. It will present the various risks threatening our documentary heritage and the items to take into consideration when establishing a disaster plan. It will also bring some practical solutions to mitigate the consequences of a disaster. Aimed at librarians but also at archivists, the manual will be published in 2006 in a trilingual version (English-French and Spanish).

As a conclusion I would like to invite those of you who do not yet have a disaster plan to consider implementing one. May I add that this plan should not forget to include digital and digitised collections?

Another thing which is of importance and interest: national committees of the Blue Shield for the safeguard of cultural heritage in the event of armed conflict or natural disasters have been settled in twelve countries and eighteen are under construction. In countries that do not yet have one, national libraries could take the initiative to contact their partners from the archives, museums and monuments and sites to create a national committee of the Blue Shield, thus extending a network whose aim is to become the counterpart of the Red Cross for cultural heritage.

Thank you for your attention. I shall be happy to answer any further question.