
eIFL.net: empowering libraries and strengthening the information society in developing and transition countries

Isabel Bernal
eIFL Program Assistant to the Director
Tel: +39 06 58 07 216
E-mail: Isabel.bernal@eifl.net

eIFL.net (Electronic Information for Libraries, www.eifl.net) is a powerful network of library consortia serving millions of end-users in 50 developing and transitional countries in Africa, Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, the Middle East and South-east Asia (see the list of member countries at <http://www.eifl.net/cps/sections/country>). Established in 1999 by the Open Society Institute (OSI, <http://www.soros.org/>) and registered as an independent not-for-profit organisation in the Netherlands in 2003, eIFL.net was born to fill the gap of information have-nots in countries that could not afford to pay the spiralling prices of subscriptions to electronic journals and databases. The eIFL.net mission rests on the belief that a fair and ever-growing access to educational resources in poor societies is a fundamental requirement for the development of civil and democratic societies, their economic growth and their inclusion into a fast-changing world where technologies have become a primary conduit of knowledge as well as a basic tool for a participatory global network. However, eIFL.net does not limit itself to facilitating access to up-to-date, high-quality, multidisciplinary scholarly resources but also promotes the wide visibility and availability of local content produced in member countries, which is too often overlooked or remains to be discovered fully by the international research community.

After a primary phase in which all efforts were put on enabling access to scholarly online material through collective negotiations with publishers on behalf of its member countries, eIFL.net shifted to a holistic approach whereby the local communities of libraries in member countries got empowered to set up the priorities on their agenda of library modernisation through the application of technologies and to engage in a regular dialogue with eIFL.net in order to achieve them. Therefore, eIFL.net has been supporting the building and development of local library consortia since 2002, as it is through interlibrary cooperation and the sharing of costs and efforts that libraries can make an efficient integration into the modern information society. With the ambitious goal of assisting libraries in their modernisation on all fronts, since 2005 eIFL.net has incorporated new work programmes which devote themselves to building capacity and raising awareness about cutting-edge trends in the field of librarianship and information sciences, such as open-access publishing, advocacy for balanced copyright laws and free and open-source software for libraries. Today, eIFL.net is a consolidated international advocate for enhanced access to knowledge through libraries in disadvantaged countries and aspires to broaden its cooperation in more regions and grow partnerships with an increasing number of like-minded initiatives.

With offices in Rome, Italy, eIFL.net has developed six programmes in which the local library consortia in member countries participate as they feel ready to do so, and to the extent that these programmes match their priorities and most pressing needs. The reasons behind the existence of different velocities within the eIFL.net network are manifold: some countries already had a tradition of educational infrastructure when they started to cooperate with eIFL.net, as is the case of many countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; others, on the contrary, had been completely isolated from the information-society revolution of the last decades and it has been through eIFL.net that they have started to organise themselves under the umbrella of local consortia to learn about electronic resources, licensing and many more new concepts. Besides, in many eIFL.net countries uneven internet connectivity and outrageous prices, frequent electricity power cuts, insufficient numbers of usable computers and changing budgets dependent on local circumstances still work as important obstacles in their daily progress. In spite of inner differences, all member countries have experienced important achievements and a continued advancement in

the last years, and eIFL.net has proved sensitive to provide the required assistance to the local communities in their consolidation phases and to improve its services further to make all programmes adequate to the needs of individual countries.

The negotiation with publishers for access to electronic resources at highly discounted prices (if not totally for free in the case of the poorest member countries) and with fair terms of conditions has been at the core of eIFL.net work since its inception and continues to be a leading service. Its negotiation techniques (well known at an international level), the use of a model licence and a model contract for every agreement reached with a new publisher and a decision-making approach whereby the local library consortia in member countries make their voice heard as regards their interest and priorities in the acquisition of new resources all lie behind the success of the programme. As of today, eIFL.net has reached agreements with first-class scholarly publishing houses and aggregators around the world, covering all disciplines and with a growing list of offers to study (see the list of all content licensed at <http://www.eifl.net/cps/sections/services/negotiations>). A host of related services complete eIFL.net's assistance in this field: for instance, for the better management and use of these resources, the local library consortium in Serbia, KoBSON (Serbian Library Consortium for Coordinated Acquisition, <http://nainfo.nbs.bg.ac.yu/kobson/page/>), has recently developed a journal-management tool for the benefit of eIFL.net countries.

The consortium-building programme (<http://www.eifl.net/cps/sections/services/consortium>) has also been a fundamental work line, whose main goal is to help create and support strong, self-sufficient and sustainable library consortia with an increasingly ambitious agenda. This objective is being pursued by helping the consortia in their initial stages with small grants, by organising country and regional workshops on issues of relevance, by paying troubleshooting visits to consortia with temporary difficulties, by attending local events organised by the consortia, by producing educational resources and by training member countries on techniques and tools to best advocate, fundraise, promote and consolidate their consortia. In every member country the local community of librarians designates a country coordinator who works as the main contact person with eIFL.net, keeping us regularly informed and updated on the developments at the local level and passing on to the whole consor-

tium eIFL.net news and services. By doing so, far from adopting a hierarchical *modus operandi*, eIFL.net aspires to create a real and self-enriching flow of information and feedback that works in both directions.

eIFL.net Open Access programme (hereafter eIFL OA, <http://www.eifl.net/cps/sections/services/eifl-oa>) raises awareness on the benefits that open access brings about amongst the international research communities in particular and end-users in general, by making publishing far less costly to the readers and rendering access, distribution and use of research and educational material seamless, immediate, flexible and widely available on the internet. In addition, open access allows an alternative and successful publishing model for authors in developing countries as it greatly facilitates the global visibility of local content, and at a low cost. In partnership with the Open Access Program of the Open Society Institute (OSI), a forerunner in the international movement, eIFL OA has established itself as a major player and advocate for OA mandates both in the international arena and at eIFL.net countries level. Its advocacy efforts go accompanied with a wide range of training material and opportunities that aim to build capacity locally. An issue that ranks high on the eIFL.net agenda is to contribute to making the cultural and educational heritage of member countries widely exposed to the global readership, thus helping to unveil the rich variety of cultural resources and the research output by its scholars. In fact, an eIFL.net institutional repositories initiative kicked off in 2007, to encourage and coordinate efforts in the building of repositories according to international standards. In this sense, an ongoing partnership between eIFL.net and the EU-funded DRIVER project (Digital Repository Infrastructure Vision for European Research, <http://www.driver-repository.eu/>) seeks to incorporate these repositories into the international infrastructure. In parallel, eIFL.net has been collaborating with Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com/>) over the last two years in linking online journals and union catalogues from eIFL.net member countries.

eIFL Intellectual Property (hereafter eIFL IP, <http://www.eifl.net/cps/sections/services/eifl-ip>) has become a leading advocate for balanced copyright laws for libraries in developing and transitional countries after only three years in existence. Its global role and effectiveness are reflected in the growing number of funders supporting its work. These include the Open Society Institute (OSI), the UNESCO Information

for All Programme (http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=1627&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html), the Ford Foundation (<http://www.fordfound.org/>) and the MacArthur Foundation (<http://www.macfound.org/site/c.lkLXJ8MQKrH/b.855229/>), in other words some of the most renowned grant-making organisations in the field of intellectual property. Like eIFL OA, eIFL IP carries out its activities at country level, by providing training and workshops, legal assistance with IP issues related to libraries and the production of educational resources (such as the popular eIFL IP 'Handbook on copyright and related issues', available in translation and freely available to all at <http://www.eifl.net/cps/sections/services/eifl-ip/issues/eifl-handbook-on>), as well as in the international arena. This includes, for example, partnering with the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) Copyright and Legal Matters Committee (<http://www.ifla.org/III/clm/copyr.htm>) and, with official observer status at the World Intellectual Property Organization (<http://www.wipo.int/portal/index.html>), participating in committee meetings where discussions revolve around international copyright law. At WIPO, eIFL IP has been an active supporter of proposals for a development agenda, including an international treaty on access to knowledge. Through eIFL, librarians from developing and transition countries have, for the first time, experienced international policy-making at first hand through attending Geneva meetings. In addition eIFL IP is developing its agenda apace with exciting new activities in 2008: the publication of model copyright provisions for libraries, partnering with the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School (<http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/home/>) to develop a distance learning course in copyright for libraries and the first eIFL IP conference.

The newest work programme that has been incorporated to the agenda is eIFL Free and Open Source Software (hereafter eIFL FOSS, <http://www.eifl.net/cps/sections/services/eifl-foss>). Fully operational since this summer, eIFL FOSS intends to raise awareness of the benefits that free and open-source software can bring to libraries in developing and transition countries, where budget constraints and cultural particularities and needs play a fundamental role in decisions about their informatisation. The first project of eIFL FOSS is to build capacity in the migration or installation of integrated library systems based on free and open-source software (Koha and Evergreen) in eIFL.net countries. Equally,

the programme has created a network of FOSS experts working in libraries who will help disseminate open-source news and trends locally and will contribute actively in the international open-source software movement by sharing the problems and solutions in their institutions. eIFL FOSS has been enthusiastically welcomed by eIFL.net member countries, given that in many cases the establishment of integrated library systems is still the number one pressing need as unaffordable prices and the rigidity of the functioning of proprietary software have impeded a satisfactory development. Another ongoing project is delivering training in the installation of open-source software Greenstone technology for the building of digital libraries in southern Africa.

eIFL.net programmes all come together nicely through a wide range of knowledge-sharing activities. Although specific in their main topics of interest, there is much common ground between all its programmes, as they jointly aim to modernise and empower libraries by proposing new solutions and ways to face their many challenges at present. Thus it is through sound local library consortia that libraries can level up their negotiating positions for online content, and, by the same token, a coordinated approach to latest novelties in the sector – such as open access, balanced copyright laws for libraries and open-source software applications – avoids overlapped efforts, increases efficiency and encourages a nationwide betterment of libraries. An annual eIFL.net general assembly is the most important event, where all its work lines are updated and discussed with the membership. In addition, a free bimonthly newsletter, topical and regional mailing lists, information and knowledge-sharing events at global, regional and local levels, discussion groups, educational and training resources, surveys and online courses, country visits and so on are the means whereby eIFL.net is creating a real network of professionals representing libraries in member countries, with the intention to last.