



EBLIDA statement on the WTO GATS negotiations

Libraries and trade in services

EBLIDA, the European library and archive association, is an independent, non-profit umbrella organisation of library, information, documentation and archive associations in Europe. Subjects on which EBLIDA concentrates are culture, copyright, education, information society related matters and information technology. We represent the interests of our members to the European institutions, such as the European Commission, European Parliament and the Council of Europe.

EBLIDA, together with our international colleagues in IFLA¹, are monitoring and discussing the ongoing WTO GATS process designed to liberalise trade in services, which began with a new negotiation round in 2000. We understand that these negotiations have progressed to an important stage as Member Governments submit liberalisation requests to their trading partners and that important services meetings will be held to further advance the negotiations. Governments, representing countries from all levels of development, attach great importance to these negotiations because services occupy a growing role in the global economy.

Libraries and archives: vital building blocks in the knowledge society

EBLIDA believes that publicly funded cultural heritage institutions such as libraries, archives, museums and educational institutions constitute vital building blocks in the development of the knowledge and information society in which all citizens benefit from access to culture, knowledge and information.

Libraries and archives empower European citizens by collecting, organising and providing access to a great range of high quality, current information and services to millions of researchers, students and members of the public, as well as by preserving our cultural heritage. Libraries have an important function in pooling demand and financial resources of bodies such as universities, research organisations, etc. They aggregate resources and collections, which these days are increasingly electronic, keeping them up-to-date and available. In addition, libraries preserve material which the publisher no longer holds in stock.

The growing digital divide is a major threat to society in the coming period. Libraries and archives bridge the gap between the information rich and poor and help to combat social exclusion.

¹ International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. www.ifla.org



The strategic goal of the European Commission eEurope action plan is for Europe to become the world's most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy. Libraries and archives play a key role in three of the five priorities² set by Information Society Commissioner, Erkki Liikanen, for 2005. The key function of libraries is not as a service place, but as an active partner offering access, professional guidance and training to global resources in a local setting – making the goals of eEurope a reality.

EBLIDA strongly believes that libraries have a fundamental role to play in the development of strategies for lifelong learning, as broad media competence becomes a basic skill and adult independent learners are growing in number all over Europe, contributing to the knowledge economy.

Treasure houses of European digital content

Libraries and archives are fast becoming treasure houses of European digital content, as well as creators of unique digital content themselves. However, physical library collections will remain a necessary component in the information chain and a vital part of our cultural lives. A new library concept is evolving with the integration of physical and electronic resources in all types of libraries. New kinds of meeting places are developing in which librarians are pro-active mediators of culture and information. If efficiently supported, this concept can benefit all citizens and libraries can play a role in efforts to revitalize the concept of active citizenship.

There are around 224.000 library service points in Europe with about 139 million registered users³. Library visits were estimated at 3.5 billion and loan transactions at 3.54 billion during 1998. Libraries are centred at the heart of local communities and in everyday locations such as high streets and community centres. Special services are provided for targeted groups, such as minorities and people with disabilities. Mobile library services provide access to rural areas and to special groups, such as the elderly.

Library and archive services must remain excluded from sector negotiations

EBLIDA believes that publicly-funded libraries and archives with a long historical tradition in society can adapt and prosper in response to changing needs and business models in society, for example, 24 hour reference services such as "Ask a librarian", UK People's Network.

But we firmly believe that this can only happen as part of a policy based on public funding where criteria such as the preservation of our cultural heritage, the public interest in access to information⁴ and the notion of a community-based library serving the needs of the local population, take priority over profit margins. We believe these functions are compromised if they are subject to general competition in the information marketplace for example, provision of Internet-based services, lending of audio-visual material e.g. DVDs, academic Internet publishing, inter-library document supply.

² to promote attractive content for all Europeans; to provide public services on-line; to pursue digital inclusiveness for all Europeans; to promote faster broadband Internet; to ensure trust and confidence in cyberspace.

³ Library Economics in Europe Millenium Study. www.libecon2000.org

⁴ Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights



There are three sectors within the GATS schedule which impact on library services:

- Sector 2CJ: Telecommunication services - online information and database retrieval;
- Sector 5: Educational services - primary, secondary, higher education, adult and other educational services;
- Sector 10C: Recreational, Cultural and Sporting Services - Libraries, archives, museums and other cultural services.

EBLIDA urges the European Commission and member states to continue its present policy of not making any commitments concerning libraries and archives and to urge the Commission to make a commitment not to include libraries and archives in future negotiations.

Libraries and education services

Libraries are an integral part of the education process. The privatisation of educational services therefore directly affects library services in the education sector. A characteristic of a publicly funded library is its integrity, neutrality and impartiality; good breadth in its collections; easy access to its information and the professional competence of its staff. It is of great concern how existing library services will function in an environment where economic criteria are the main consideration. The nature of information provision within these institutions could be changed forever.

We are also concerned by the statement that the European Union believes that all electronic deliveries are services and that the GATS principles should therefore apply to the regulation of e-commerce⁵ and by implication to e-learning services. Where electronic delivery is fast offering an alternative in accessing information and where libraries are developing corresponding electronic services, this could slow down the growth of the use of the Internet as a standard medium to access essential information. This goes against the development of the knowledge economy.

⁵ <http://trade-info.cec.eu.int/europa/2001newround/ser.pdf>



The Commission must not hamper European cultural diversity

EBLIDA views with trepidation the Commission statement to reserve the right to table new proposals in the proposed sectors or any other sectors at any time⁶.

On the other hand, we are pleased at the Commission view that international trade agreements should respect the diversity of cultural products and that one of the EU's main objectives in the new round of WTO negotiations is the defence of European cultural pluralism⁷. **In the same way that the EU recognises the special role of the audio-visual sector as a medium for the expression of cultural diversity, so too are libraries the gateway to the preservation and accessibility of our cultural heritage.** We strongly believe therefore that libraries and archives should not be committed to the competition processes that result from GATS.

EBLIDA is aware that 13 countries have already made commitments covering the sector "*Recreational, Cultural and Sporting Services - Libraries, archives, museums and other cultural services*".⁸

EBLIDA will also remind the European Commission that libraries are an integral part of activities in the educational services area both directly and indirectly e.g. school and university library services. This means that EBLIDA also urges the Commission to exclude educational services from new commitments.

We strongly urge the European Commission to respect access to cultural diversity currently enjoyed by European citizens.

Keep library services excluded from sector negotiations!

The Hague, November 2002

⁶ <http://europa.eu.int/comm/trade/services/nspw00.htm>

⁷ <http://trade-info.cec.eu.int/europa/2001newround/ser.pdf>

⁸ Bolivia, Gambia, Iceland, Sierra Leone, Venezuela, Central African Rep., Guinea-Bissau, Japan, Singapore, Ecuador, Hong Kong, New Caledonia, USA.