

**The Permanent Secretary, Fiji Ministry of Education Heritage and the Arts,**

**Ms Alison Burchell**

**Opening Address, Pacific Libraries Summit, June 1<sup>st</sup> 2018**

Allison Dobbie, the Chair of INELI-Oceania

Christine Mackenzie, President Elect, The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)

Deborah Jacobs, Director Global Libraries, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

Ms Nisha, UNESCO,

Colleagues from Pacific Librarians, and the full Pacific

Yadra vinaka, Namaste, Salaam Aleikum, a very good morning to everyone.

Firstly I would like to reflect apologies from the Honourable Attorney General who is also the Minister responsible for Education, Heritage and Arts which also includes Archives and Libraries. Unfortunately he is unwell today. He would have loved to be here because it's a very important part of our portfolio.

I would like to say thank you very much for the invitation for us to be here, and I am very happy to say that my stereotypes of librarians have been shattered after your performances last night.

This morning I looked at what I call 'Uncle Google' and there were two particularly interesting quotes. I usually say when in doubt look at the instruction book, but JK Rowling says "When in doubt go to a library". And then another famous person said "The only thing that you absolutely have to know is the location of the library" – Albert Einstein.

My friends the lawyers always say you don't need to know all the cases, you only have to know where to look for them. It says that books and research and access is very important.

I was lucky to have books at home, and I managed to read my way through *Utopia* at the age of 14. My first library was in secondary school, it was one of those places where you had to be very disciplined and not talk, so I managed to get chucked out quite frequently. And then also as a university student.

So in some senses I have related libraries to work rather than to enjoyment and entertainment and to some extent this colours the way in which you look at libraries. I remember never having a library card because I wasn't part of a public library, I only had access to the school and the university libraries. I always used to operate on the basis of stereotypes that women ask directions and men don't, so I always went to the Librarian and asked 'where do I find this book?' because that ridiculous card system confused the hang out of me and even if I managed to find the card then finding the book was a mission in that large library, so take the shortcut and go to the Librarian.

The other thing, certainly at University, was that there would be a fine if I didn't return the book on time. So these are all part of the stereotype that we develop of libraries in our period of growing up.

Libraries are probably one of the greatest public services that can exist. In some senses they are also the biggest secrets in society, and I think that what we should be doing is literally to open those doors to the library, to open those doors to learning.

I think libraries are probably the first proponents of a recycling system and obviously with a small charge in many instances, libraries have improved access across the board, to people who can and cannot afford it, but mostly to people who are interested. And the key then becomes, how do we make everyone interested?

So then came Uncle Google and traditional research changed – how we research, how we do research changed. Libraries have in many instances changed and will have to continue to change in order to keep up with technology.

On Wednesday you had a visit to see a range of libraries that we have in Fiji. You went to an urban centre and I think that what you saw in Suva is probably partly reflective of some of the challenges that we have in Fiji in terms of expanding the library network. But we obviously still have to establish libraries both in schools as well as in communities, and it is key to recognise that learning is not just when we are at school, it is really about lifelong learning. I always say that the day when I stop learning is when I am six foot under. If we continue to learn as we go then life remains more interesting.

I think the other creative thing that some of my colleagues have been doing is using libraries as a way to teach people, for example teaching women how to sew. Bring them into the library, show them the books about how to sew, and help them to practice. I was surprised to be signing a document the other day to purchase sewing equipment for libraries. I was excited to learn exactly what it was about.

Within the Pacific context, and let's say the developing part of the Pacific, literacy is critically important, as well as numeracy. I have been saying that there are actually 4 pillars of learning – one is literacy, the other numeracy, the third is technological literacy and then physical literacy. In the Pacific we have far too many people dying too early from non-communicable diseases, and it is therefore important in the education context to have those four pillars.

A parent recently told me that the most important things we can give children are a strong foundation in terms of literacy and numeracy but I think we can do even better by making sure that the technological literacy and physical literacy are added to that because then you have a four way solid foundation on which to build the house which is the child and the student.

This year we are doing the Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment and that happens every three years. It will guide us on where we are going right and where we are going wrong in terms of ensuring that literacy and numeracy are properly embedded in the educational systems across the Pacific. Part of that literacy jigsaw is going to be Libraries, and at the moment it perhaps is one of the passive pieces of that jigsaw. So the issue then becomes how do we make libraries a far more active part of that jigsaw so we can become proactive in terms of access to the knowledge that is contained in libraries.

So literacy traditionally has been the 3 R's, but perhaps we need to look at it in a slightly different way, so that it is reading and writing, as well as talking and discussing and debating. It's about engaging with ideas. It's about developing knowledge. It's about developing opinions, and it's also to some extent about problem solving, because the books, whether electronic or hard copy books, provide access to research and provides access to people asking questions and how to answer those

questions and the problem solving component. Teachers are very critical in this process and in ensuring that technology in both its good and bad parts is applied within the curriculum component. And therefore also within the library component.

The technology is good and bad, it has its own language which doesn't qualify for literacy assessments unfortunately. It keeps developing and that presents a challenge to us to keep developing and catching up. We hope that at some point we are getting ahead of it but that's probably unlikely. In some senses technology hides literacy levels. I was talking to the Vice Chancellor of Fiji National University about the issue we have of ensuring that our teachers are properly literate and numerate when going into the school context. He said one of the bad things about technology and the programmes we use is that it highlights the issues so they can be corrected without us necessarily having to analyse the problems. So, it makes life a lot easier and therefore it hides the proper level of literacy that we are at.

So there are good and bad things about technology. The good thing is that it is easy to check if you know where the spell checker and grammar checker is, and that tells you that you know where spellchecker is, it doesn't tell you that you know how to spell properly or address your grammatical approach. The bad thing is that not everyone has access to technology, but when you do then you have world wide access.

Some of the challenges are how do Libraries address these issues hand in hand with the education system, and as part of the education system, and that is a critical component. I think for many years in Pacific countries, potentially worldwide, Libraries are always like the poor second cousins. We need to be able to move libraries into the mainstream so that we can address it together.

The issue for us in Fiji luckily is that the budget has increased for libraries by 150% and that is really giving meaning to opening the doors of learning. So far we have established 450 school libraries, and in 2016 there was a decision that we should open up library corners in our early childhood care centres. That has been done in 300 areas in Fiji. We have 36 community libraries and that number continues to increase, particularly in rural areas. We have a process for automating our 4 public libraries. We are trying to ensure as our Government's motto and as part of the SDG's that *No Child is Left Behind*, so therefore we are also making sure that schools for learners with special needs are included so there are 3 libraries being developed there.

Some of the challenges that we face in the Pacific are perhaps how to address the mixed-use approach to Libraries, paper as well as e-copies. How do we address issues with and without electricity, and that is a major issue across the Pacific? But it's also how do we engage the google generation that is now in our schools - the google generation that is au fait with technology while the teachers are not as au fait with technology. And how do we open up the world of libraries and the knowledge that they hold, not only for our children and students but also for our adults, parents, teachers. These are all challenges we need to grapple with very strongly but not alone, in conjunction with other partners in the process.

So I leave you with those thoughts, thank you very much, I hope that your deliberations will be very constructive and as energetic as you were on the dancefloor last night.

## **Official speech**

Libraries play an important role in society. They are gateways to knowledge and innovation, and have an important role to play in building informed, tolerant and progressive societies. Libraries, especially public and school libraries are very important in terms of increasing literacy. They are exciting places whose books encourage young children to actively practice the literacy skills learnt in the classroom. Practice makes perfect, and Libraries are a wonderful place to practice. Libraries also encourage young children to open up their imagination and travel to far-away places to have rousing adventures through the printed page. This exposes them to different cultures, ideas and practise which expand their horizons and nurtures a healthy sense of curiosity.

Later on in a person's development, libraries become an important information resource to carry out in-depth research for school assignments. This helps develop information literacy skills, and builds self-confidence to conduct independent and collaborative research on a given topic. Such skills are transferable across all industries and are essential to building proactive and pragmatic communities.

Public Libraries are also important safe spaces that reinforce positive social behaviour and important values such as mutual respect, tolerance, and working together. In short, Libraries have an important function in society, and are relevant to members of society throughout their lifetime.

For our part, the Fiji government recognises the fundamental role of libraries to societal growth and sustainable development. Over the last 6 years we have increased our resourcing of public and school libraries through the Department of Library Services of Fiji by over one hundred and fifty percent (150%).

This is not just about numbers, impressive though they may be. It has been about making libraries more accessible for the public and improving literacy levels, especially for school children, and communities in remote rural areas.

Over this time the Department has either established or upgraded four hundred and fifty (450) school libraries, ensuring that these libraries are well resourced and housed in proper buildings.

In 2016 the Fiji Government recognised the importance of reading at an early age, supporting a Library Services of Fiji proposal to establish library corners for early childhood education (ECE). To date a total of three hundred (300) ECE Centres have been assisted by the Department. Early Childhood Education achieves the highest rate of social return both in developing and industrialised countries. Early Childhood Education offers children a head start in their primary schooling and positively influences their performance in school.

Library Services of Fiji supports ECE through the provision of resources that provides opportunities for less-privileged children, thus helping to reduce the inequalities in educational opportunities, particularly among rural/low income families.

In addition, thirty six (36) Community Libraries have been established in remote rural areas to increase access to information for our rural dwellers. These libraries have bolstered the comprehension skills of children in surrounding areas and also given the Library Services of Fiji an opportunity to deliver functional literacy training for adults in order to support community development. Of particular note are the Community Libraries in Nameka in Tailevu, Kasavu and Gusuisavu in Naitasiri, where the Department was able to assist community women to connect with the Ministry of Women's Expo, to sell their products to supplement their household income.

Government has also provided the funds to automate four (4) of the Public Library Branches managed by Library Services of Fiji, namely Lautoka Public library, Rakiraki Public Library, Savusavu Public Library and Nasese Public library. Tavua Public Library is in line to be automated by the end of the financial year.

Last but not least, under the No Child Left Behind Policy, Library Services of Fiji was given a budget as their NEW initiative in this financial year to extend services to the Special Schools for Physically challenged students. Assistance so far has been rendered to 3 Special schools in setting up a corner with resources suitable for those with special needs.

As you can see, much work has been done, and more is needed. But Government is not able to shoulder the burden alone. This makes your week's activities culminating in today's Pacific Libraries Summit most fitting indeed. It is very clear from our experience that Libraries actively support many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's). It is vitally important therefore that these connections are articulated and communicated in order to allow Libraries to be identified as contributors and enablers of the SDG's. Hopefully your efforts will enable Pacific Libraries and Pacific Librarians to become more visible, and develop the relevant skills to engage and build valuable relations with donors, development partners, and all stakeholders in sustainable development.

I wish you very fruitful deliberations today leading to some strong outcomes, which allow the valuable work done so far to continue forward with renewed vigour.

With these words it gives me great pleasure to open the 2018 Pacific Libraries Summit.

Attorney General of Fiji,

Minister Responsible for Education, Heritage and Arts