

Celebrating the 'miracle of Marrakesh' - the day the barriers came down

Friday 30 September, 2016

EMBARGOED UNTIL: 30 September 2016

Vilnius, Lithuania (30 Sept 2016): Today, EIFL joins the World Blind Union and our global partners in celebrating the entry into force of the Marrakesh Treaty for persons with print disabilities.

From today, blind and visually impaired people in 22 countries need no longer be denied access to books and other reading materials due to copyright restrictions - barriers that come tumbling down as the Marrakesh Treaty enters into force.

The treaty is a major step in ending the book famine for blind and visually impaired people - the fact that only 7% of published works are made available globally in accessible formats. In the developing world, where an overwhelming majority of blind and visually impaired people live, the figure is less than 1%.

The 22 countries that have ratified the Treaty are now obliged to change their national copyright laws to incorporate the Treaty's key terms.

The changes will, in a nutshell, allow 'authorised entities' to make copies in accessible formats - like Braille, digitized audio and large print - of copyrighted works without asking permission from rightsholders, and to distribute them to blind and visually impaired people on a not-for-profit basis. Distribution includes cross border sharing between all countries that have ratified or acceded to the treaty - at this stage, just 22 countries, but with encouraging signs that many more countries are poised to ratify.

The Treaty's definition of 'authorized entities' as organizations that are authorized or recognized by the government to provide education, instructional training, adaptive reading or information access to blind and visually impaired people means that libraries will have an important role to play.

'Same book, same day'

"The treaty permits the making of accessible format copies on-demand, enabling libraries to serve all their users equally - same book, same day," said Teresa Hackett, Copyright and Libraries Programme Manager of EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries), an international non-profit organization supporting access to knowledge through libraries.

Libraries will also have new global responsibilities regarding cross-border sharing of accessible format materials.

"Now, libraries with larger collections of accessible works, such as in Canada, can share these collections with blind and visually impaired people in countries with fewer resources, such as Mali," continued Hackett.

"Since signing of the Treaty in Morocco in June 2013, EIFL has worked hard with the World Blind Union and other global partners to encourage ratification of the Treaty by the 20 countries needed for it to enter into force. We were able to work with the Mongolian library community and the Mongolian Federation for the Blind to assist the Mongolian government in ratifying the Treaty. As a result, in September 2015, Mongolia became the 10th country to ratify the Treaty."

M. Tsengel, who manages Ulaanbaatar Public Library's accessible publication service, had good cause to advocate for ratification of the Treaty in Mongolia:

"Publishers, who own all the rights, do not permit us to convert school textbooks although we have modern recording studios to create digital talking books. So blind children learning at school have no modern books, and rely instead on ancient Braille textbooks printed in Russia during the socialist period.

"The Marrakesh Treaty has opened the doors of learning for blind and visually impaired people in Mongolia," he said.

There are over 200 million blind and visually impaired people denied access to knowledge in the

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remaining 167 WIPO member states that must still ratify the Treaty. Vigorous advocacy campaigns are underway in many of them.

For example, EIFL is supporting a ratification campaign in Lesotho. The National University of Lesotho library has facilities for reproducing and distributing accessible books, but despite the best efforts of the Special Educational Needs Unit and library staff, there was never enough material available in accessible formats for the students.

“I studied at the university from 2005 and graduated in 2010 as a lawyer with a Bachelor of Law degree”, said Nkhasi Sefuthi, Human Rights and Advocacy Officer, Lesotho National Federation of Organisations of the Disabled (LNFOD).

“With regard to accessing materials, it was a disaster, and I had to mainly rely on my friends to read out for me. I am very excited about the Marrakesh Treaty. Imagine being able to easily get accessible materials from other countries. It would spur other students in Lesotho to study and lead fulfilled lives,” said Nkhasi.

A giant step forward - but still a long way to go

Today, blind and visually impaired people in 22 countries can celebrate. For the Treaty to realize its full potential, however, many more countries must ratify it. Then governments must change their national copyright laws in ways that respect the spirit of the Treaty, which is to guarantee access and end the book famine.

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