Restrictive copyright laws create legal barriers to accessing resources for education, research and personal development. This can have significant consequences for libraries in developing and transition countries which have limited funds to purchase copyright-protected materials.

Through the programme “Advocacy for Access to Knowledge: copyright and libraries”, known as EIFL-IP, we advocate for fair and balanced copyright laws that support libraries in their mission to provide access to knowledge.

First of all, librarians themselves must understand the impact of national copyright laws on the provision of access to learning resources and research information, as well as on services to library users such as course packs and inter-library document supply. Then policy makers must recognise the role of librarians as stakeholders when national copyright laws are being amended or new copyright laws are introduced.

Through training and awareness raising, EIFL-IP librarians are empowered to take part in consultations, put forward position papers and offer suggestions for amendments. “The knowledge I acquired through EIFL gave me the confidence to approach our copyright officials”, said Hasmik Galstyan, Papazian Library at the American University of Armenia. “As a result, libraries now cooperate closely with the copyright office, and we are invited to give our views on library-related provisions.”

“My experience in Geneva was phenomenal. It has changed my perspective of international policy making, and has refocused the way I look at things. I realise now that I can effect change”, said Kondwani Wella from Malawi
Through participation in the EIFL-IP programme, Benson Njobvu, Lecturer in the Department of Library and Information Studies at the University of Zambia, has become a recognized advocate for the interests of libraries and their users in terms of copyright policy at a national level. “Maximizing access to educational and learning materials is critical for development in Africa. This is why I influenced the introduction of a course on copyright for postgraduate students at our University. Teaching students about legal information issues enhances the role of the librarian, preparing the next generation for a professional career in the digital age”, said Benson. In 2009, Benson was appointed to a national Working Group on IP advising the Zambian Ministry of Commerce, Trade and Industry on its new draft copyright law. This is a milestone in recognition of the role of librarians as stakeholders in national policymaking in Zambia.

International policy making

As national copyright laws are mostly based on international copyright treaties, it is also essential for librarians to be involved at international level. The majority of countries, including developing nations, are bound by two treaties - Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS, 1995) administered by the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the Berne Convention (1886), administered by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO).

The WIPO Standing Committee on Copyright and Related Rights (SCCR) is the main body that shapes international copyright law. It usually meets twice a year in Geneva, and is attended by government copyright officials from up to 184 WIPO Member States. Items currently on the agenda of SCCR are the protection of broadcasting organisations, the protection of audiovisual performances, and limitations and exceptions, of major importance for libraries.

EIFL has observer status at WIPO. EIFL librarians attend Committee meetings, make statements and discuss the library viewpoint with government delegates. "Attending my first WIPO meeting in 2008 gave me a better grasp of the issues and new knowledge for dealing with the national copyright office. Since then, the library community has earned its place as a stakeholder in Moldova, and has made recommendations for improvements to our draft copyright bill", said Mariana Harjevschi, Director of the Public Law Library in Moldova.

Awa Cissé from Senegal was the first librarian from francophone Africa to make a statement to government delegates, in which she described her dream as a librarian to be able to create a repository of documents in accessible formats for visually impaired people, enabled by copyright law. At SCCR/20 in June 2010, Kondwani Wella from Malawi informed delegates about new modes of delivery designed to widen access to tertiary and higher education in Africa, such as e-learning projects, many of which are cross-border. If such projects are to reach their full potential, good limitations and exceptions are necessary in support of education and e-learning policies.

Government delegates appreciate hearing first-hand about such experiences. “This is the type of real-life situation we need to hear about in Geneva, so that our policies are well-informed and our decisions meet the needs of the communities on the ground”, said Tshibumbudzo Ravhandalala, First Secretary (Political) at the Permanent Mission of South Africa in Geneva.

Kathy Matsika from Zimbabwe concludes, “I have learnt that we are the experts on library issues, who can tell copyright officials about the challenges we face. I was heartened at their willingness to listen to our advice, and that we can make a real difference to discussions at WIPO and back home in our countries”. July 2010