

Speech by WBU President Dr. William Rowland in Amsterdam on Wednesday 23rd April 2008 on the occasion of WBU's Press Conference launching its Global Right to Read Campaign.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a pleasure to be here in Amsterdam today as this wonderful city takes over from Bogotá as World Book Capital. We all know that Amsterdam is an historic trade hub. But it's important to recall that through its long history this city has traded not just in goods, but in ideas and culture too. Since books are such a vital vehicle for these precious notions, it seems to me that Amsterdam is a most appropriate, as well as convivial, 2008 World Book Capital.

I note that the Amsterdam World Book Capital's "Mission statement" expresses a desire to, and I quote:

"inspire and propagate dialogue and debate about the freedom of expression. The city aims to do this by adopting the 'Open Book' theme as its guiding principle"

And what better theme could there be than that of "open book" for Amsterdam's year? Books are made to be opened and enjoyed. They enrich the lives of their readers. From the latest bestseller, to a school textbook, to Nelson Mandela's autobiography, they entertain, instruct or inspire. Sometimes the same book can do all three!

But the book – whichever category it falls into- is still usually closed for the millions of us around the world who are blind or partially sighted.

So while I certainly support freedom of expression, and I'm happy to enter a debate about how we achieve this, my concern today centres on how blind people can actually **receive** the ideas and information being expressed.

As a blind person I want to be able to access the culture, information, entertainment and education that books provide, just as much as my sighted peers. And I have a right to do so! For many years articles 19 and 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have acknowledged my- indeed our – rights in this area.

And a right to access information is enshrined in articles 21 and 30 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This landmark Convention took several years to negotiate, and will finally enter into force on the third of May this year.

Let me explain to the uninitiated **why** the book is closed to us. Blind and partially sighted people read in formats that are not standard print, such as large print, braille and audio.

These days it is not technically difficult to produce books in these formats. To illustrate this point, you will find here today a demonstration of the fully accessible biography by John Coles entitled “Blindness and the Visionary”.

But 95% of books are never published in any format other than standard print.

Blind and partially sighted people therefore face what we can only describe as a “book famine.”

Imagine if **you** walked into a bookshop or library, and were told that you were only allowed to choose from five percent of the books on the shelf. What would such a limited choice do to **your** education, to **your** leisure reading opportunities? Would **you** feel like a fully paid-up member of our society?

Let me share with you my own frustration of not being able to access the book you want to read. In preparing for my Masters course I had consulted my Professor and agreed a reading list of 129 books. However an extensive global search only found 9 of them in accessible formats for me to use independently for my studies. More recently I was similarly frustrated as a poet writing Afrikaans verse, I have wanted to read my fellow Afrikaans poets but have only found one volume accessible to me.

But don't worry. The purpose of today's event is not to spend too long lamenting the current situation, and much less to find people to blame for it! Rather, we are here to launch an international “Right to Read Alliance” to campaign for two main things.

First and foremost, for more books to be published in accessible formats. Our vision is to be able to access all books at the same time and for the same price as everyone else.

To achieve this goal, we will work among others with our national members, with national libraries across the globe, and with publishers. Many publishers are now expressing a real interest in helping us end the “book famine”, and no organisation is better placed to make a difference than they are. I am therefore delighted that the Director of the Federation of European Publishers, Anne Bergman, will be speaking here today.

Secondly, we have to address the fact that for some time to come the vast majority of books on the market will still not be available in a format we can access. In these cases, we would like to ensure that, so long as a blind person or

organisation has legally acquired a print or electronic version, copyright law will allow us to both put books into an accessible format, and to allow us to pool our scarce resources for reformatting into formats such as braille, by clarifying our right to send such accessible books from one country to another. To this end we will work to encourage countries around the world to provide exceptions to national copyright law to allow such reformatting. We will also continue the work the World Blind Union is already pursuing at international level with the World Intellectual Property Organisation.

I do not wish to pretend that the launch of this International Right to Read Alliance signifies an imminent end to the "book famine", or that the work we aim to undertake will be easy. But, over five and a half centuries since the first printing press started turning, 183 years since the invention of braille, and given all the advantages of our current age of digital media, it is surely time we made a start.

Please join us in ending the book famine and ensuring that our "right to read" becomes a reality!

Blind people read books too!

Announcing the launch of the WBU's Right to Read Global Campaign

Blind and partially sighted people enjoy reading books just as much as the rest of us. However, only 5% of books are ever published in formats that blind and partially sighted people can read, such as audio, braille and large print.

Today, 23rd April 2008, saw the launch, in Amsterdam, of the World Blind Union's International Right to Read Campaign, which will advocate globally for accessible books. The event was organised in close collaboration with the Secretariat of the Amsterdam 2008 World Book Capital which celebrates reading this year with the theme "open book".

Mrs Judith Belinfante, Chair of the Amsterdam 2008 WBC Foundation and Mr Mauro Rosi, UNESCO's Chief Delegate to the Amsterdam WBC Launch, attended the WBU Right to Read Press Conference and heard Dr William Rowland, President of the World Blind Union, explain.

"For far too long the book has been closed for blind people. The International Right to Read Campaign aims to open it".

Bente Dahl Rathje, Chair of the IFLA Libraries for the Blind Section, added:

"Libraries exist to serve ALL members of the public. However, we need more books to be published in braille, audio and large print in order to fully achieve our mission".

Anne Bergman, Director of the Federation of European Publishers, also spoke at the event, and underlined the will of publishers to work with the Visually Impaired to publish more books which blind people can read.

The International Right to Read Alliance is a partnership between the World Blind Union and the Libraries for the Blind Section of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), and it will work with publishers, booksellers, libraries and many others to create a world where blind people can read the same book at the same time and for the same price as everyone else.

WBU, working through its 160 National Member Organisations, will be establishing National Right to Read Alliances, bringing together stakeholders, including librarians, University Disabled Students Support Teams, Ministries of Education Special Education Units and other Service Providers, all of whom have an interest in promoting the need for accessibility for visually impaired people.

The campaign will pursue three main objectives, namely:-

To form National Right to Read Alliances to give visibility to the visually impaired reading community

To lobby, in the 120 countries that currently do not have copyright legislation on Exceptions, Governments to enact Copyright Exceptions for the Visually Impaired. Such legislation would facilitate the production of accessible formats, such as audio, braille and large print without the need to re-clear copyright

To field test, in the 60 countries that already have copyright legislation for Exceptions for the Visually Impaired, the cross border export/import of accessible formats created under these Exceptions to validate the compatibility of Exceptions of different legal jurisdictions. Evidence gained from these field trials will be presented to both Publishers and the World Intellectual Property Organisation's Standing Committee on Copyright and Related Rights.

During the event WBU demonstrated the world's first fully accessible book 'Blindness and the Visionary' by Sir John Coles. Published in 2006, this biography of Sir John Wilson, founder of Sightsavers International <http://www.sightsavers.org> Is published by Giles de la Mare <http://www.gilesdelamare.co.uk> and provides, tucked into every copy, on a Daisy CD an audio copy of the book and special formats for printing the book in braille and large print. In recognition of the world's first 'same day same cost book' the WBU has welcomed Giles de la Mare as a 'Pioneer Publisher' and gratefully appreciates its offer to support the Right to Read Campaign.

Later in the evening, at the official launch party of Amsterdam 2008 World Book Capital, William Rowland presented a copy of the book to both Her Royal Highness Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands", Patron of UNESCO Amsterdam WBC 2008 and to Mr Job Cohen, the Mayor of Amsterdam, whose wife is visually impaired.

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