

A New Opportunity: The UN 2030 Agenda and Library Advocacy

Stephen Wyber
IFLA - Policy and Advocacy, Den Haag, Netherlands
stephen.wyber@ifla.org

Abstract

The growing attention to sustainable development, in all of its dimensions, has meant that decision makers are focusing on the importance of a broader range of policies and cross-cutting factors. By including access to information in nineteen targets under the Sustainable Development Goals, the world's governments affirmed that this is essential. This represents an affirmation of the importance of the work of libraries, which ensure that access is possible and meaningful for all, and also an opportunity to engage nationally, regionally, and at the UN itself to raise awareness and support for libraries.

The first part of the article deals with an affirmation of the importance of libraries in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, while the second discusses IFLA's actions, and the opportunities to use this process to raise awareness of how libraries are partners for development.

Keywords: development, sustainable development goals, access to information, libraries, library advocacy, United Nations

"Development" has long been considered mainly in economic terms – increasing gross domestic product– GDP per capita. Countries looking to "develop" have sought to raise investment to build infrastructure, factories and skyscrapers. Success has been measured in kilometres of road or railway, of industrial production, of trade.

Cultural policy, meanwhile, has been viewed as the opposite, as something removed from economics, more to do with the soul than the pocket. Libraries, given their status in many countries as an element of cultural policy, have been seen in the same way, as complementing but not contributing to development.

However, this is no longer necessarily the case. The way we think about development has evolved, with a growing focus on the importance of sustainability – how to live in a way that does not prejudice the ability of future generations to do the same.

This is at once an economic, environmental and social question – it is necessary to use resources responsibly, to maintain the environment, and to ensure that everyone can contribute to and feel ownership of the society in which they live. While infrastructure helps, development also requires people to be educated, in good health, and able to participate in economic, social and civic life.

This represents an important opportunity for libraries to explain the role they play in delivering government priorities across the board. The United Nations 2030 Agenda, agreed in 2015,¹encapsulates this shift in thinking, and has therefore also been central to IFLA's work to advocate for libraries as partners for development.²

¹ United Nations, *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (New York: United Nations, 2015), accessed August 7 2018, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld/publication>.

² IFLA is the International Federation for Library Associations and Institutions. It is the leading international body representing the interests of library and information services and their users, and the global voice of the library and information profession. Founded in 1927 in Edinburgh, Scotland, it has over 1300 members in around 140 countries around the world.

This article starts by exploring the connections between the work of libraries and the model of development promoted by the 2030 Agenda, and then looks at how IFLA has already engaged, its plans for the coming months and years, and how libraries and library associations can get involved.

The 2030 Agenda – an Affirmation of the Importance of Libraries

In our daily lives, we all take decisions, all of the time. Some are simple and instinctive, but many require conscious judgement – which job to go for, what to eat, how to do things differently, how to vote. Assuming we have freedom in these choices – something which we assume to be desirable – we rely on having information that can help us take the best possible decisions.

Clearly, as humans, we are always able to do something sub-optimal, but at least with information, it is a question of choice, rather than luck.

As highlighted in the summary report of the first phase of IFLA's Global Vision initiative,³ access to information is front and centre of the work of libraries. By providing information, libraries support the process of decision-making, from the highest international institutions to the individual.

They ensure that it is not only those who are economically or socially favoured who can benefit from this vital raw material, but everyone. Universal access to information is essential to democracy, not just politically, but in every aspect of life. It is also in line with models of human-centred, or capacities-focused development, where the priority is to allow – to empower – individuals to make development happen for themselves.

IFLA has gathered examples of the difference this access can make in its brochure, *Access and Opportunity for All*.⁴ This goes from the health information that helps people choose to live healthier lifestyles, the job search information that helps them find work, the research information that is the basis of discoveries and innovations, and the government information that allows for transparency.

When talking about access to information, therefore, IFLA is referring to all types of information, from all sources. This conception is broader than that of access to public (i.e. public sector or government) information. The latter is an essential part of the picture, but it cannot be all, as when faced with situations where they need to take decisions, people will normally care little about where the information comes from, as long as it helps them choose well.

It is also important to add that for IFLA, access should be read as "meaningful" access. The Development and Access to Information report,⁵ the result of a partnership between IFLA and the Technology and Social Change Group at the University of Washington, suggests that it has four parts.

These are access to the Internet, cultural and social norms governing access, the legal framework for freedom of expression and freedom of access to information online, and the skills to find, apply and create information. Working together, these help ensure that access to information leads to development.

The UN's 2030 Agenda is the follow-on from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).⁶ The MDGs, for the first time, aimed to develop a coherent, transnational approach to development, aiming in particular to deal with the most serious challenges facing humanity – poverty, infant mortality, illiteracy, amongst others.

³ IFLA, *IFLA Global Vision* (Den Haag: IFLA), accessed August 10 2018, globalvision.ifla.org.

⁴ IFLA, *Access and Opportunity for All: How Libraries Contribute to the United Nations 2030 Agenda* (Den Haag: IFLA, 2016), accessed August 7 2018, <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/10546>.

⁵ Maria Garrido and Stephen Wyber, eds., *Development and Access to Information* (Den Haag: IFLA, 2016), accessed August 10 2018, <https://da2i.ifla.org/>.

⁶ United Nations, *United Nations Millennium Development Goals*, accessed September 3 2018, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>.

The eight goals set out had a particular focus on developing countries (where, even if not explicitly, the problems the MDGs sought to address were concentrated), and played an important role in focusing development funding. They also enjoyed some success. In addition to seizing the imagination, there was important progress on a number of the areas identified.

However, they were also criticised for focusing on the "macro" level,⁷ rather than considering the situation, or the rights of individuals.⁸ They were challenge-focused, rather than trying to build a coherent and holistic overall agenda to help guide governments and others. And they dealt more with areas where governments would take the initiative, rather than giving people the possibility to grow themselves.

Therefore, when the United Nations looked to work out what would follow the MDGs, they decided to move towards a broader concept of development – sustainable development.

While often associated with environmental policy, this also incorporates economic and social pillars also. In effect, in order to guarantee that future generations can enjoy a good standard of living, it is not only necessary to preserve the planet and its resources. Those responsible should also ensure that growth is sustainable, and that there is sufficient equality and social progress for people and communities to live happily together.

In line with the idea that development takes place across a number of areas, they therefore set out seventeen goals – the SDGs – covering nearly all policy areas, and underlined that these are interlinked.⁹ Not only did progress in one area rely to progress in others, but there were key underpinning factors which are essential for success.

One such factor is access to information. This appears in 19 of the 169 targets associated with the seventeen global goals, and across the range of policy issues.¹⁰ Governments commit, for example, to providing access to knowledge and ICTs for people facing poverty, to delivering market information to farmers, to offering information about reproductive health, and to ensuring affordable Internet access.

This is a real affirmation of the importance of libraries and their work. Together, these nineteen targets describe a large part of the work of libraries. Moreover, the general focus of the SDGs on people-centred growth fits well with the approach taken by libraries of empowering individuals and communities equitably to find solution for themselves, rather than imposing them from above.

This focus is not accidental. A large number of actors spoke up in favour of access to information during the preparations for the 2030 Agenda – around 600 signed the Lyon Declaration in 2014.¹¹ IFLA itself worked hard with Member States in order to call for the explicit reference to access to information that appears in SDG16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), and to targets linked to culture and Internet access.

Crucially, too, this is a document signed at the highest level by all United Nations member governments, with a structured follow-up process, and continued high attention. While the SDGs are not legally binding, it is hard to imagine a more prominent place for access to information to be given such attention. The 2030 Agenda is a clear affirmation of the importance of the work that libraries are doing, and a moral commitment to support them.

⁷ Raj Kumar, *Critics of the Sustainable Development Goals Were Wrong: Here's Why* (World Economic Forum, 2017), accessed September 3 2018. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/turns-out-sdg-critics-were-wrong/>.

⁸ Sakiko Fukada-Parr, "A Right to Development Critique of Millennium Development Goal 8", in UN OHCHR *Realizing the Right to Development* (New York; Geneva: United Nations, 2013).

⁹ United Nations, *Transforming our World...*

¹⁰ IFLA, *Data and the Sustainable Development Goals: An IFLA Briefing* (Den Haag: IFLA, 2018), accessed September 5 2018, <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/67353>.

¹¹ IFLA, *The Lyon Declaration* (Den Haag: IFLA, 2014), accessed September 3, 2018, www.lyondeclaration.org. This document was negotiated by many and signed by still more.

IFLA has already been active, working around the SDGs in its relaunched International Advocacy Programme.¹² Representatives from 76 countries have committed to working to raise awareness of the SDGs within their national library communities, and advocating to governments around libraries as partners for development. Tens of thousands of people have benefitted from awareness-raising, there have been hundreds of meetings with government, and nearly ten of the national development plans mandated by the Agenda include reference to libraries.

Next Steps: Realising the Opportunity

As highlighted in the previous section, the 2030 Agenda includes a structured process for monitoring progress towards realising the SDGs. The second part of this article focuses on the opportunities to use this process to raise awareness of how libraries are partners for development.

The UN itself plays an active role in tracking efforts to deliver on the SDGs, both from a qualitative and quantitative angle. In terms of qualitative work, both the United Nations itself, and its agencies, produce important reports every year analysing trends and drawing on good practice examples. These often match up with the specific SDGs which are in focus in any given year.

2019 is particularly promising in this regard, with SDG 4 (education), 8 (economy), 10 (inequality) and 16 (which includes access to information) all in the spotlight. There will also be a scientific report – the Global Sustainable Development Report – and collections of examples of effective partnerships to deliver sustainable development.

There is also quantitative monitoring. To match the 169 targets defined under the 17 SDGs, there are 232 indicators (1–3 per target) which together aim to provide a clear means of measuring how well states are doing against their commitments. These indicators are not all yet operational however, with some still uncollected, and others even still to be defined properly.¹³

From a library point of view, they do not all necessarily do justice to the work our institutions do. Many are positive, such as those concerning literacy or Internet access. However, for example, the indicators of access to information are the existence of freedom of information laws, and evidence of attacks on journalists and human rights defenders. Both are important, but say little about the impact of libraries, or access to information as IFLA understands it.

In parallel with the UN's work, Member States undertake their own efforts. The most high profile are the Voluntary National Reviews. These see governments prepare a report and a presentation on the progress they have made, and take questions and comments from other governments and stakeholders.

As the name suggests, they are voluntary, with extensive space left for Member States to decide what they want to say and do. However, the guidance produced by the UN underlines that they should talk about how they have engaged different stakeholders, and include their contributions in their report.¹⁴

The key focus of the year is the High level Political Forum (HLPF), an eight-day meeting held every July in New York. This is where the focus SDGs are discussed, the UN's (and its agencies') reports discussed, and Voluntary National Reviews presented. However, this is very much the climax of a much longer process.

Thematic reports draw on evidence and examples collected over months, offering opportunities for libraries to provide ideas and input. IFLA will be engaging with key agencies over this period to identify the best opportunities to influence this work.

¹² For more, see IFLA, *The International Advocacy Programme (IAP)*, accessed September 5, 2018, www.ifla.org/ldp/iap.

¹³ See IFLA, *Data and the Sustainable Development Goals...*

¹⁴ For more, see IFLA, *IFLA Guide to Voluntary National Reviews* (Den Haag: IFLA, 2018), accessed September 5, 2018, <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/60881>.

There are five regional forums for sustainable development (Europe and North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Asia-Pacific and Western Asia). These both prepare the HLPF, and provide valuable opportunities to talk with governments and influence development policies at the regional level. IFLA will look to attend each of these.

We will also be looking at building the case for better suited indicators which do justice to the contribution of libraries. A new edition of IFLA's Development and Access to Information report in 2019, produced in partnership with the Technology and Social Change Group, will offer a first opportunity to look at trends across the basket of indicators selected to give the fullest view possible of the state of access to information around the world.

Finally, IFLA will be preparing for the review of the whole 2030 Agenda due to be launched in 2019, and where it will be vital to protect references to access to information in the SDGs, and push for a stronger role for stakeholders such as libraries.

To achieve anything, IFLA will be relying heavily on libraries and library associations at the local, national and regional level. We will be looking to have as many library representatives at regional and thematic meetings as possible, in order to network and underline the importance of libraries for development. References to access to information and libraries do not only send a signal to the United Nations, but can also be used by libraries in their own advocacy with governments and development agencies.

In those countries undertaking Voluntary National Reviews – for example Serbia in 2019 – there is an important opportunity to get involved in the preparation process, build up contacts with central government, and maybe even to take part in national delegations to the UN in New York.

Even for countries not involved in Reviews, there should be ongoing efforts to develop, deliver and review national development plans. These often include sets of indicators – libraries can argue to shape these to include measures which reflect the work of libraries.

Finally, but crucially, all libraries can support the work not only of IFLA, but also of other libraries around the world by sharing stories and evidence. Stories backed up by serious evidence of impact are an essential tool for advocacy. By giving our arguments a human face, we can build empathy and support for the work that libraries are doing. A manual for developing such stories is available on the IFLA website. Following vetting, stories submitted will be posted on IFLA's Library Map of the World.¹⁵

Conclusion

The 2030 Agenda is unique both in its status and its relevance for libraries. Never before has there been such universal commitment to such a comprehensive set of goals, and never before has access to information been given such a significant place.

As such, the 2030 Agenda – and the Sustainable Development Goals – represent an important opportunity for libraries to draw attention to, and explain, the contribution they make to building stronger and more sustainable societies. In addition to everyday efforts, there are a number of key opportunities at the national, regional and international levels in the coming months. IFLA looks forwards to working with its members to realise them, and so build support for libraries around the world.

¹⁵ IFLA, *Library Map of the World* (Den Haag: IFLA), accessed August 26, 2018, Librarymap.ifla.org.

Bibliography:

1. Fukada-Parr, Sakiko. "A Right to Development Critique of Millennium Development Goal 8". In UN OHCHR *Realizing the Right to Development*. New York; Geneva: United Nations, 2013.
2. Garrido, Maria and Stephen Wyber, eds. *Development and Access to Information*. Den Haag: IFLA, 2016. Accessed August 10, 2018. <https://da2i.ifla.org/>.
3. IFLA. *Access and Opportunity for All: How Libraries Contribute to the United Nations 2030 Agenda*. Den Haag: IFLA, 2016. Accessed August 7, 2018. <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/10546>.
4. IFLA. *Data and the Sustainable Development Goals: An IFLA Briefing*. Den Haag: IFLA, 2018. Accessed September 5, 2018. <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/67353>.
5. IFLA. *IFLA Global Vision*. Den Haag: IFLA. Accessed August 10, 2018. globalvision.ifla.org.
6. IFLA. *IFLA Guide to Voluntary National Reviews*. Den Haag: IFLA, 2018. Accessed September 5, 2018. <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/60881>.
7. IFLA. *Library Map of the World*. Den Haag: IFLA. Accessed August 26, 2018. librarymap.ifla.org.
8. IFLA. *The International Advocacy Programme (IAP)*. Accessed September 5, 2018. www.ifla.org/ldp/iap.
9. IFLA. *The Lyon Declaration*. Den Haag: IFLA, 2014. Accessed September 3, 2018. www.lyondeclaration.org.
10. Kumar, Raj. *Critics of the Sustainable Development Goals were wrong: here's why*. World Economic Forum, 2017. Accessed September 3, 2018. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/turns-out-sdg-critics-were-wrong/>.
11. United Nations. *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. New York: United Nations, 2015. Accessed August 7, 2018. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld/publication>.
12. United Nations. *United Nations Millennium Development Goals*. Accessed September 3, 2018. <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>.

Нова могућност: Програм Уједињених нација до 2030. и заговарање за библиотеке

Сажетак

Све већа пажња која се поклања одрживом развоју, у сваком од његових аспеката, указује на чињеницу да се доносиоци одлука усредсеђују на важност ширег спектра политика и унакрсних фактора. Укључивши приступ информацијама у деветнаест потциљева у оквиру циљева одрживог развоја, светске владе су потврдиле да је реч о питању од суштинског значаја. Ово потврђује важност рада библиотека које обезбеђују да приступ буде могућ и користан за све и пружа прилику за ангажовање на националном и регионалном нивоу, као и у самим Уједињеним нацијама, у циљу подизања свести и подршке за библиотеке.

Први део рада бави се афирмисањем значаја библиотека у Програму Уједињених нација до 2030, а други разматра активности IFLA-е и могућности да се овај процес искористи за подизање свести о библиотекама као партнерима у развоју.

Кључне речи: развој, циљеви одрживог развоја, приступ информацијама, библиотеке, заговарање за библиотеке, Уједињене нације



A New Opportunity: The UN 2030 Agenda and Library Advocacy by Stephen Wyber is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.