

DYNAMIC COALITION ON PUBLIC ACCESS AND LIBRARIES

SUMMARY

The need for a Dynamic Coalition on Public Access in Libraries was realized during the 2011 Internet Governance Forum. At the time, Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL) shared the outcome of a survey that revealed how most policy makers in developing countries see libraries as repositories of printed materials and not as spaces for Internet access and use. Since then, the Dynamic Coalition for Public Access in Libraries has facilitated interaction between relevant stakeholders, increasing the visibility of libraries in the debate for public access both in developing and developed countries.

Libraries are catalysts for Internet use and access. Access to information via the Internet is vital for the economic, educational, and societal well-being of individuals. The outcomes public access yields are numerous. Access to information empowers people to exercise their political and socioeconomic rights, to be economically active, and to learn new skills. Access to information enables informed decision making, supports creativity and innovation, provides transparency and helps citizens to hold governments accountable.

Public access to information is a free, or mostly free, undertaking of public libraries worldwide. As public institutions, libraries look to guarantee access to all. The horizontal and decentralized placement of libraries within nation states allows for easy, reliable and safe access to information and irrespective of the size of this network, libraries tend to be regarded as safe places to gather, exchange ideas, develop digital literacy skills and access the Internet.

As such, this access helps deliver inclusive development and achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals. However, it should not be taken for granted. Libraries need to be connected to the physical infrastructure necessary for connectivity, implying the need for properly adapted regulatory and budgetary policies, including funding for continuous staff development. This access also needs to be protected from Internet shutdowns, which harm people's ability to use information to improve their lives. Partnerships between actors – libraries, regulators, businesses, adapting to local circumstances, could help deliver progress.

Access in libraries remains an essential tenet of a democratic, open society and libraries are catalysts that facilitates access to information and the overall societal well-being. The Dynamic Coalition on Public Access in Libraries provides a space within the IGF to address the Internet governance issues

relating to public access, and enable a discussion to take place about how the existing expertise, networks and infrastructure offered by public libraries can contribute to the goals and spirit of the WSIS process.

IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC ACCESS IN LIBRARIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

The UN 2030 Agenda recognizes that access to information is crucial for sustainable development, and offers affirmation of the work that libraries do in guaranteeing public access to the Internet. As we look to bring the remaining billions online, libraries offer a cost-effective way of doing this, giving people their first taste of the Internet, and guaranteeing continued access to those who cannot afford it for themselves.

The Development and Access to Information report (DA2I), produced by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and the Technology and Social Change Group at the University of Washington (TASCHA) offers not only qualitative evidence of the importance of access, but also sets out a basket of indicators which will allow for the monitoring of governments' progress towards meaningful access to information. It highlights the role of public libraries as facilitators of development through access worldwide. Libraries are fully immersed in the reality of the communities they serve and are well positioned to provide free access to information to all members of society. They can be a more welcoming environment than Internet cafes, act as the hubs of partnerships with other actors, and as already highlighted, help build the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours necessary to make for confident and responsible Internet users. Even in societies with high levels of home Internet penetration, such as the Nordics, the evidence seems to indicate that usage of public access remains high.

- **What further evidence is there of how public access can help develop interest in, and demand for, home or mobile internet access?**
- **Why does there continue to be such strong use of public access in countries where home or mobile Internet access is well developed?**

THE PARTICULAR ROLE OF DIGITAL LITERACY

A key pillar of meaningful access to information, as identified by the Development and Access to Information report, is the importance of digital literacy skills, given that access to the Internet alone, or the ownership of a device, does not guarantee an equal opportunity to create, receive, apply, and create information. The ability to not just to read information, but to use digital tools creatively, from

blogging, to editing a Wikipedia page or coding, can be decisive in helping people make the most of the Internet. This ability can be summed up as 'digital literacy' - the capability to harness the potential of digital tools to their fullest effect - efficiently, effectively and ethically – to meet our information needs in our personal, civic and professional lives.

Libraries and other community anchor institutions help people to benefit from information and related tools, ensuring people can use digital information and skills to improve their lives. The combination of training and support to develop digital literacy provides a strong argument for public access to lie at the heart of strategies for ensuring that communities and societies are not only connected but thriving online.

DC-PAL will continue to include evidence-gathering on the role of libraries in developing digital literacy among their users, both in developing and developed countries.

- **What can governments, businesses and other stakeholders do to ensure that libraries and other community anchor institutions are enabled to offer effective digital literacy training?**

GETTING THE RIGHT POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR PUBLIC ACCESS

In addition, reflection continues on the right policy framework for public access in libraries. Universal Service Funds offer a potentially powerful tool for building high speed connections to libraries and other community anchor institutions, along the lines of the United States' e-Rate programme. In some countries, these funds are often under-spent, with opportunities to get people online lost.

There are also potential regulatory challenges, especially when it comes to spectrum. Governments should enable libraries both to receive information and to build community connectivity.

In addition, the apparently growing number of Internet shutdowns presents a worrying trend. Libraries guarantee free, public access to all, but this is jeopardised by governments' recourse to shutdowns. While freedom of expression and access to information online is not an absolute right, Internet shutdowns represent a heavy-handed and usually disproportionate means of achieving their policy objectives. In the short term, they limit the flow of information and control what people can see and say online. In the long term, they have serious social and economic repercussions.

The UN and many human rights experts have recognised that internet shutdowns are a violation of international human rights law. Governments must find solutions that are proportionate. Internet shutdowns carry too high a price now and in the future, to be an acceptable tool.

- **Where do policy-makers and regulators need to act to facilitate the development of public access? What could be done to ensure that Universal Service Funds in particular realise their potential in this area?**
- **What more can we do to underline that the costs of Internet shutdowns more than outweigh any potential benefits in all but the most exceptional circumstances?**

PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS FOR PUBLIC ACCESS

A number of active members of the DC have sought, through a Partnership for Public Access (P4PA), to develop partnerships in which individual libraries and library associations, civil society groups, government and business collaborate to deliver both public access to the Internet, and the support needed to make this meaningful. For example, in Tunisia, there have been coding classes to help young people realise the potential of the digital economy, and work to help local librarians develop the confidence to deliver digital literacy to users. This project will now expand to include Colombia, where strong library infrastructure and civil society opens opportunities to connect areas which were long isolated by the conflict.

The potential of public access initiatives to marry up with Community Networks is also increasingly clear. Libraries can act not only as hubs or nodes in Community Networks, but can also serve to help community members develop the necessary skills and start to produce local content.

- **Which actors need to be engaged in order to build effective partnerships for public access at the local level? Which examples could inspire others?**
- **How can public access points such as libraries work together with the growing community network movement to maximise connectivity?**