

Delivering Inclusive Development: How Libraries Worldwide Lead in Bringing People Online and Helping to Reach the SDGs

Summary

Libraries support governments and other actors to connect people to the internet and thereby achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other national and international commitments. Library support organizations have mobilized governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and businesses in the Dynamic Coalition on Public Access in Libraries, which works within the context of the United Nations (UN) Internet Governance Forum (IGF) to promote the role libraries play in public access to information. This paper presents the commitments governments have made to provide access to the internet and information and libraries role in helping governments to meet those commitments. It explores the issue of whether and how international commitments can be met without public access.

Importance of Access to Internet and Information

Economic, education, health and social opportunities depend on internet access, where access to information makes the difference between those who have opportunities and those who do not. Access to information empowers people to exercise their political and socioeconomic rights, to be economically active, to learn new skills and to hold their governments to account. It enables informed decision-making, supports creativity and innovation, strengthens identity and provides transparency. While the number of internet users worldwide exceeds three billion, half of the world's population lacks access to information online.

The Alliance for Affordable Internet notes that unless there is dramatic acceleration in progress, only “16% of people in the world’s poorest countries, and a mere 53% of the world as a whole, will be connected by 2020.”ⁱ Through multilateral, bilateral and international commitments, governments have increasingly recognized the importance of accelerating access to information and the internet, particularly through public access, to promote social and economic development:

- The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes a commitment to universal literacy, recognizes that access to information is crucial and identifies ICTs and the internet as horizontal enablers for development.ⁱⁱ It specifically aims to “significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020.”ⁱⁱⁱ
- The African Union’s Agenda 2063 calls for connecting the unconnected to allow them to participate in the fast-rising digital economies that will create tremendous opportunities for growth and transformation, thereby reshaping Africa’s economic and social landscape.^{iv}

- The IGF is furthering its seminal work on Policy Options for Connecting and Enabling the Next Billion(s) focused on developing a set of policy options aiming at the creation of enabling environments, including deploying infrastructure; increasing usability; enabling users (e.g. through ICT literacy and training tools); and ensuring affordability.^v During the 2015 Internet Governance Forum in Brazil, the 61 deliberators considered 13 specific policy proposals and rated them on a scale ranking top to bottom, and at the top were two proposals to “facilitate free public access” at schools or libraries, and also by local businesses and user communities.
- The World Summit on Information Society (WSIS)+10 acknowledges the importance of a society where "everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life."^{vi} It also recognizes that “public access facilities have in many countries facilitated significant gains in connectivity and sustainable development.”^{vii}
- The United States State Department, in partnership with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, adopted the goal to connect the next 1.5 billion people in the world by 2020 known as the Global Connect Initiative (GCI).^{viii} GCI Guiding Principles encourage public access, for example in public libraries and community centers and fostering digital literacy, enabling and promoting the development of locally relevant content, applications, and services as they are essential to widespread adoption of the Internet and increase its social and economic.^{ix}

A4AI notes that public access is critical to bringing connectivity to marginalized groups, yet is frequently neglected or excluded from policy in developing countries trying to achieve universal broadband. “To achieve the SDG target of universal access, governments will have to invest much more in providing widespread low-cost or free public access facilities, designed particularly to reach women, rural dwellers and those living in poverty.”^x The Global Commission on Internet Governance calls for a new global social compact to promote a single, open and secure Internet for all and for public investment at locations such as schools and libraries to provide wider access to communities that have limited opportunities due to income or geography.^{xi} The World Economic Forum noted in its recent Internet for All report that the barriers to greater internet use fall into four categories: infrastructure; affordability; skills, awareness and cultural acceptance; and local adoption and use, which is often an issue of the lack of local content.”^{xii}

In his April address, World Bank President Jim Yong Kim declared “Two things we know for sure will be needed: connectivity for everyone and also the ability of people to engage in that new digital world. We have to move quickly on connectivity, but we have to move equally as fast in making sure that people are able to take advantage of that connectivity.”^{xiii}

Public Access and Public Libraries

Public access represents the most economical, expedient and equitable way to reach the greatest number of new users. Public libraries are often one of the only places where many people can access computers and the Internet. Public libraries and other community centers can be connected at a fraction of the cost of reaching every premise. These public access facilities provide low fee/no fee basic access "entry points" and when combined with support services, can improve digital literacy and drive demand for commercial services.

Worldwide, more than a million libraries ensure that information and the skills to use it are available to everyone. Public libraries represent a worldwide network of 320,000 trusted (73 percent of them in developing and transitioning countries) and safe, public places, providing a gateway to information, skills and support.^{xiv} While libraries are recognized for improving literacy, promoting culture, and preserving and making heritage available, what often goes unrecognized is the role they play by ensuring equity of access to life-changing information and communications technologies that help communities address their most pressing challenges. Libraries help people, particularly those who are marginalized such as those living in poverty or rural areas or due to gender or disability, to use the internet to access health information, improve their education, access online government services and find jobs.

Governments have many competing priorities, and resources are always in demand. Public libraries share characteristics that enable them to do amazing things with limited funds. They are already funded by the taxpayer and embedded in government infrastructure and they have skilled and qualified library staff who offer the public support on technology and training. Library services contribute to improved outcomes across the SDGs and other government commitments by:

- Promoting universal literacy, including media and information literacy
- Closing gaps in access to information, providing services to those who might not have access and helping government, civil society, and business to better understand local information needs
- Providing a network of delivery sites for government programs and services and a place for people to access government services
- Advancing digital inclusion through access to ICT, and dedicated staff to help people develop new digital skills
- Serving as the heart and knowledge hub of the research and academic community
- Preserving and providing access to the world's culture and heritage

An effective way of achieving connectivity for the next billion is to use libraries as community hubs to provide *access* to the internet (e.g. through wireless internet connection), *education* on how to use ICTs, and *advice* on how to critically evaluate the accessed information. Training and resources are needed to help libraries and librarians upgrade the information and services they provide to users. With comparatively minor investment in the following, governments can further leverage public library networks:^{xv}

- **Infrastructure:** Libraries should be recognized as a vehicle to ensure universal access to the Internet and provided with the infrastructure needed (e.g. upgraded technology, high-speed internet) to support their services. One promising scenario has emerged wherein public libraries and other types of community centers, using TVWhiteSpace (TVWS), WiFi and other license free spectrum technologies, provide internet access and services for the greatest number of first-time users in the shortest time at the least cost.
- **Policy:** Policies and legislation should create an enabling environment for universal access to information by supporting the role of libraries in providing public access to ICTs, internet connectivity and technology training. Universal Service Funds (USFs) are used as effective tools in connecting libraries and schools. Additional key policy issues that governments need to address include copyright, the right to privacy, ensuring that all people have access, irrespective of gender, age, capacity, race or ethnicity.

- **Skills development:** Libraries should be supported in their role of offering training and skills development in using technology, media and information literacy so that people can access the information and services that they need.

Libraries and the SDGs

Libraries are already supporting progress toward specific SDGs including^{xvi}:

SDG 1: Reducing Poverty

In Slovenia, the Ljubljana City Library hosts an Employment Information Service (EIS) that helps around 1,200 people a year, many of whom are homeless or receiving social benefits, to find a job. The library helps them develop their resumes and apply for jobs. As many homeless patrons of the library suffer from drug abuse, the library works closely with the Centre for the Prevention and Treatment of Drug Addiction at the University Hospital of Psychiatry in Ljubljana to support rehabilitation, reintegration and social inclusion.^{xvii}

In Sri Lanka, the e-Library Nenasala Programme is a government-sponsored initiative to increase digital literacy and access to technology among the nation's poorest residents, often living in remote rural areas. The 300 centres in all parts of the country are open to everyone and are the most robust form of access to infrastructure in many remote and impoverished parts of the country.^{xviii}

SDG 2: Sustainable agriculture

In Romania, public library staff worked with local government to help 100,000 farmers use new ICT services to apply for agricultural subsidies, resulting in US\$187 million reaching local communities in 2011-2012.^{xix}

SDG 3: Healthy Lives and Wellbeing

In Botswana, 87% of library visitors say their health improved as a result of health information they found using public library services.^{xx} In Australia, a report released in 2014 found that hospitals, government departments, associations and other organizations involved in healthcare get a \$5 return for every \$1 they invest in libraries.^{xxi}

The government of Kyrgyzstan launched an intensive national tuberculosis (TB) prevention and control program. The Kyrgyz Libraries Information Consortium (KLIC) 'No to TB!' service works in partnership with civil society organizations like Project HOPE and the Red Crescent Society to mobilize public libraries to support government goals. 'No to TB!' initiatives were set up in 190 rural libraries with training for 800 people on how to raise awareness of TB, as well as public debates attended by 5,600 people.^{xxii}

The Uganda Health Information Digest published by the Makerere University library repackages scholarly information in print format for health workers who cannot access the information online. The Digest includes abstracts on topical disease and health issues. It is distributed to over 1,500 health units including hospitals, health centers, dispensaries, health-related NGOs, district medical offices, all district health and social services committees and Members of Parliament. The Digest is one of the few sources of up-to-date information in remote areas during outbreaks of disease such as Hepatitis.^{xxiii}

SDG 4: Lifelong learning opportunities

In Botswana, public libraries have taken large strides toward supporting the government's objectives under its National Vision 2016, including introducing ICT access, improving the computer skills of library users, and enabling users to be successful in business, education and employment.^{xxiv}

In New York City, 19 library branches have specialized adult learning centres that offer classes in pre-GED, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), adult literacy, citizenship, and ICT skills. Four branches in the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens offer job placement services through the city's Workforce Career Centers.^{xxv}

SDG 5: Empowering women and girls

The National Library of Uganda has provided ICT training specifically designed for female farmers, ensuring that these women can access weather forecasts, crop prices and support to set up online markets, in their local languages.^{xxvi}

SDG 8: Productive employment and decent work

In Ukraine, 1 in 3 public library visitors used technology at the public library for business communications, and 62% of those who used library services to apply for a job received a job offer.^{xxvii}

In the European Union in 2012, 4.1 million people used public library computers to support employment-related activities — 1.5 million used library computers to apply for jobs, and more than a quarter of a million secured jobs this way.^{xxviii}

In New York City, the Science, Industry and Business Library, Queens Public Library, and Brooklyn's Business & Career Library (B&CL) run popular business plan competitions that offer guidance to participants, targeting current and prospective business owners from underserved communities.^{xxix} At B&CL, 25 percent of the participants are immigrants, 29 percent are unemployed or underemployed and more than half have a household income below the median in New York City.

SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure

In Latvia, for every dollar invested in public libraries from 2008-2010, nearly \$2 in value (direct and indirect) was created. The return on investment of computer and Internet use in public libraries was even higher, returning more than \$3 for every \$1 invested.^{xxx}

Reaching SDGs without Public Access

Public access is critical for getting the next billion online. Public libraries are ideal for providing public access as outlined above.

- *How will access to the internet expand without public access? Or what would be the implications of not having public access?*
- *How is public access being addressed in different contexts?*

ⁱ <http://a4ai.org/2015-16-a4ai-affordability-report-out-today/>

ⁱⁱ UN (2015). "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.globalgoals.org/global-goals/innovation-and-infrastructure/>

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- ^{iv} <http://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/agenda2063.pdf>
- ^v <http://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/policy-options-for-connecting-and-enabling-the-next-billions-phase-ii>
- ^{vi} <http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/UNPAN96078.pdf>
- ^{vii} <http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/UNPAN96078.pdf>
- ^{viii} <https://share.america.gov/globalconnect/>
- ^{ix} <https://share.america.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/1.-GCI-Connectivity-Principles-FINAL.pdf>
- ^x <http://a4ai.org/2015-16-a4ai-affordability-report-out-today/>
- ^{xi} <https://www.ourinternet.org/report>
- ^{xii} http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Internet_for_All_Framework_Accelerating_Internet_Access_Adoption_report_2016.pdf
- ^{xiii} <http://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/end-poverty-there-must-be-digital-connectivity-all>
- ^{xiv} <http://www.ifla.org/node/7411>
- ^{xv} <https://www.intgovforum.org/cms/documents/igf-meeting/igf-2016/820-dcpal-2015-output-document/file>
- ^{xvi} IFLA (2016). *Access and Opportunity for All: How Libraries contribute to the United Nations 2030 Agenda*. Available at: <http://www.ifla.org/publications/node/10546>.
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- ^{xxiv} IFLA (2013), "The Role of Public Libraries in the Attainment of Botswana's Vision 2016," available at <http://library.ifla.org/258/1/201-radijeng-en.pdf>.
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- ^{xxvii} Global Libraries Atlas (2015), available at <https://www.glatlas.org>.
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