



# UN High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation

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## Initial IFLA Responses to Stakeholder Consultation

### VALUES & PRINCIPLES:

*What are the key values that individuals, organizations, and countries should support, protect, foster, or prioritize when working together to address digital issues?*

Fundamentally, the values and principles applying to cooperation in order to address digital issues should be the same as those that apply to wider policy decision-making. As the digital power of technologies increases, they are becoming indissociable from broader social and economic challenges, and the same goals should apply.

Just as libraries have seen some of their historical functions taken over by the internet, they have used the opportunity to apply digital tools to find new and more effective ways of achieving their missions, and addressing the challenges met along the way. Throughout, the same values apply.

A first value is therefore of universal benefit from digital technologies. We must aim for a situation where everyone can gain from the possibilities that the internet has brought.

A second is the importance of protecting individual rights. Particularly crucial to this is access to information, not just as a right in itself, but also as a means of realising other rights.

A third, and connected value is the need for inclusiveness. Not just the effectiveness, but the legitimacy of solutions found will depend on everyone having the possibility to participate in decision-making.

Finally, there is the value placed on cooperation itself, rather than individual or national solutions. The work of the United Nations Secretary General to launch the High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation underlines the importance of working together.

*What principles should guide stakeholders as they cooperate with each-other to address issues brought about by digital technology?*

As set out in the previous question, the same principles should apply to our approach to digital issues as to non-digital ones.

A key principle (in the on- and offline worlds alike) must be the importance of individual and collective well-being, now and into the future – sustainable development. The objectives set out in the United Nations 2030 Agenda provide an important reference point, not just those targets specifically referencing digital and connectivity issues, but all 169 targets. Keeping this goal in mind will – it can be hoped – fulfil the mission of democratic government to take the best decisions for all citizens, in cooperation with all stakeholders.

A second key principle is the protection of individual rights, and promotion of the participation and giving everyone the space to engage. This should include a readiness to make positive interventions to ensure equality. There needs to be a strong focus on access



to information, deliberation and decision-making at the local or community level where at all possible.

A third principle is the need to reject simple responses which do not take account of side effects. We also need to avoid the concentration of decision-making power in any one set of hands (be they commercial or governmental), given the risk that this creates of allowing one set of interests to prime over others, at the expense of universal benefits.

Connected to the fundamental similarity between the values that apply to action in the real and digital worlds is the need to be realistic. We should not look to apply tougher controls – or higher standards – to the digital world than we do to the physical. While behaviour that is criminal offline should also be criminal online, digital tools should not serve to leave anyone in a less advantageous position than previously.

Furthermore, we need also to recognise that the internet has opened up possibilities to groups which previously were marginalised for a variety of economic, social and cultural factors, and ensure that this progress is not lost.

Finally, we must place access to information (from all sources) as a key principle in our response to digital challenges, both as a goal in itself, and as a means of achieving solutions. Greater information promotes empowerment, engagement, transparency and trust, allowing more and more people to engage in debates and discussions. Access to information, as with many public policy goals, does require intervention and support in order to ensure that the knowledge provided is relevant, and that the receiver has the possibility to understand and apply it.

*How can these values and principles be better embedded into existing private and/or public activities in the digital space?*

To some extent, implementing the values and principles set out above is a question of attitudes and behaviour. However, meaningful consultation processes, and full assessment of the impacts of any decisions proposed and taken (not just economic, but also social and environmental). Such processes are supported by taking steps to encourage and enhance access to information for all.

This allows for informed and participatory debate, notably including voices which otherwise risk not being heard, as well as ensuring that the latest research and thinking is heard. This may also require providing physical spaces for learning and discussion, as well as active outreach by dedicated staff, such as librarians, in order to ensure everyone has the chance to develop skills and be heard.

Connected to this is the opportunity provided by bringing a wider range of stakeholders into the discussion. Given that decision-making on digital issues is likely to have real-world impacts, it is vital to give a voice to those who are already working to achieve sustainable development across the board. This also applies across levels of government. Multi-stakeholderism must therefore implies an interdisciplinary approach.

Finally, taking a more bottom-up approach is valuable. The first response in tackling challenges in the digital world should lie with individuals, with action at higher levels only where this is necessary. For example, improving information literacy skills represents the single most effective response to online disinformation.



## **II. METHODS & MECHANISMS**

*How do the stakeholders you are familiar with address their social, economic, and legal issues related to digital technologies? How effective or successful are these mechanisms for digital cooperation? What are their gaps, weaknesses, or constraints? How can these be addressed?*

Our responses relate primarily to libraries and their patrons. Libraries have long played a role in providing education and access to information to their communities, in line with the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1994). They have a unique position in their communities welcoming, non-commercial environments, open to all, with support and training on offer from dedicated staff, helping people find the information they need to live better lives. Libraries cooperate with other stakeholders – the formal education system, governments and law-makers, technical experts and companies.

As highlighted above, the initial response to digital issues should be to look at how we can help individuals take action themselves. Libraries work with other actors to do this. Partnerships with the healthcare sector and public health authorities have seen libraries develop their capacity to help people discover health information online, in a way that they may not feel comfortable doing at home.

Libraries also provide digital skills training for marginalised and at-risk communities who may not interest for-profit providers, in order that they should not find themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide. Such skills include training on privacy and data hygiene, better understanding of how the internet itself operates, and awareness of how to avoid cybercrime.

They also support more advanced and specific skills for example, coding, robotics and web-design. This such initiatives are often delivered by external partners who rely on the library's space, internet connection, and welcoming nature in order to deliver courses. This work helps ensure that more people are able to seize the opportunities offered by digital technologies.

Librarians also work directly, and in partnership with formal education institutions in order to develop information literacy skills. Libraries have a long expertise in helping people find, understand, evaluate and apply information, a skill that is as important as ever in the modern world. School librarians provide media literacy training, and public librarians have been recognised in UNESCO's Media and Information Literate Cities concept as key to promoting such skills throughout life.

Clearly action at the individual level cannot solve all issues, and it is unfair to place all the responsibility there. Libraries therefore also engage in wider discussions, bringing to bear their values and expertise in broader policy discussions. With copyright, for example, it is essential to avoid a situation where user rights are not undermined by legal or technical tools. At this level, we highly value the opportunity to engage with decision-makers, ensuring that all interests are heard and respected.

As for barriers to cooperation, a first concerns the capacity of libraries themselves. Their potential to deliver services that address digital issues depends on having adequate resources, and of course a high quality internet connection. As publicly funded institutions,



they do rely on local and national government providing sufficient support. At the same time, libraries are acknowledged as ‘low-hanging fruit’ when it comes to delivering connectivity and digital skills equitably, and can also accelerate wider internet buildout in difficult-to-serve areas. Arguably, pooling broader resources for digital health, education, e-government and other programmes in order to support libraries would bring greater efficiency and effectiveness.

A second barrier comes with the possibilities for libraries – and their users – to engage in decision-making on digital issues. In many countries, libraries are governed at the local level, and not necessarily engaged in national or international discussions. As a result, high-level debates on digital cooperation risk focusing on regulatory questions (within the purview of central governments) rather than on skills and delivery. They also miss out on the expertise that librarians as information scientists can bring. Where multi stakeholder bodies exist, they tend to be highly limited in their actions and functions.

*Who are the forgotten stakeholders in these mechanisms? How can we strengthen the voices of women, the youth, small enterprises, small island states and others who are often missing?*

In addition to the groups set out in the question, a key forgotten stakeholder (or set of stakeholders) is the non-technical community. The internet has such a central role in our lives, that it makes less and less sense to discuss it separately from other policy issues.

Regarding the stakeholders indicated in the question, a key means of allowing engagement and building voice is to start at the local level. This way, more and more people learn to understand the issues associated with the internet, develop their own points of view, and gain confidence in engaging in digital cooperation. A key part of this, as set out previously, is to create the spaces and services which make people feel welcome and give them the skills and knowledge necessary to make the most of the internet.

Libraries are well positioned to strengthen the voices of the marginalised. They accept and serve users without discriminating and provide a public service that goes beyond the traditional channels of access to information.

*What new or innovative mechanisms might be devised for multi-stakeholder cooperation in the digital space?*

A first step is to ensure that a broader range of stakeholders can be involved. Too many actors are not yet at the table, and mechanisms to foster their engagement are not fully developed. Organising internet governance discussions around end-goals (education, health, employment) could ensure greater inclusion of those stakeholders who work with digital tools in order to deliver real-world outcomes. Such an approach could also help dispel the idea that digital cooperation activities are primarily technical, but also help avoid simplistic answers. It would also make it easier to pass from discussion to action.

A second mechanism is to promote a strongly localised approach to tackling digital issues where this is appropriate. Enabling communities to apply diagnostic tools in order to identify those challenges most relevant to them could make a major contribution. Libraries would offer a natural place to carry out such work, involving all relevant players, with the support of experts acting as catalysts or facilitators, with librarians themselves supporting the provision of information. It goes without saying that such approaches



must be inclusive, with particular efforts made to reach out to marginalised groups, such as women, minorities, the elderly, people with disabilities, and individual from the global south.

### **III. ILLUSTRATIVE ACTION AREAS -**

*The Panel plans to explore, among others, the following areas where greater digital cooperation is required:*

- *inclusive development and closing the digital gap*
- *inclusive participation in the digital economy*
- *building the capacity of individuals, institutions and governments for the digital transformation.*
- *data*
- *protection of human rights online, particularly of children, women and marginalized communities*
- *human voice and participation in shaping technological choices and architecture*
- *digital trust and security*
  - a) *What are the challenges faced by stakeholders (e.g. individuals, Governments, the private sector, civil society, international organizations, the technical and academic communities) in these areas?*

Libraries are engaged in almost all of these areas to a greater or lesser extent, with a strong focus on inclusive development and closing the digital gap, building capacity of individuals, data, protection of human rights, and digital trust. They do this through both formal and informal learning provision, as well as simply providing a space where people can develop their own skills and knowledge.

As highlighted above, a key challenge for libraries is to ensure the resources necessary to realise this potential. Staff, equipment, and an internet connection are essential. This also opens up more scope to draw on the experience and expertise of librarians in national and international-level digital cooperation initiatives.

Further barriers come from a lack of scope for libraries to take active decisions about services, and in particular to reach out to others and build partnerships. Librarians must feel empowered to support citizens in any relevant way, and this role must be recognised by other stakeholders involved in digital cooperation.

At the global level, the work of librarians in managing data and information makes them a key potential partner. The challenge here is a tendency to leave planning to the private sector, rather than taking advantage of skills that are already there. Shared standards, information ethics and knowledge management could all represent areas where libraries can contribute if invited.

- b) *What are successful examples of cooperation among stakeholders in these areas? Where is further cooperation needed?*

The reference section below some successful stories of digital cooperation in the realization of the UN 2030 agenda and the role of libraries in developing access to information. The links were provided to support this evidence.



- c) What form might cooperation among stakeholders in these areas take? What values and principles should underpin it?

In the field of inclusive development and closing the digital divide (as well as individual capacity building), cooperation at the local level will look like regular contacts between authorities, skills providers and libraries in order to raise awareness of the benefits of internet access and digital skills. Local and national strategies, fully taking account of the role of libraries (and ensuring they are funded appropriately) and of other stakeholders, would be both an opportunity to hold relevant discussions, but also to deliver results.

In the field of data, it could pass through a move towards a common understanding of data ethics globally, leaving space for national variation and public interest activities. Similarly, the protection of rights (and the careful management of any conflict of rights), should be decided through meetings of stakeholders from all areas.

Finally, concerning participation, some parliaments and governments work to use libraries as places where people can understand and interact with decision-making processes. Such a model already existing, it could well be applied in the digital space.

#### **IV. PLEASE PROVIDE YOUR NUMBERED REFERENCES OR LINKS TO ADDITIONAL REPORTS/DOCUMENTS HERE.**

1. Access and opportunity for all: How libraries contribute to the UN 2030 Agenda (<https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/hq/topics/libraries-development/documents/access-and-opportunity-for-all.pdf>). This highlights how libraries, through delivering access to information, help deliver on all of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Many of the examples centre on enabling full use of the internet, demonstrating both the connection between digital cooperation and sustainable development.
2. Development and Access to Information (<https://da2i.ifla.org/sites/da2i.ifla.org/files/uploads/docs/da2i-2017-chapter2.pdf>). This sets out an intellectual argument for the connection between access to information (including the ability to understand, apply and create information) and development, and gives examples. Again, many of the examples are linked to meaningful internet access.
3. Bridging the digital divide: a prerequisite for e-government (<http://library.ifla.org/2210/1/233-lachal-fr.pdf>). This presentation at IFLA's World Library and Information Congress highlights how libraries and library services support people without connectivity, or the skills and confidence to use it, to engage with government services.
4. Public Library Innovation Programme (<http://www.eifl.net/programmes/public-library-innovation-programme>). This initiative, by Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL) offers many very strong examples of libraries undertaking projects which realise the potential of the internet to improve lives in high-impact and sustainable ways.
5. Beyond Access-IREX (<https://www.irex.org/project/beyond-access>). This initiative brings together work around the world to show how, through libraries, development can be accelerated and made more equitable.