



WSIS Report 2018

Contribution by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions

This paper primarily focuses on WSIS Target 4: Connect all public libraries, archives, museums, cultural centres and post offices. IFLA is not a facilitator for any of the Action Lines, but clearly has a strong interest in them, notably 3: Access to Information and Knowledge and 4: Capacity Building, to name just two.

Part I: Summary

The [International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions](#) (IFLA) is the leading organisation for libraries around the world, working both to support the profession to improve services to users, and to advocate for libraries in the wider policy environment. It has nearly 1300 members in almost 140 countries around the world.

IFLA engages strongly in favour of public access to the internet in libraries, through discussions around information society policy at the international level, as well as parallel member activities and events. It also works to produce materials and tools that its members can use in order to promote practical change on the ground.

Throughout this, we argue that the access to information that public access to the internet in libraries brings can make a real contribution to sustainable development, in line with the UN 2030 Agenda. The specific nature of libraries makes them particularly apt to help ensure that no-one is left behind, and gives them a unique and lasting role, even in countries and regions with high levels of connectivity.

In terms of trends, the value of public access remains clear, notably given the need to help all members of society develop the skills necessary to make the most of an evolving internet. Yet policies that make intermediaries such as libraries liable for users' actions can have a deeply negative effect. Meanwhile, under-funding of libraries in some countries also serves to reduce their positive impact on communities.

In terms of actions, IFLA itself is working to support libraries and library association through encouragement and guidance on policies and practices. Other stakeholders in the field are promoting innovative approaches to connectivity and making the most of the internet, with some evidence that such projects can gain strong enough community buy-in to become sustainable.

Part II: Trends and Experience

Public access continues to play a key role as part of broader strategies to boost connectivity, both as a stepping stone to 'private' access (through a home or mobile connection), and in complement such 'private' solutions. Among the key areas where libraries add value are the following:

- Libraries already exist around the world, reducing the need for new infrastructure
- Libraries are familiar to their communities, and so do not need to be explained to users
- Libraries are non-commercial, and so accessible to people on low incomes
- Libraries are public, and have a vocation to help all members of their communities
- Libraries are seen as 'safe' spaces by vulnerable and marginalised groups
- Libraries have a mission to provide access to information, and staff dedicated to this
- Libraries form a network, and can cooperate to boost connectivity

We have seen welcome recognition of the importance of such access in both developed and developing countries. In Europe, the WiFi4EU programme explicitly underlines the role of libraries as a centre for connectivity, while in Africa, the African Union is actively planning to connect libraries and other community centres as part of its broader efforts to help more people benefit from the internet.

The growth of community networks represents another important area in delivering the potential of library internet connectivity. There are already some well-established examples (in Catalonia and the Netherlands) where libraries are involved in networks, but there is increasing awareness of the potential of libraries to support such networks more broadly. The value of the library as a physical space where people can come together, learn, and create, is significant.

'Offline internet' projects are also receiving increased attention. Initiatives such as Libraries Without Borders' Ideas Box, and SolarSpell are showing their worth, and relevant groups are looking to work together more effectively to share expertise and develop standards. Such tools offer a powerful means of helping the most remote communities, as well as those affected by disasters.

Concerning the importance of digital skills, there is a welcome recognition in a growing number of jurisdictions that it is unhelpful to refer to 'fake news'. Instead, the emphasis is rather on how to develop the skills to spot deceptive content and approach the internet in a positive but critical way. The creation of new privacy rights also requires steps to raise awareness and help users understand the possibilities now open to them.

Recent advances in Open Access, notably Plan S, aim to accelerate the shift to Open Access in scholarly publishing, which will increase the value of public access in libraries further. Librarians will have further possibilities to use their training to help users obtain material which helps them undertake research.

At the same time, there are also concerns. Efforts being made to curtail copyright infringement and the sharing of extremist and terrorist content by placing the responsibility on hosting service providers and other intermediaries risk making it too risky for libraries and others to provide access. We have already seen a decision in Europe that would make the providers of public WiFi potentially liable if they do not take specific steps to identify users. The WiFi4EU programme would require users to identify themselves, which poses important questions about privacy.

Such provisions run against the Manila Principles on Intermediary Liability, of which IFLA is a signatory. These underline the importance of avoiding placing responsibilities on intermediaries which could both shut out smaller players, and lead to proactive blocking or filtering of content.

A more basic concern, at least in some countries, is the continued lack of investment in libraries. Closures, as well as reductions in opening hours, all reduce the impact that library connections can have in communities. The shift to staff-less libraries in some countries means that users accessing the internet there cannot benefit from support. While library WiFi may still be accessible outside the building, this is not an adequate solution for people who do not have a device, or who feel uncomfortable using the internet without someone to whom they can pose questions.

There is a renewed focus by some on how to make the most of Universal Service Funds. Public Access would be a logical beneficiary of such programmes, but it remains to be seen whether pressure for reform turns into reality.

Finally, discussions at the most recent Internet Governance Forum appear to indicate a desire to find a new way forwards on solving key challenges. With connectivity clearly still a major concern, a combination of public access, offline internet and community networks could respond to this desire for approaches that are neither purely state- or purely commercially led.

Part III: Activities in 2018

Connecting and enabling the next billions remains a key focus of IFLA, as well as the many other stakeholders engaged in projects to spread creativity. IFLA has, in particular, continued to

concentrate on making the case for public internet access in libraries as a means of delivering sustainable development across the board.

While IFLA has not produced a 2018 version of its Development and Access to Information report, it has continued to advocate around what libraries – and in particular internet access in libraries – can bring to development. The focus on SDG 11 has provided an opportunity to look in particular at community impacts. By showing what difference can be made by connecting libraries, we are providing a tool for our members, governments and development agencies in taking decisions.

IFLA has also worked to develop the capacity of librarians at the national and local level to make the case for library connectivity and the impact of this on development through our International Advocacy Programme. Through this, representatives of 130 countries have learnt about how to engage in discussions around the UN 2030 Agenda in order to make the case for access to information and libraries.

IFLA has, in particular worked to bring evidence around library connectivity together in the [Library Map of the World](#). This includes figures for the number of libraries, staff, users and loans, but also the number of libraries with public internet access. The Map currently includes data from 104 countries, and work is ongoing to increase the number of countries covered, and the capacity of local library associations and libraries to collect data. As this work advances, it will become possible to target further efforts on connecting libraries around the world.

Furthermore, the Library Map of the World will provide a storehouse of examples of how libraries deliver the Sustainable Development Goals, many of which again involve library internet access. Current examples focus, for example, on libraries supporting children to learn to code (helping them get jobs in future), helping farmers to access information and subsidies (helping boost agricultural production and productivity) and bringing together children and older people to teach digital skills (promoting inclusion of older people).

In support of this, IFLA continues to develop tools to support libraries and library associations, from statements (for example on Fake News, underlining the importance of skills developments) to a [toolkit on net neutrality](#). IFLA is also currently working on a new set of guidelines for libraries giving internet access to the public, responding to frequently posed questions around, for example, sharing time on computers, or how to deal with controversial content. We are aware that, in some countries, there is a reluctance to give access, give fears that users will access pornography or social media – it is important to send out a clear message in favour of access.

A further key current project is a [toolkit on public access](#), designed to help libraries and library associations understand the various policy issues which can determine the success or not of public access initiatives. This offers a short introduction to questions relating to law, regulation, infrastructure and finance, key advocacy points, and links to further material.

The toolkit has benefitted from the expertise of a variety of stakeholders. It will be launched in early 2019, after a final round of comments, and will include a simple diagnostic to help readers identify where they could best invest their efforts.

Elsewhere, other organisations carry out impressive practical work. Libraries Without Borders runs projects in many countries. For example in Colombia, it has brought offline internet solutions to libraries serving communities in areas previously controlled by the FARC rebels. The combination of access to information, and the skills of the librarians, have helped reconnect these groups to the world, and heal the wounds of the past.

Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL) works in a number of countries in Europe, Africa and Asia, supporting innovative projects that maximise the impact of library internet connections. In



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Myanmar, work originally supported by IREX's Beyond Access programme has managed to achieve a level of sustainability by uniting the community around an internet-connected library.