

Keynote address to the IFLA Government Libraries Section at the World Library and Information Congress, Wrocław, Poland

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Good morning everyone, and thank you so much for inviting me here to speak to you at the opening of this morning's session. It is a great honour to be surrounded by so many of my professional colleagues from Government and Law libraries around the world, and I wanted in particular to thank Anoja Fernando and Guillermo Garcia for this kind invitation.

I have spent some 20 years working in policy-related roles in the UK and across Europe. I feel I should say that as well as being an Englishman, I am an internationalist and a proud European. I have seen first-hand the tremendous importance of evidence, timely and accurate information in the policymaking and legislative process.

This morning, we will talk about the UN Sustainable Development Goals, part of the United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable development. This is a hugely ambitious programme – an agenda to balance long-term economic prosperity with environmental sustainability and social accountability. While it is enacted through policy and legislation – it is at its heart a fundamentally human project.

The Sustainable Development agenda represents a commitment on the part of the 193 signatory nations to making real and lasting progress in ending extreme poverty, reducing inequality and tackling climate change.

Speaking at the signing ceremony, Ban Ki Moon said, *“the agenda you adopt today embodies the aspirations of people everywhere for lives of peace, security and of dignity on a healthy planet”*.

In this sense, the Sustainable Development Goals represent a shared ideal about what we think would constitute a better world for our citizens. And in so doing, they raise a central question about the role of Government and the law in making the world a better place, and about your role as information professionals in helping them to do so.

The idea that Governments have a central role to play in development is still relatively new, and it is not evenly distributed. The Declaration of Independence in the US, for example,

made clear that the primary purpose of Government and the extent of the exercise of its powers is to secure the right to life. It is only more recently that we have come to understand the power of intervention and policy to achieve progressive change.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals say that there are things that must be done in order to eradicate poverty that *can only be done* by National Governments through the instruments of policy, of regulation and of investment.

In a perfect world, all Governments would be wise and motivated by the selfless ambition to improve the quality of life of their people. The press would be impartial and the influence of corporations would be kept in check by a natural system of justice and transparency. Perhaps some of you live in such a country. In which case I would like to come and live there.

In practice, the political process, the economic influence of globalisation, a failure of accountability, the spread of misinformation, pressure on the freedom of the press and a lack of democratic and critical literacy amongst the peoples of the world mean that we cannot assume that our Governments will uphold their commitment to the SDG, nor that when they do, they will make wise and informed choices. The process of international development is, in this sense, too important to be left to politics.

Which is why we as information professionals, as librarians, have a fundamentally important role to play in bringing the ambitions of the Sustainable Development Goals to fruition. You can inform and help to shape policy which, because it is evidence-based, targets the root causes of the social and economic issues that drive poverty and inequality.

We have heard mention several times at this conference of ‘neutrality’. When I met recently with the wonderful staff of our own House of Lords Library – a key information service at the heart of our British Government – they described their role ‘to provide timely, impartial and accurate information to inform the policymaking and legislative process’.

But while we have a professional ethics which states that we must be balanced and impartial in our presentation of information, we also have a moral responsibility to deliver services to the best of our ability which improve the lot of our societies.

Our mission as a profession touches on some of our most fundamental freedoms as human beings. There is a close relationship between the Sustainable Development Goals and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For us, Article 19 is right at the core of what we are as a profession:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

The systematic use of misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and fake news are a direct assault on these rights and an attempt to limit these freedoms.

So when we see the use of misinformation, not as a casual behaviour, but as a deliberate tool of political influence – and even in some countries of subjugation and the marginalisation of minorities - we have an absolute responsibility to counter it with all of our force.

That is why I am proud to have launched our campaign in the UK - #FactsMatter – which aims to hold our Government to account for its use of evidence in the policymaking process. Because while we all know that to some degree, truth is always subjective, facts, nevertheless, really do matter.

Facts matter because evidence-based policy is more effective, more accountable and more transparent. Facts matter because facts, evidence and statistics have no Party, fight no elections, profess no ideology. Facts don't carry placards or use slogans – they shed light on the underlying realities of the world around us.

There is not one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals the success of which doesn't rest fundamentally on information, knowledge and evidence.

Taking for example, Goal 3 around health and wellbeing: In the UK, we have a law – the 2012 Health and Social Care Act – which states that:

“In exercising functions in relation to the health service, the Secretary of State must promote—

*(a) research on matters relevant to the health service, and
(b) the use in the health service of evidence obtained from research.”*

There are more than 1m decisions made every day across our health service which have a profound impact on patients, their carers and families. Even as debate rages about Government policy towards our National Health Service, our responsibility as librarians and information professionals is to ensure that we bring the best possible evidence to bear in delivering quality healthcare – whether by keeping patients informed at the bedside, ensuring that clinicians have information about current treatments, or supporting better-informed decisions in the Boardroom.

Our UK policies on clean water and sanitation are explicit in emphasising the value of information and data-sharing between nations. We are working hard to put information and information professionals at the heart of policies around economic growth and industrial development.

We must not allow ourselves in this digital age to forget the power of books in the policymaking process. Last week, I had the opportunity to visit the library at the Bank of England – a beautiful 1970's facility deep in the vaults underneath London.

A few years ago, the Bank questioned whether a physical library was still needed in this age of digital resources. And the answer came back from their 3,000 staff that the hard-copy library, supported of course by subscriptions to databases and electronic resources, is a hugely valuable and much-used service. Many of the economic policies which affect our national economy and the banking sectors around the world originate in that 1970's library deep beneath the streets of London.

As we look ahead to the days of big data, machine learning and decisions about public services made by unaccountable algorithms which risk deepening inequality, now more than ever we need the ethics of an information professional making sure that information is used for the good of the people.

And it is because of this that we have a professional responsibility as librarians to ensure that our Nation's response to the SDG is built on a solid foundation of facts and evidence. In translating the 17 goals first into policy and then into action, it is essential that decisions are made on the best available evidence rather than personal whim or political utility.

I very much hope that you will take the #FactsMatter message back to your countries and use it to ensure that your own Government is held to account.

I am a great believer in the fundamental role of evidence in a healthy democratic process. I would like to propose three central roles that we can and must play as librarians in promoting this.

The first is educational. Citizenship begins at our mother's knee, with our families around the dinner table, with our friends in the playground. It is honed and refined at school and given expression in adult life. We must fight to create populations that read and love literature and ideas, that have the information and digital skills to navigate the online world and that have the political, media and critical literacy to question what they are told.

The second is as advocates. Strong government and coherent, effective legislation is built on good information. We are not custodians of books, we are scientists and teachers, sherpas, guides and analysts. We learn our subjects and hone our collections, identify and assess new sources – always with the aim of providing the best, most balanced answer to the question.

Yet many of those we serve have no mental picture of information as an asset that needs to be managed and curated to achieve its potential - which is why we have to be clever in building up influence with policymakers.

From my experience, most of Government runs on relationships, social capital, timing and luck. If we really want to bring evidence to the heart of Government, we must not sit and wait passively for policymakers to come and ask us for it. We must be visible, useful, engaging and engaged – in the right room on the right day with the right relationship to ensure our voice is heard.

The third is as accountable public servants. Governments and regimes come and go, but the human need for supported access to quality information persists. Our ethics as a profession have lasted precisely because we prioritise the integrity of the information source and the rights of the information user over the partisan interests of Government.

Our job must therefore be to draw together the evidence in order to create an accurate picture of the extent to which our Governments really have made progress toward the UN 2030 agenda to eradicate extreme poverty. We must be ready to acknowledge success and failure without fear or favour, because that is what our citizens ask of us. We must help to monitor our progress, share ideas and support better-informed decision making. As a global community, we must come together to share best practice and good ideas. When the time comes for our countries to make their progress reports in 2019, we must be ready to support them.

So I am excited to hear today about how your library and information services are supporting your Governments in moving the Sustainable Development Goals from an ambition to a reality.

I am at heart an optimist – history suggests that when our backs are against the wall, we use our knowledge and creativity to adapt, to innovate, to find better solutions. The better, the more accountably and professionally we do our job as librarians, the more likely it is that our policies, plans and laws will be effective and the greater the impact we can achieve for the good of the societies we serve.

In his video message on the launch of the goals, Professor Stephen Hawking says, “*The Sustainable Development Goals are an ambitious to-do list to eradicate poverty, save the environment and make the world a fairer place for everyone. Where every woman and every man has a chance to live a healthy, secure life full of opportunity and love. People cannot fight for their rights if they do not know what they are.*” I cannot think of a nobler or more worthy use for our skills as librarians than that.

Thankyou.