

## Working together: access to information and our power to cause change

**Loida Garcia-Febo**

IFLA Governing Board Member, ALP Chair  
Information New Wave, Brooklyn, NY  
USA/Puerto Rico



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### Abstract:

*This is a momentous time for libraries and librarians. Library workers and information professionals from all library settings are joining forces with organizations to reflect, explore, create and redesign access to information and knowledge through new technologies and new initiatives. We are advocating at local, regional and global levels to continue providing access, services, promoting reading and literacy. The role of libraries and librarians is essential in the information ecosystem to promote citizen participation, social inclusion, positivism and hope. Globally, librarians have joined efforts with organizations to create policies that benefit people of all ages, races, gender, abilities, and social status to access information. Librarians and libraries have become key social tools to promote just and democratic societies.*

*The global information environment is being transformed by new policies, new technologies and renewed focus on the communities served. Libraries, professional associations, community organizations and other agencies are working together to help develop innovative services that meet the changing needs of local communities and at the same time support sustainable development for the economies and societies of the world.*

*The time to take action is now. We can start right where we are. Librarians are creative game-changers, innovators, and caring, brave and global professionals. We must continue having a place at the table promoting libraries before the decision makers. At a national and global levels, we need to be brave and creative to show the world how libraries and librarians are saving lives every day.*

**Keywords:** Library Advocacy, SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), Access to Information, Empowerment

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This is a momentous time for libraries and librarians. We have everything on our side to seize this moment.

The global information environment is being transformed by new policies, new technologies and renewed focus on the communities served. This is certainly a time to re-think and re-imagine the relationship between libraries, librarians, local and global organizations, and digital technologies. Libraries, schools of library and information science, professional associations, community organizations and other agencies are working together to help develop innovative services that meet the changing needs of local communities and at the same time support sustainable development for the economies and societies of the world.

These multifunctional teams are opening new avenues including both technological capability, involvement and commitment which have resulted in access to information for people whom otherwise would not be able to access it. This renewed creativity is truly revolutionizing environments and services to meet the diverse needs of people in different regions of the globe.

Librarians and information professionals have joined forces with nonprofit organizations to reflect, explore, create and redesign the access to information and knowledge through new technologies like virtual platforms, e-learning tools, and online educational networks. We are using our powers to do good; we are trying to save the world.

### **Relevance for Libraries and Library Workers**

Information is a powerful tool for development, promotes better decision-making, helps citizens stay engaged and promotes accountability.

Libraries have the power to provide access to information that can help people to better educate themselves to reach goals, secure jobs, increase income, prevent health conditions, and learn about water systems and farming. These can contribute to increase education and decrease hunger in their communities. The information they access may help them to manage their oceans and look into ways of producing energy. Libraries have the capacity to organize knowledge in ways that can help people to increase their quality of life and promote lifelong learning opportunities. By actively collaborating to achieve these goals, we would make the world a better place for us and for everyone else. We can save our community and the world. Our efforts can have a cascade effect going from impacting our local area to the city, the country, region and the world.

These concepts could be seen as an aspirational approach as many of us hope that circumstances in our world improve. At the same time, I believe they also include a practical approach as libraries facilitate workshops, access to books, research, the Internet and information to the communities they serve in academic, public, school or specialized libraries. These resources allow people to learn how to tackle their needs. Additionally, these concepts are social in nature as we are social beings that seek to interact with others as well as help each other. Therefore, access to information becomes a tool for education, citizen engagement and empowerment.

For example, Los Angeles Public Library has partnered with an immigrant-serving NGO to help users fill out applications for naturalization. Some libraries have secured accreditation from the Board of Immigration Appeals Recognition and Accreditation from the Department of Justice that allows them to provide legal advice and services to immigrants (Dankowski, 2015).

Other libraries such as Toronto Public Library in Canada provides Newcomer Settlement Services which include *providing information and support about legal, childcare, housing, health, education; providing support with applications for citizenship, and government benefits* (2015).

Students at academic libraries in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Indiana have followed an initiative from the Association of College and Research Libraries to increase financial literacy to help students manage their finances. Librarians coordinate programs and instruction within their curriculum to assist students already burdened with high student loans to maximize resources through programs (Dawes 2014).

Harris County Public Library's iKnow digital library card is designed for card holders to access only digital resources such as magazines, movies, music and e-books. This new program is being used by students from nearby universities to access periodicals and other resources remotely without having to compete with others for a space to sit at the library. County residents with mobile phones are using the service to download materials to do their homework (Rahman, 2015).

Dokk1, a city center housing the local library in Aarhus, Denmark, is impacting the social and as some may say, the emotional lives of the city's residents by including a giant gong that can ring when a newborn arrives at the local hospital. Parents of new babies have the possibility of ringing the gong located at the library by pressing a button in the hospital (*The Local*, 2015).

Residents of Ames in Iowa can renew their driver's license or request the manual to study for the driver's test at their local public library which has partnered with the Department of Transportation to provide kiosks with access to the Internet where people can request these services (Marcotte 2015).

As our land and planet are important for people, the government in Alaska has partnered with libraries to lend devices to compile data about bats in the state. This data collected by library workers and users would help them understand a disease killing the bats in the area and hopefully stop them from disappearing. This new service would help preserve the biodiversity of the region (Bodin 2015). San Juan Planes Community Library in Honduras is key to bring safe drinking water to their entire community through a water treatment project they established in the town's central square (Beyond Access 2013).

Ensuring inclusive and equitable education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all can be done through initiatives like ConnectHome, a new effort to expand access to high-speed broadband by connecting *99 percent of K-12 students to high-speed Internet in classrooms and libraries over the next five years in the USA*. The American Library Association is a partner on

this initiative that would include public and school libraries and hopefully other types of libraries as well (ALA Office for Information Technology Policy 2015).

An additional project is seeking to provide access to 10,000 e-books for low-income children throughout the USA by partnering with publishers and libraries. The New York Public Library is developing an app to facilitate access (Rampton 2015). In another project related to technology and sustainability, *the National Library of Uganda has an ICT training program designed for female farmers, providing access to weather forecasts, crop prices, and support to set up online markets, in local languages. This programme increases the economic well-being of women through technology skills (Beyond Access 2012).*

## **Driving the change**

Library workers and information professionals are advocating at local, regional and global levels to continue providing access, services, promoting reading and literacy. The role of libraries and librarians is essential in the information ecosystem to promote citizen participation, social inclusion, positivism and hope.

Globally, librarians have joined efforts with organizations to create policies that benefit people of all ages, races, gender, abilities, and social status to access information. Librarians and libraries have become key social tools to promote just and democratic societies.

When it comes to connecting people with information, librarians do it better than anyone. We gather, organize, distribute and teach skills for community members to maximize the use of the information they receive. This helps people to make better decisions about health-related conditions, find jobs, improve their finances and their quality of life. We promote reading, lifelong learning skills and equal access to information for all people. All of these power democracy and development.

A study carried out by the Technology and Social Change Group (TASCHA) from the University of Washington shows libraries, telecenters and cybercafes play a critical role in extending the benefits of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to a diverse range of people worldwide. Situating public access in the context of national development, their five year Global Impact Study generated evidence about the scale, character and impact of public access ICTs in eight countries: Bangladesh, Botswana, Brazil, Chile, Ghana, Lithuania, the Philippines and South Africa.

The results show that a central impact of public access is the promotion of digital inclusion through technology access, information access and development of ICT skills. Both users and non-users also reported positive impacts in various social and economic areas of their lives. Public access complements home or mobile access, and is crucial for many tasks relating to development in the areas of education and employment, for example (Gomez et al. 2009).

I believe that our working environment becomes the communities we serve. Therefore, through our work at academic, school, special and public libraries, we serve communities that benefit of the joint collaboration we carry out with allies and partners.

For instance, Dokk1, the new library built in Aarhus is already a main community center because it was co-created with the community as a framework to design programs and services. Public consultation with citizens was central to the library design (IFLA Public Library Section 2015). The success of the library in Aarhus is proof of why it is of great benefit to help politicians and communities to re-envision libraries as engines for development and social change as Deborah Jacobs expressed recently during her keynote at the Next Library Conference (2015).

We must get involved in these matters. We need to join forces and strategize with those who can position projects so that change starts happening.

### **Contributing from where we are**

The time to take action is now. We can start right where we are. Librarians are creative game-changers, innovators, and caring, brave and global professionals. These characteristics equip us with tools needed to connect with the communities we serve, learn what is really needed and how to provide it. At a national and global levels, we need to be brave and creative to show the world how libraries and librarians are saving lives every day. We must continue having a place at the table promoting libraries before the decision makers.

Librarians' concerted efforts towards the same goals in different countries will come together to benefit our shared goals and targets. By embracing a common agenda, following a collective impact framework where we partner with different stakeholders and keep communication channels open, we ought to be able to address issues and make significant progress (Kania and Kramer 2011).

In today's world, we can contribute where we are, be it local, national or regional. These efforts should support global endeavors such as the one carried out by IFLA members and representatives to position access to information within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set to be in place on January 2016 and to be achieved by 2030. Libraries are essential for development.

Supported by more than 500 signatories of the Lyon Declaration, IFLA advocated for inclusion of access to information on the SDGs. Our President, Donna Scheeder, made interventions at meeting in the U.N. I, myself, presented our goals at conferences at the U.N. In general, as part of our advocacy strategy, we partnered with civil society, NGOs and reached out to Member States. Thanks to the work of a global team of librarians members of IFLA we were able to reach out to country's Permanent Representatives that had been contacted by their local library associations.

The key is to work together to develop effective approaches to help us benefit our cities and our world. Together we can do great things, even change the world. Therefore, we must continue to work as an excellent global team to position libraries in national and worldwide agendas as we

have done through our advocacy at the United Nations to include access to information in the SDGs specifically on 16.10 *“Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.”* We hope these initiatives encourage associations, national libraries and librarians in general to advocate for the inclusion of libraries in national government agendas.

Now that the SDGs and its 17 goals have been approved by the United Nations General Assembly this past September in New York, we plan to produce a report to keep you informed. As Fiona Bradley from IFLA HQ indicated during our IFLA Congress in Cape Town, the report has two purposes, to keep everyone updated about progress providing access to information (A2I), and to support advocacy to increase A2I, and for better indicators to measure the number of libraries, public access to ICT and skills.

This report should be helpful to see how libraries are contributing to the goals. Furthermore, it will support national library advocacy efforts. If we look at a number of targets, we can realize how much we are already doing. For instance on target 4.4: By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.

The Botswana Library Association developed a strategy to identify where libraries contribute to Botswana Vision 2016. Libraries drive the An Educated and Informed Nation Pillar of Vision 2016 directly in that they collect, organise and disseminate information that society access and uses to inform themselves on various issues of life. However, attainment of the Vision extends beyond just informing and educating, it cuts across all the pillars by empowering communities through knowledge and the ability to access information for themselves (Radijeng 2013).

9.c 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. Related to this target, we know that schools hundreds of kilometers apart in remote areas of western Kenya and Uganda are engaging in lively debates, quizzes and spelling competitions through Kisumu Public Library’s smartphone, laptop and video conferencing project. Few rural schools have internet connections, so the library researched ways of connecting to the internet through the mobile phone network (IFLA Public Libraries Section 2014).

9.5 Enhance scientific research, upgrade the technological capabilities of industrial sectors in all countries, in particular developing countries, including, by 2030, encouraging innovation and substantially increasing the number of research and development workers per 1 million people and public and private research and development spending.

Reports are good ways find out information. An Australian report released in 2014 found that hospitals, government departments, associations and other organisations involved in healthcare gain a \$5 AUD return for every dollar they invest in libraries (ALIA 2014).

11.4 Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage. About this target, we know that for example, in 2013 armed groups occupied Northern Mali and Timbuktu, a city famous for its cultural heritage and its vast amount of public and private

libraries with invaluable documentary heritage. To safeguard the manuscripts during the occupation, volunteers smuggled them into safety to Bamako with the help of international support. The manuscripts have since been kept in the capital and are undergoing restoration and digitisation work. Libraries have been at the forefront of evacuating and preserving the unique heritage of Mali (UNESCO 2014).

16.10 Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements. In Ukraine, protests in Kiev in 2014 around the Maidan put the National Parliamentary Library of Ukraine was at the midst of the clashes. The library opened its doors to those wounded during the clashes and people in need of some rest and a safe place.

The above examples show that it is possible to work together to create a national framework for libraries as engine of community development. The main message is that *libraries are engaged across multiple fields, and they provide portals to provide access to information in many different sectors – including development. The structures we are helping to build, and the skills and knowledge transfer we can bring to development projects, will be crucial to make it a reality.*

### **Making things happen**

As we learn about the importance of what we do, who is driving change and the contributions we can make, we confirm that libraries do more than just provide services in physical locations. We make providing access a reality by building data infrastructure, and then sharing it with our users. Data won't just get into the hands of users on its own, it needs to be made available, it needs to be structured so it can be found easily, and it needs to be linked so that it can be shared and re-used in ways that will help to save the world. How do libraries do this?

They can provide spaces, online and in buildings in the community, where dialogues about community development needs can take place and influence the success of initiatives. Our community is intrinsically related to where we work.

Libraries can be used as places of last-mile information delivery, where public access to ICTs can provide users with access to the information they need on a community level – such as access to government services. Additionally, train them in the skills they need to engage with development processes or contact relevant agencies.

Looking at the overall picture, we begin to see how libraries are moving to meet the changing needs of the communities related to digital information as well. We believe that governments, the private sector, civil society and international institutions should make an international commitment to ensure that everyone has access to, understands, and is able to use and share the information that is necessary to promote sustainable development.

Today's information professionals are responding to trends reflecting society changes. The IFLA Trend report is firmly grounded in society as a whole. Discussions are about what are the challenges and possible responses for libraries that come from these societal trends. This is vital

to empower librarians to move forward according to the reality of their libraries, work environments, users and society.

As librarians, we are all creating the library of the future every day. We need to continue working with community members and local organizations to develop sustainable libraries. Flexibility will serve us well as we must customize services according to needs of the groups we serve in academic, public, school or special libraries. We must continue promoting literacy in all forms used by people including digital, language or otherwise. The IFLA Trends Report is an excellent source that can help us tackle areas such as new technologies, online education, open access, data and privacy matters of our global information environment to continue developing today, the library of the future (IFLA 2014).

Looking at the big picture, the types of services I have shared with you today can definitely contribute to sustainable development. We ought to collaborate together to identify responses and ways of continuing providing services in the face of these societal trends. Being aware of the way these trends impact libraries and the profession is relevant for what we do. It is imperative then that we can integrate services and proposals reflecting these new changes. As per the examples presented above, partnerships can play a central role in assisting librarians to understand and integrate these new changes in its services and professional approach.

By strengthening our associations we solidify our librarianship links with one and another. IFLA advocates on behalf of libraries at the United Nations, WSIS and WIPO. Advocacy will continue to be on our agenda because we must continue to emphasize the importance of our profession, defend the right of access to information, intellectual freedom, and library services. The advocacy we do at worldwide forums is supported by the advocacy you do at your national level. We need you, and we need you strong.

The Building Strong Library Associations (BSLA) program plays a pivotal role in capacity building. Additionally, the materials provided support associations and librarians taking action in their country and region. These local efforts build support for libraries at the global level. Therefore, local activities are the backbone of IFLA's global efforts.

Some key points on which we can focus include working together with common goals, establish precise strategies, target decision makers and groups driving development of initiatives, programs and policies. Reaching out to them will benefit our profession, libraries, services and communities. Making ourselves available to share more about library services is beneficial to our libraries, communities and cities.

These examples shared with you today reflect vision, passion and strategy. These actions have raised the profile of libraries nationwide. In many cases, encouraging private foundations to devote funds to research libraries and users. These results are used to develop campaigns to support libraries. For instance, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Aspen Institute are some who have submitted research in collaboration with unions, libraries and organizations. This has been a complete game-changer and we are looking forward to more of that.

As we know, strong partnerships are formed by informed citizens. During the last decade non-governmental groups, charities and foundations have sprung up to promote access to information using effective strategies according to the regions where they operate. These organizations are successfully partnering with local, regional and international groups to find perfect combinations that allow meeting the changing needs of the regions in which they focus.

Besides working together, we must identify allies from different fields including non-profit organizations, NGOs and public and private agencies that support and complement our efforts. Developing these partnerships may take time, that is why it is imperative that we start now. There are opportunities for everyone to help. Together, we can do big things; we can save the world.

At the beginning of my talk I shared that this is a time to re-think and re-imagine the relationship between libraries, librarians, local and global organizations, and digital technologies. How to do it?

Being aware of the global information environment and changes reflecting technological trends and impacting development.

Strengthening associations to work together to advocate in high-level areas to continue paving the way for libraries to participate and contribute in these changes that are driving the economy, education, and social compass within countries.

Developing collaborative work to create policies, advance social good, and make decisions.

Working together under the banner 'every librarian, a promoter, an advocate'.

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