The contribution of the National Library of South Africa towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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Abstract:

The attainment of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals requires a concerted effort from government and other role-players in order to ensure that the Goals are achieved through a sustained, focused and coordinated approach. Like many other countries on a developmental trajectory, South Africa is plagued by poverty, high levels of illiteracy, unemployment and gender inequality, amongst other challenges. These are some of the seventeen areas that have been identified by the United Nations as being key to the attainment of sustainable development. As a national resource, the National Library of South Africa is tasked with the responsibility of preserving the cultural heritage of the people of South Africa and fostering social cohesion. It also runs a number of programmes that contribute directly or indirectly to the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals. As a result of these programmes, the NLSA contributes immensely to the education of young adults through provision of free access to ICT's, reading and research spaces and workshops aimed at preparing young people for the job market. This paper will profile the areas in which the National Library plays a role in various ways, such as providing relevant information that relates to some of the Goals, such as information on climate change to support researchers and providing health-related information, as well as information on how to access government services. An analysis of the nature of information requests by the public will be conducted to determine their information needs and how these relate to SDGs. A matrix that maps the contribution of the NLSA to some of the Sustainable Development Goals will be developed in order to identify specific SDG's that the NLSA has an impact on. The paper is intended to stimulate debate on how National Libraries should support government initiatives and programmes to contribute towards the achievement of SDGs.

Keywords: National Library of South Africa, Sustainable Development Goals

1. Introduction

The attainment of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs') requires a concerted effort from government and other role-players in order to ensure that the goals are achieved through a sustained, focused and coordinated approach. The National Library of South Africa (NLSA) is one of the entities of the Department of Arts and Culture that is intended to mirror the South African heritage in terms of the collections it builds through targeted purchases and as a Legal Deposit Library. The NLSA also plays a crucial role in promoting social cohesion. Social cohesion is defined by the South African Presidency as ''the extent to which a society is coherent, united and functional, providing an environment within which its citizens can flourish'' (www.thepresidency.gov.za/docs/pcsa/social/part1.pdf)

The NLSA was established in terms of the National Library of South Africa Act (Act 92 of 1998). In terms of the Act, the NLSA is mandated to ''build a comprehensive collection of material published in or about South Africa… thereby ensuring equitable access to the documentary heritage of the country'' As a fledgling democracy, South Africa faces a number of developmental challenges in the areas of education, health, housing, roads, water provision, energy and poverty alleviation. Government is acutely aware of these developmental imperatives and has put in place strategies to ensure that the challenges are addressed systematically.

The South African government's initiative in spearheading the *Cape Town Declaration* at the 2015 IFLA Conference held in Cape Town is evidence of the government's commitment to mobilizing other African countries to support their libraries as partners in development towards the African Union 2063 agenda. This initiative is driven by the South African Ministry of Arts & Culture, and is aimed at positioning Africa's libraries as strategic partners in contributing to the achievement of SDGs'. In terms of the declaration which was signed by several African countries, the Ministries responsible for Libraries committed themselves to ensuring that libraries are well-resourced to enable them to respond to modern day challenges and provide access to emerging technologies. The Ministers further committed to the establishment of a Pan African Library Organization that will provide a platform for networking and resource mobilization (www.ifla.org/node/9767)

The United Nations has identified five areas that are of critical importance for humanity and the planet. These areas are encapsulated in 17 SDGs' that the world's nations are supposed to focus on and achieve by 2030. These areas are People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership. Below is the role that the NLSA plays in the various areas in order to contribute towards accomplishing the SDGs':

People: In terms of its mandate, the NLSA is expected to ensure that all South Africans can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality. It is a strategic resource centre that is rich with heritage and knowledge sources that are made accessible to people from different socio-economic backgrounds, including previously marginalized communities. These resources can also be accessed remotely by users. This places the NLSA at the service of humanity, and ensures that communities have access to information so that they can enjoy a better quality of life and function effectively in a rapidly transforming society.

Planet: The NLSA responds to this imperative in order to contribute towards protecting the planet from degradation, including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change. Through collaboration with government departments, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) and the public library sector, the NLSA connects with various stake-holders in order to fulfil their information needs so that they can best serve their constituencies. Information leaflets from various government departments is currently being distributed to communities in order to encourage them to save energy and water, vote in the elections and participate in our democracy. Water and energy are two critical resources that South Africa lacks and needs to guard jealously.

Prosperity: The NLSA provides reading and research spaces for students and researchers respectively, to empower them through education and enable them to position themselves as future leaders in their own communities. A library is a runway on which our minds are allowed to escalate and fly into the heights of wonder. It is a space that is neither confined by rules nor governed by redundancy because there is always a new piece of information to learn. This engagement stimulates young minds and supports their learning initiatives, through which they can prosper. The NLSA makes this possible by providing the much needed information resources and space. The NLSA has a strong conviction that the common good of any given society can be served better when its members are intellectually adept.

Peace: The NLSA is a social cohesion space and a place where people come to learn, socialize and reflect. It is a place where all people are welcome to share initiatives, ideas for justice, inclusiveness and peace. South Africa's Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) continuously holds exhibitions during election times and conducts voter education campaigns on the NLSA's premises. This joint initiative with the NLSA is aimed at ensuring peaceful elections and participation of South African citizens in democratic processes, in order to ensure stability and peaceful co-existence amongst members of the South African society.

Partnership: The NLSA recognizes the importance of partnerships and therefore enters into collaborative agreements with different stake-holders. This is intended to enhance the NLSA's capacity to deliver targeted services and leverage the expertise and resources of entities that we partner with. Partnerships also enable the NLSA to make connections and cooperate with like-minded organizations in the non-profit, business and governmental sectors. These partnerships cut across a multiplicity of stake holders including youth organizations, government entities and publishers associations, amongst others.

2.   Areas in which the National Library of South Africa supports Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs')

A new set of global goals to advance the world's nations was adopted by the United Nations (UN) in September 2015. As a member of the UN, South Africa is bound to work towards the achievement of these goals. SDGs' cover a variety of spheres aimed at providing educational opportunities and skills, ending poverty, protecting the environment and ensuring prosperity. They have become a blue-print for the development of the entire planet. These goals are set to be achieved in the next 30 years. The SDGs' were created through the largest consultation programme that the UN had ever undertaken. The consultation process included engagements with ordinary citizens, civil society organizations, the private sector, academia and local and regional governments (www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals).

The NLSA plays a critical role in advancing the South African society through its programmes. It is instrumental in fostering development in a number of areas by providing services and relevant information in support of the SDGs'. Below are the goals, targets within goals and the role that the NLSA plays in each one of them.

2.1. Goal 1: Poverty alleviation

One of the biggest challenges facing South Africa is endemic poverty which is exacerbated by high levels of unemployment and illiteracy. Consequently, a staggering 26.7% of the South African population is unemployed in the three months to March 2016. This is slightly higher than the 24.5% rate that was reported in the previous quarter. The high levels of unemployment and poverty are a result of a sluggish growth in the economy which has not grown by any significant margin in the last five years. Estimates put the growth at only 2.1% in 2015 (www.tradingeconomics.com/south-africa/unemployment-rate)

In order to help government fight the scourge of poverty, the NLSA encourages young entrepreneurs to establish their own businesses and not only look for

dwindling job opportunities in the formal sector. Budding entrepreneurs are encouraged to use the Public Library System and to take advantage of free Internet, e-mail facilities and library spaces to grow their businesses. Scores of young entrepreneurs make use of library facilities to run their businesses, service clients via e-mail and use library spaces as their offices. Scores of entrepreneurs use Internet facilities to check government tenders, process orders and respond to customer enquiries. Without this support, many of the fledgling businesses that are run by young people would not survive as they would not afford the cost of office rental and Internet facilities in the formal business sector. The Africa Progress Panel made of eminent persons monitors progress in Africa in terms of achievement of the SDGs'. The panel makes the following observation:

''Africa can go to zero on extreme poverty and embark upon a transformative human development pathway. But it is time for Africa's leaders to bring the poorest and the most marginalized sections of society from the periphery to the centre of policy design'' (Africa Progress Panel, 2015:11).

2.3. Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all, at all ages

Along health care lines, the NLSA enables women from vulnerable groups to get information on health-care, pregnancy and childbirth, and to empower women to learn how to care for their babies and older children. This makes it possible to make rapid, significant progress in reducing child mortality and improving the health of mothers and children through the provision of health information. This makes the Library a bridge for empowering all women and girl-children to get the best education and training.

2.4. Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote life-long learning opportunities

The South African government recognizes the importance of education as a way out of poverty and ignorance. This imperative is included in chapter twelve (12) of South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP), entitled Vision 2030: Our future, our plan. The NDP makes reference to the improvement of education, training and innovation as key national priorities (Vision 2030: Our future, our plan, 2015: 201). The provision of educational support is one of the critical areas in which the NLSA plays a role in the South African society. This support is two-fold and involves the provision of study material to high school learners and University students. On any given day, scores of learners, students and researchers make use of the library's study and research spaces in pursuit of their educational endeavours. On average, the two NLSA campuses in Pretoria and Cape Town collectively service 30 000 users on a monthly basis. Over and above the provision of study material and reading spaces, the NLSA provides free Internet access in the two campuses. This is one of the

reasons why scores of learners and students flock to the NLSA campuses to take advantage of free Internet facilities that are sponsored by the NLSA's partners.

Vision 2030: Our future, our plan (2015: 23) further places emphasis on Early Childhood Development as a national priority. The plan provides for dedicated resources to be made available to ensure that children receive the necessary emotional, cognitive and physical development stimulation and are taken good care of from an early age. In a quest to improve early childhood development and encourage the development of a reading habit amongst South Africa's children, the NLSA's Outreach Programme, Centre for the Book works with school-children through their reading programme. Scores of learners are bused into the Centre for the Book for story-telling sessions to enthuse them and get them interested in reading at an early stage in their lives. A set of games offered by Public Libraries that are recipients of the Mzansi Libraries Online Project managed by the NLSA, are not only meant for entertainment purposes, but are hugely educational. One of these games is chess, which is renowned for developing memory concentration, logical thinking and the ability to predict and foresee consequences of action. These skills are critical for young kids to learn in their formative stages so that they can function effectively as members of society.

Target 4.4: Sustainably increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills

IFLA contends that increased access to information and knowledge, under-pinned by universal literacy is an essential pillar of sustainable development (Bradley, 2015: 5).The NLSA responds to Target 4.4 by offering a number of job opportunities. In partnership with the private sector, the NLSA provides training to cyber-cadets and train-the-trainer courses in computer skills and trouble-shooting. Cyber-cadets are located within the Mzansi Libraries Online Project (MLO) and are unemployed young people with a keen interest in ICT. MLO is generously funded by the Global Libraries Programme of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The cyber-cadets pass on their ICT skills to community members and help public library staff with basic trouble-shooting and ICT support. A stipend is paid to the cyber-cadets so that they earn an income. Very often, these cyber-cadets are offered jobs in the formal ICT sector, thus gaining permanent employment and surviving the cycle of poverty that they were once trapped in. The NLSA has agreements with various youth formations and supports their activities both financially and in kind, in order to enhance their sustainability and improve their prospects of success. One case in point is the collaboration with Agape Youth Movement. The NLSA was involved in publishing their book through the publishing grant. The youth formation is also allowed access to the NLSA's facilities at no cost when they host their events. Also, final year students pursuing Library & Information Studies are given internship placement opportunities to integrate theory into practice and get skills that enhance their chances of getting employment upon completion of their studies. This is a working relationship that the NLSA has with Library Schools and demonstrates the role that the NLSA plays in ensuring that the country has a cadre of well-trained LIS professionals.

2.5. Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

By 2030, the UN hopes to have eliminated all discrimination, violence and all harmful practices against women and girl-children, such as forced marriages and female genital mutilations (www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals). The NLSA participates in the annual *Take a girl-child to work* programme. This is an initiative introduced by one of South Africa's cell phone companies in 2003. The purpose of this programme is to provide girl-children with real-life platforms in order to deepen their thinking and aspirations about their roles in society, and to reflect on which careers they would want to follow upon finishing their high school programme. This exposure to the world of work provides an opportunity to young girls to shadow a staff member in order to learn about what they do on a daily basis and introduce them to the world of work that they would be entering in the near future. This is an empowering initiative for girl-children who are usually discriminated against. They are given an opportunity to be exposed to the world of work and to make informed career decisions later on in their lives.

Women are still outnumbered by men in the most prestigious positions. In order to connect the dots, these authors had to look backward not forward to understand why this goal, more especially 5.5 is still a concern. The NLSA is aware of the gender inequality that has created barriers to women and girls in South Africa. It is very clear that the full potential of women is not yet realised. Discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes still prevail. Women who adopt masculine styles of leadership, that is those who are directive and assertive, tend to be disliked and their ability to wield influence can be undermined. Women also risk not getting a job or a promotion when they are too direct (Tepper *et al*, 1993: 70). The external social, cultural, political and economic barriers that continue to make it hard for many women to achieve full equality make it difficult for them to connect and collaborate within their communities.

Human dignity cannot be achieved and a sustainable development will not be possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities. Women and girls must enjoy equal access to quality education, economic resources and political participation as well as equal opportunities with men and boys for employment, leadership and decision-making at all levels. The NLSA needs to reach out to those centres that are meant for abused women and children. In this way, it will contribute significantly towards the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls, including through the engagement of men and boys. (http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs/sdg-5-gender-equality#sthash.lJw97EOW.dpuf). If this goal can be achieved in South Africa, the gender landscape will transform significantly.

2. 6. Decent work and economic growth

One of the clauses of this goal makes reference to the need to formalize and grow micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises. This includes access to financial services. The SDGs' aim to encourage sustained economic growth by achieving higher levels of productivity and through technological innovation. Promoting policies that encourage entrepreneurship and job creation are key to this, as are effective measures to eradicate forced labour and slavery. The goal is to achieve full and productive employment, and decent work, for all women and men. In this regard, the NLSA through the network of public libraries that it supports, provides working space for new small businesses that cannot afford to rent office space in mainstream rental companies. This support takes the form of free Internet and e-mail facilities in public libraries that entrepreneurs can take advantage of to service their customers. Furthermore, the NLSA is in the process of setting up an innovative / maker-space to be used by young people, in order to support their creativity and innovation. This will enable them to experiment with technology with a view to commercializing their innovation and ideas. This would make it possible for them to generate revenue through start-up companies that may be created through their innovative ideas.

2.7. Goal 11.4: Strengthen efforts to protect and safe-guard the world's cultural heritage.

Over and above safeguarding the South African cultural heritage, the NLSA also plays a role in protecting and preserving Africa's cultural heritage. As a member of the African Union, the world expects a lot from South Africa. The NLSA was involved in the restoration of manuscripts in Timbuktu (Mali), thus playing a strategic role in the African Continent. This is as a result of specialised expertise that the NLSA has in the conservation, preservation and restoration of materials. The project involved training of the Malian counterparts in preservation and restoration of rare collections. The NLSA staff travelled to Mali as a result of the agreement entered into by the government of South Africa and the government of Mali. The NLSA has also been appointed as an official preservation site for Anglo-phone Africa. In terms of the role played in English-speaking African countries, the NLSA is expected to provide leadership in the training of staff in libraries, museums and other institutions in the preservation of materials.

In February 2015, the NLSA in partnership with the IFLA Office for Africa and the Mount Kenya University, presented a two-day Preservation and Conservation Workshop for participants from Anglo-phone countries. Topics covered included disaster planning and recovery, de-acidification treatment and preservation policy development. This initiative is part of the NLSA' support to English-speaking African countries, in line with South Africa's role in the South African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU).

2.8. Goal 16: Peace & Justice

Target 16.10: Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms

The NLSA responds to goal 16.10 by offering a dedicated Public Engagement Programme known as Information Access. This programme is aimed at promoting access to information in the broader sense, including government-related information. The South African government has embarked on a drive to roll out e-government initiatives in order to make it easy for the public to access and interact with government departments. The government encourages its citizens to use technology to access its services as this is faster, more convenient and hassle free. Citizens can download application forms for jobs, unemployment benefits and make applications for identity documents, passports and housing services, amongst others (NLSA Annual Report 2014/2015:21).

3. Future plans to address other SDGs' that the NLSA does not currently support

There is a need for the NLSA to develop new programmes that will deliberately support some of the SDGs' that are not covered by the current programme offerings. This will enhance the role of the NLSA and make it an even more competent strategic partner in the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals and align it strategically to the imperatives of South Africa's National Development Plan. Since some of the areas covered by SDGs' do not directly fall within the ambit of the library in general, and the NLSA in particular, the NLSA can only support government and private sector initiatives through the provision of information to enhance the activities that the entities undertake. For instance, the NLSA can provide information resources to researchers working within the spaces of energy conservation, climate change and other specialist fields identified within the SDGs'.

4. Challenges encountered by the NLSA in the execution of its mandate

As an entity of the Department of Arts & Culture, the NLSA encounters a number of challenges in executing its mandate of promoting social cohesion and protecting the literary heritage of South Africa. In the execution of its mandate, the NLSA has to grapple with the challenges outlined hereafter:

- The funding for Core Programmes through what the Department of Arts & Culture (DAC) refers to as a Conditional Grant, offers no guarantee for future sustainability of the Programmes. Any changes in the political leadership of the DAC could negatively affect the Conditional Grant budget, as this hinges on the political will of the Department's leadership. Mainstreaming of the

Conditional Grant would ensure some continuity and sustainability. However, the Department of Arts & Culture does not seem to favour this route.

- The Department of Arts & Culture is in competition for funding with other government departments that are generally perceived as more critical for service delivery and nation-building, namely education, housing and health. A strong fundraising drive is in place at the NLSA in order to utilize other revenue streams to significantly bolster the entity's coffers.

5. Conclusion

This paper sought to demonstrate the strategic role that the NLSA plays in helping the South African government to achieve the imperatives of Sustainable Development Goals as enshrined in the UN resolution and expressed in South Africa's 2030 National Development Plan. This puts South Africa in a developmental trajectory and helps government navigate through the maze of challenges that it is confronted with. The challenges of development are indeed huge but surmountable. They require a concerted effort from all state entities, the private sector and non-governmental organizations that operate in different spaces. It is therefore important to tweak the NLSA's programmes and activities to ensure that they contribute meaningfully to the attainment of SDGs' and the strategic imperatives outlined in the National Development Plan. Africa Progress Panel which monitors the achievement of SDG's in Africa, further argues that ''the SDGs' will only succeed if they succeed in Africa – where a rapidly growing population most needs the change that the agenda describes'' (Africa Progress Panel, 2015:1). It remains to be seen whether all the African countries will be equally committed and put in sufficient effort, energy and resources in order to achieve the set targets by 2030 as projected.

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