

Role of Libraries in Strengthening Tolerant and Inclusive Societies

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Abstract :

Libraries around the world have always played active roles to improve the quality of lives of the people. Some are more successful than others due to their particular local conditions, whether it is availability of funds, culture or history. With the implementation of the United Nation's (UN) Sustainable Development Goals Programme (SDGs) which runs from 2016-2030, all governments are working hard towards achieving the goals that have been agreed by member countries.

Libraries certainly have critical roles to play in many, if not all of the SDG goals. Examples that are more visible include how libraries help to improve goal 4 in raising the quality of education by enabling the skills of reading in young children, and how libraries help in bringing about gender equality in goal 5 by creating safe places for girls and boys to learn in common spaces and to live together harmoniously. Even in goals that do not seem to sit so clearly with libraries such as goal 9 on innovation and infrastructure, the ability of libraries to provide up-to-date information and data to support projects and programmes to strengthen innovation cultures and infrastructure outcomes allow libraries to play a role that no other institution can play so easily due to the ready access to information and librarians' information search skills. Librarians are also trained in doing excellent secondary research and are able to extract good data and stories from across communities, countries and regions to provide perspectives which cannot be easily obtained without these skills.

In end-2016, IFLA initiated a new programme called the International Advocacy Programme (IAP) that trains librarians on skills to step up advocacy efforts nationally to support their governments in achieving the UN SDGs. A group of core trainers were trained in the programme. They subsequently conducted 4 separate workshops in IFLA's 4 regions, ie Asia-Oceania, Africa, Latin America and Europe. About 10 countries were invited to attend the workshops in each region. After the workshops, they returned to their countries to begin the journey of promoting awareness of the UN SDGs and in forming a delegation of influential librarians to meet policy makers to state their cause. This is so that librarians and libraries are seen as partners of the government in working towards achieving the UN SDGs.

This paper shares the results of the efforts made by a select number of participants, and the results of what they did in their respective countries. When libraries are seen as partners in helping the government to achieve the UN SDGs, hopefully libraries will receive greater support in terms of resources and expertise in improving libraries to enhance people's lives, and to strengthen the fabric and cohesiveness of societies, bringing about global peace and prosperity.

Keywords : United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, IFLA International Advocacy Programme, tolerant and inclusive societies, library advocacy

Background

Libraries have always played the role to provide quality information and to promote literacy and life-long learning to improve lives. The United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Plan lays the roadmap for countries to improve on 17 areas (called goals) over the next 15 years, from 2016 to 2030. This is an ambitious plan that urges countries and governments to make clear improvements to the quality of life of people with specific targets tied to each of the 17 UN 2030 SDGs.

If countries are able to make concrete progress and improvements to areas such as eliminating poverty and reducing inequality, the world will definitely be more able to strengthen tolerant and inclusive societies.

UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals

The UN 2030 SDGs comprise 17 goals and 179 targets. The 17 goals are :

- No poverty (Goal 1)
- Zero hunger (Goal 2)
- Good health and well-being (Goal 3)
- Quality education (Goal 4)
- Gender equality (Goal 5)
- Clean water and sanitation (Goal 6)
- Affordable and clean energy (Goal 7)
- Decent work and economic growth (Goal 8)
- Industry innovation and infrastructure (Goal 9)
- Reduced inequalities (Goal 10)
- Sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11)
- Responsible consumption and production (Goal 12)
- Climate action (Goal 13)
- Life below water (Goal 14)
- Life on land (Goal 15)
- Peace, justice and strong institutions (Goal 16)
- Partnerships for the goals (Goal 17)

Libraries can and have always played a role in supporting policy makers in bringing about a more literate, knowledgeable and well-informed society to achieve the above goals.

In 2016, IFLA produced a very good handout on how libraries can drive progress across the entire UN 20230 agenda. This summarises the ways libraries can contribute towards each of the 17 goals.

As an example, on goal 1 to end poverty in all its forms everywhere, libraries support this goal by providing

- public access to information and resources that give people opportunities to improve their lives,
- training in new skills needed for education and employment,
- information to support decision-making by governments, civil societies and businesses to combat poverty.

Another example, on goal 2 to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture, libraries support this goal by providing

- agricultural research and data on how to make crops more productive and sustainable,
- public access for farmers to physical and online resources like local market prices, weather reports and new farming equipment.

With good data and easy access to resources and information, libraries can support all the 17 UN 2030 goals in varying ways. It is therefore important for libraries to step up advocacy efforts to show their value to their communities and policy makers by showing the role libraries play in helping countries to achieve the UN 2030 goals.

IFLA's International Advocacy Programme

In 2016, in order for libraries to make their voices heard in a more impactful way, IFLA launched an extensive training programme to help librarians learn how to advocate to their policy makers to include libraries in their national development plans. This was the beginning of the two-year International Advocacy Programme (IAP).

A pool of some 20 IAP trainers from all over the world were trained as IAP trainers, and training workshops were conducted in the 4 regions of Asia-Oceania, Africa and the Middle East, Latin America and Europe.

The training for trainers was held in the IFLA Headquarters in Oct 2016, and trainers were then deployed to conduct the training in the four regions from Nov to Dec 2016.

IAP Training Programme

The IAP training programme comprises 5 modules and was conducted over 2.5 days, with small group discussions and sharing of experiences. The first module covers work done by IFLA in advocating for libraries to be included in the UN 2030 plan. Module two covers details of the UN 2030 plan and role of libraries in the UN plan, as it is important that participants know the plan well in order to prepare for their advocacy work when they return home.

Module 3 introduced the 7 steps of the advocacy planning cycle which requires participants to first understand the meaning of “advocacy” and then learn the steps in developing an advocacy plan. Module 4 applies the steps covered in module 3 and uses the process to develop an advocacy plan to approach policy makers in the country to help them see the role and value of libraries in achieving the UN2030 goals and targets.

The last module was designed to enable the participants to develop a roadmap for them to take actions soon after their return back home. From past experiences, IFLA learnt that after a training programme, when participants return to their home countries, they might not know how to take the first steps to apply what they had learnt. The 2016 IAP training programme included a segment to show participants the steps they could take to begin the advocacy journey, and included deadlines for actions.

After the training

During this period, IFLA also recruited a staff member to help in regular communications, in following-up with participants on their progress, and to offer help where necessary. This proved to be very helpful, as participants are constantly in touch with IFLA after the training, and they are aware that IFLA is very keen and supportive of their actions.

Actions taken after the training

The rest of this paper will report on the actions taken by participating countries from November 2016 to May 2017, and the results that had been reported back to IFLA.

Australia

Australia started very early on the advocacy work on the UN 2030 Agenda, even before IFLA launched its IAP programme. In May 2015, the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) attended several meetings with its Federal Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to explain the potential of libraries to assist in delivering the draft agenda. Since then, the discussions have broadened to three roles : libraries supporting the freedom of access to information outcomes, libraries providing examples of success and libraries helping to communicate the 2030 Agenda to the general public. In 2017, ALIA organised two sessions to create greater awareness of the 2030 Agenda, one for the library profession and the other for other professions.



Bahrain

In April 2017, a workshop was organised for the Bahrain Library Association to create awareness of the UN 2030 Agenda. An advocacy plan was developed and will be implemented.



Bhutan

Participants of Bhutan met with the National Library and Archives management and staff on 22 November 2016 and updated them on the UN 2030 Agenda. The first ever library symposium was held in March 2017. A presentation on the role of libraries in the UN 2030 Agenda was delivered to 70 delegates from all over Bhutan. The presentation was followed by group discussions on how the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) relate to the Gross National Happiness Index in the context of Bhutan to help participants see the role of libraries in the fulfilment of national goals and objectives.



Participants also worked in groups to map out their library activities with the SDGs to show how they help achieve the SDGs.

Cambodia

Participants met with the President and management team of the Cambodian Library Association (CLA) to brief them on the UN 2030 Agenda and discuss the role of libraries. A workshop on the role of libraries in SDGs was organised on 14 January 2017. 49 participants from 33 organisations attended this workshop. Two local media reported on the event, highlighting the important role of libraries in the UN 2030 Agenda. IAP participants also met with the UN Resident Coordinator in Phnom Penh to discuss partnership between the CLA and UN on promoting the role of libraries in the UN 2030 Agenda. After the meeting, the UN Resident Coordinator agreed to support 20 librarians to be trained in advocacy for the UN 2030 Agenda.



China

The IAP participant updated the President and Secretary-General of the Library Society of China on the IAP training and actions to be taken after the training. By mid-November, the UN 2030 Agenda handout was translated into Chinese and shared with the members of the Library Society of China. The participant also met with the policy makers and prepared the advocacy for the Law of Public Culture Service Protection on 18 November 2016. In December 2016, the Law was passed by the National People's Congress and this law was put into force since 1 March 2017. This is the first national law about public libraries which stipulates that the government has the responsibility to establish a nation-wide library system for its people.

On 1 April 2017, a draft on regulations for promoting national reading was issued by the Legislative Affairs Office of State Council for public comment. On 17 April 2017, a draft of the Public Library Law was passed in the executive meeting of the State Council and this will be submitted to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress for deliberation. The draft stipulates that the government is responsible for the promotion of the development of public libraries and e-resources, and the integration of digital and physical services.



Indonesia

Participants translated the IFLA UN 2030 Agenda handout into Indonesian and shared this at various forums and workshops, reaching 920 librarians and heads of libraries. At the “National Coordination Meeting in Indonesia” on 21 March 2017, attended by 600 heads of public libraries and librarians, it was shared that the Ministry of Education and Culture had agreed to support the important roles that libraries play, especially in promoting the development of school libraries.



Iraq

The IAP participant presented the UN 2030 agenda to a seminar on 24 March 2017, and discussed steps to promote and raise awareness of this in Iraqi libraries.



Jordan

In March and April 2017, the IAP participant shared with the Jordan Library and Information Association and at the Irbid National University's Scientific Week on UN 2030 Agenda and are actively discussing how libraries, especially the Abdul Hameed Shoman Public Library contribute to the UN agenda.

Lao PDR

IAP participants reported to the Vientiane Public Library (VPL) and management on the learnings of the UN Agenda and advocacy workshop. Another presentation was made at the 10th Anniversary Ceremony of the VPL in November 2016.

Lebanon

On 28 March 2017, the IAP participant presented the UN 2030 Agenda at the Lebanese Library Association (LLA) Board meeting and discussed follow-up actions. On 4 May 2017, the LLA organised an event to introduce the UN Agenda to its members, and discussed the development of the advocacy plan. It was suggested that a national plan for libraries be drafted to be presented to the relevant government ministries.



Myanmar

The IFLA UN 2030 Agenda handout was translated into Myanmar language and distributed to the library community and published online for easy access. An update was given to the Myanmar Library Association Executive Committee on 4 November 2016. Two training sessions were held for 48 public librarians on 5 and 19 December 2016. Three other sharing sessions were held in December 2016 and January 2017.



Nepal

IAP participants briefed the Executive Committee of the Nepal Library Association on 21 November 2016 and organised discussions and awareness sessions on 22 November 2016, 21 January and 25 February 2017. The Secretary from the Ministry of Finance was the keynote speaker at the awareness event.

Oman

A meeting with the UN 2030 Agenda was held with the Oman Library Association on 29 March 2017 attended by General Assembly members. Awareness sessions were planned to reach out to more members.



Papua New Guinea

A presentation on the UN 2030 Agenda was given to the National Library and National Archives of Papua New Guinea on 10 November 2016. Meetings were also held with the Department of Education and Department of the Prime Minister to begin advocacy work on the SDGs.

Philippines

The IAP participant presented the UN 2030 Agenda to 800 delegates at the Philippine Librarians Association, Inc.'s Annual Congress on 22 November 2016. This was attended by representatives from the National Commission for Culture and the Arts. Presentations were made to two other conferences on 14 March and 19 April 2017. A Strategic Planning meeting was held on 21-22 January 2017 to discuss action plans relating to the UN Agenda.



Qatar

A presentation was made to 230 library and information professionals from Qatar on 23 March 2017. The IFLA handout was translated into Arabic and distributed to participants.

Samoa

IAP participants gave a talk on the UN 2030 Agenda and the role of libraries to 60 students attending the training course at the School for Library Assistants.

Singapore

Two sharing sessions were held on 25 January and 30 March 2017. A blog on the UN 2030 Agenda was published in the Library Association of Singapore's (LAS) e-bulletin. The IFLA handout on the UN 2030 Agenda was translated into Malay and Tamil and published on the IFLA website on 10 April 2017. The handout was distributed to over 100 members of the LAS attending the Annual General Meeting on 13 May 2017.

United Arab Emirates

Participants have contacted key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education to arrange a discussion on the UN 2030 Agenda.

Vietnam

The IFLA handout was translated into Vietnamese and given out to over 300 delegates at the National Meeting of the Vietnam Library Association (VLA) on 25 November 2016. A presentation on the UN 2030 Agenda was made at this meeting. Action plans relating to the UN Agenda were included in the VLA's Agenda for 2016-2021. Participants met with policy makers at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism on 18 January 2017. A national workshop on the role of libraries in the UN Agenda will be held in October 2017.



Observations

Impact of training course

The training course has been effective in terms of delivering the message of libraries playing an important and critical role in helping governments and countries achieve the UN 2030 goals and targets, that all librarians play an important role to advocate and to meet policy makers to impress them on this, and showing participants the way to plan an effective advocacy plan. The course included role plays and elevator speeches to pitch the message to policy makers. The training course did not end there. It required participants to make a plan to create awareness of the message when they return home to their countries, and to make an effort to speak with their policy makers on the role of libraries in helping the country achieve the UN 2030 goals.

Content of the training course

This training programme took the approach of fine-tuning the content of the training courseware after each of the 5 regional workshops. During the first workshop which was held in Singapore, we found that the first version of the advocacy plan template was a little hard to use, and trainers proposed changes to the template which resulted in an easier version which was used in the subsequent training programmes. The courseware was also customised for each region, and this made the content more relevant to the regions.

Lessons learnt about the training methodology

The approach of improving the courseware after each run is very effective as any challenges faced by participants in the earlier programmes would be reduced in subsequent ones. This is made possible due to the ease with which the web enabled this conversation and fine-tuning process to take place. As the course for each region is conducted by trainers from the region, it was easier to meet the needs of a multicultural environment. The training in Singapore for the Asia-Oceania region was trained by me from Singapore, one trainer from India and one from Lebanon.

Sustainability of on-going resources required to continue with the course

As the training programme trained the trainers, one of the follow-up actions by the participants is for them to train their own librarians back home when they return. IFLA would not need to train librarians from the same country for the same programme. When there is a need to train more librarians in the other countries not covered in these 5 training programmes, the same IFLA trainers could possibly conduct the training programme. Trainers from the different regions could also help each other where there is a need.

Training outcomes

In reviewing the objective of the IAP and the outcomes achieved so far, one significant observation is that many of the participants of the IAP had taken brave and concrete steps to not only raise awareness on the role of the libraries in the UN 2030 Agenda, more importantly, a significant number had reached out to and met with policy makers in their countries. This is a big achievement for IFLA as many librarians may not have the skill nor thinking that it is important to be advocating to policy makers. For IFLA to take the lead to train librarians and to open their minds to this possibility is a great step.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, libraries have always played roles that helped governments achieve the UN 2030 goals such as reducing poverty, increasing literacy and reducing inequality. When citizens are able to read and are able to find information to help them in their studies, work or hobbies, they are more able to understand their rights and assert their ability to achieve, whether in schools, at work or at home.

Armed with literacy and other skills that come more easily with literacy skills, citizens will also be more likely to be open, curious, interested in other people's culture and lives, and more tolerant. This creates better environments for more inter-cultural exchanges, leading to a higher chance of achieving tolerant and inclusive societies, and global peace and prosperity.

Another observation is that when librarians are equipped with skills on how to develop an advocacy plan, and how to do an elevator speech, they are more confident of pushing their advocacy plans forward to key stakeholders. Doing more of this worldwide will have very good long term implications for libraries and librarians. Librarians will be more vocal and more assertive and they will be armed with skills that help them make a stronger case.

It takes time for all these skills to be acquired, practised and perfected. Starting the journey now with librarians worldwide using the UN 2030 Agenda as a tool is perfect, as the IFLA UN Agenda handout shows all the possible things that libraries do to help governments achieve the UN SDGs. Librarians can make use of the ideas shared to strengthen their case to their governments which we are already seeing from the reports coming back to IFLA on the follow-up actions taken by IAP participants.

In terms of the number of new librarians reached after the IAP regional workshops, from the reports from the Asia-Oceania region, 2,646 librarians were briefed or trained in the UN Agenda and advocacy tools following the IAP training. This does not include countries which did not provide numbers reached, such as Australia and China where conferences would usually be attended by a very large number of librarians. This is an excellent start.

Conclusion

As the Chinese saying from Laozi goes, a thousand-mile journey starts with a single step. IFLA has taken the first step to spread the message that learning and carrying out advocacy work at local and national levels is critical and very important librarian's work, and this applies to every librarian, not just the library management. Through the work with national library associations, IFLA was able to reach many more librarians as national library associations have a much wider reach than any single library.

The momentum is started and it is important to keep the momentum going so that efforts put in so far will result in greater visibility of libraries, more resources channeled to library development and more importantly, libraries playing an active and effective role in building tolerant and inclusive societies.

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