

National information and library policies in support of the UN Sustainable Development Goals: Situation in Switzerland

Josephine Siegrist

Commission Biblio2030, Bibliosuisse (Swiss National Library Association), Aarau, Switzerland

joe.siegrist@sohoconsult.ch



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Abstract:

Switzerland has no federal legislation for libraries (public libraries are under the authority of communities): we have no contribution to make on national policies, as they do not exist. In fact, in Switzerland we have to fight to make the government accept libraries as partners for their work on the UN SDGs. Therefore Bibliosuisse (the National Swiss Library Association) has started a working group 'Biblio2030' that informs, teaches and coaches libraries on their role in the SDG work (not only in the field of free access to information).

What we are doing:

- 1. Information: workshops for library staff using available material.*
- 2. Contribution of the libraries: we are reflecting on the 'normal offer' of libraries, but now in the context of the SDGs, and sharing best-practice examples. We will create new programs in a Biblio2030 context. The aim of the different workshops is to raise awareness that libraries (through their work) are still involved in achieving the SDGs.*
- 3. Campaigning for the work of libraries: networking in society, and policy. Developing different working tools.*

We see this work as a chance for Libraries to put their local activities into a global context and to profile themselves as advocates for sustainability.

Keywords: Information, contribution, campaigning, Bibliosuisse, Switzerland

We are pleased to share our experiences and show you how the national library association Bibliosuisse is working with the UN SDGs.

We see this work as a chance for libraries to put their local activities into a global context and to profile themselves as advocates of sustainability.

Special situation in Switzerland

Switzerland is a strong federal state and most political decisions are made at the local level. Three political levels share power in Switzerland: the Confederation, the 26 cantons and over 2,250 communes. The cantons and communes have authority over a wide range of matters (e.g. schools, hospitals, tax and policing) and a great deal of autonomy. The federal government only takes on tasks that the cantons and communes cannot manage alone. That's one reason we have no federal legislation for libraries in Switzerland (e.g. public libraries are managed by local authorities) and we can make no contribution in national policy (because it doesn't exist).

In fact, in Switzerland we have to struggle to make the government accept libraries as partners for their work on the UN SDGs. There is a long way to go: e.g. there was no comment about culture or libraries in Switzerland's last official UN report. We will have to make some efforts to get included in the next one!

- *A little story: Participating in the annual National Sustainability Forum on the theme of sustainable consumption and production, I was asked about the interest of participation of libraries in the event (and the theme). A lot of people have been astonished about my answer: Libraries have a lot of experience with sustainable consumption. Libraries use books/media more than once, they share and conserve them - libraries have established careful handling of their resources for centuries (SDG 12)!*

Switzerland is multilingual, we have four official languages (German, French, Italian and Romansh). Federalism is what allows the different aspects of Switzerland with its four national languages to coexist. This operational experience leads to a deeper understanding of the importance of the languages (and cultures) for participation and integration in society, and it is necessary because more than 30% of the inhabitants do not have a Swiss passport and most of them speak a language other than an official one – so it is normal that not everybody who lives and works in Switzerland is fluent in German, French or Italian.

Libraries alone are doing a lot for learning languages and to know more about different cultures. They have a pioneering task in the integration of immigrants (SDG 4, SDG 5, SDG 8, SDG 10, SDG 16).

- A wide range of books/media in different languages are available (German, French, Italian, English, Spanish, Portuguese, Serbian, Croatian, Turkish, Tamil, Arabic, Chinese, Albanian, etc.)
- A lot of programs for children and parents/grandparents in different languages take place daily. (Special programs of public libraries: “Erzähl mir eine Geschichte” / “Tell Me a Story” – Family Literacy.) This is a program for families to encourage language and literacy development. Parents are the best supporters of their children's language development.

Nevertheless this work is often not known about and not seen as a substantial contribution to sustainable development. Therefore Bibliosuisse (the National Swiss Library Association) has started a working group ‘Biblio2030’ that informs, teaches and coaches libraries on their role in the SDG work (not only in the field of free access to information, SDG 16) and to develop an advocacy program for libraries.

What Bibliosuisse is doing:

1. Providing information about the SDGs and the role and engagement of libraries.

The motto is: Libraries are active players on the way to achieve the UN SDGs by 2030 and therefore the perfect partner for other political and social institutions which are active in this field. But the first step is to establish much greater awareness among librarians of the value of the work of libraries, and ensure that librarians are proud of the work they are doing. Second, librarians don't speak a lot about their work and still less about their successes! Thirdly, librarians should know the SDGs and be able to identify the link between their own work and the SDGs.

For example Switzerland is quite wealthy with a well-developed infrastructure. In Switzerland free access to information and knowledge is not in danger of repression or censorship. Technological development is well implemented. But not everyone has in fact free access in this highly-developed digital knowledge society. In Switzerland, to be poor means primarily not to be able to participate in this well-developed society.

Libraries guarantee free access to the Internet for all. They provide central tasks in creating competence to deal with the flood of information. For this reason libraries are platforms of knowledge and places of open discussion/discourse.

Libraries have undertaken and invested a lot to achieve these objectives. So today the role of libraries is multi-variable:

- To be a place with no compulsion to buy and easy access (low-threshold access)
- Wide range of offers/programs which help social integration
- Top infrastructure (free WLAN, workstations and spaces, databases, publications, etc.)
- Digital/non-digital content (free access for everyone)
- Information literacy ('the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning' (Def. American Library Association, 2016))

We are now implementing these tasks by providing:

- Information at different levels: articles, website, lectures.
- Workshops for library staff – (we held the first Workshop at the General Assembly of Bibliosuisse this year in May, with more than 100 participants; and two workshops will follow this year and more in 2020).
- Use of available material (Monâne, Bookmarks, leaflets, checklists, etc.).

2. Contribution of the libraries

The second step is to examine the ‘normal (and special) offer’ of libraries, but now in the context of the SDGs, and share best-practice examples. Now it is important to involve as many libraries as possible and to build up a sense of belonging together and create new forms of collaborations. In this stage the cooperation with external partners is important, too.

Some examples:

- “Tablet Heroes”: a community-based project between teens and seniors to learn more about the use of smartphones, tablets and e-readers. (SDG 4, SDG 10, SDG 11)
- Reading monitoring between seniors and children, who are starting reading. (SDG 10, SDG 11)
- Shared Reading Sessions. (SDG 11)
- “Grainlibrary”: the green library of the city of Biel is lending seeds. The customers bring back new seeds to the library after planting and harvesting the crop. (SDG 15)
- Open fridge: people can bring (eatable) food which they no longer need and anybody can take it. It is a possible way to reduce food waste. (SDG 12)
- Buchstart: every new-born baby gets his/her first book and an invitation to visit the library (together with the parents). There are special programs to encourage a good approach to storybooks. (SDG 4, SDG 11)

First, we want to build up a platform for exchanging good examples of our work and to allow the possibility to learn from each other. But also:

→ Create additional programs in a Biblio2030 context (work in progress within the Biblio2030 committee)

→ Work together with (new) partners (work in progress within the Biblio2030 committee)

The aim of the different workshops/activities is to show that libraries even in their day-to-day work are still involved in achieving the SDGs.

3. Campaigning:

We have become aware how important networking in society and policy-making is, in the process of the revision of the copyright law during the last three years.

Because of digital development it was necessary to revise the copyright law in Switzerland. In this process the Swiss Library Association had to fight first to be involved in the consultation process of the revision of the copyright law.

But our contributions were not taken very seriously – and the librarians have not been good lobbyists! The proposal which was submitted for debate in parliament was very problematic for the existence of libraries. I mention only two points: the implementation of a royalty on borrowing and the right of second publication in the academic field.

So the Swiss Library Association started a big campaign and organized a petition directly to the Ministry of Internal Affairs - together with other cultural and heritage institutions we sent over 1200 letters. This action aroused considerable attention from the federal administration but also from the other players in the field and enabled us to build up contacts with politicians who are willing to bring up our requests. There has been a second round of consultation and some of our requests have been included.

Now the debate about the revision of the copyright law is in the parliament – and at the last minute a parliamentarian brought in the question of a royalty again. So the debate on this point has been re-opened – and unfortunately the influence on and the connection to the politicians on national level is not well established from the side of libraries. So we have to insist to the local authorities. But the consultation at the local level is over, in the legislative procedure. In the end we will have to find other solutions (e.g. to start a referendum).

Due to this experience, we have to build up a strong network with stakeholders in politics and society. And we want to develop an advocacy program in the field of sustainability. But Bibliosuisse has a lot of work to do.