

Set the Wheels in Motion – Clarifying “green library” as a Goal for Action

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Abstract:

In leadership literature, it is commonly assumed a simple action model in which action follows if the goal is clear, understood and accepted. Thus, the leader has only to clarify the goal, ensure resources and remove hindrances for the action. However, there is no action without a decision to act and rational decision-making requires that the person in question have all the relevant information. Sustainability as a goal may be appreciated but it is a vague one and information on sustainability is often uncertain. The decision may be harder than expected. In addition, our actions must conform to the situation, which consist in a network of agents and competing interests and goals.

In this paper, the focus is on the clarification of the goal: the concept of green library. It commonly assumed that the green libraries are green buildings, which fulfil the LEED criteria and have some sustainable routines, like recycling and sorting waste. This means that librarians as information professionals have little to do with environmental sustainability; it is architects and engineers who design green buildings. Therefore, the definition of green library should be broadened to include green librarianship and information services.

The evaluation work for IFLA Green Library Award has suggested some new criteria, or point of views, which should be taken into account when considering green libraries.

Keywords: IFLA Green Library Award, green library, environmental sustainability

Introduction

Libraries, or librarians, are aware of environmental threads and wish to be environmentally sustainable. Libraries also have many environmental projects – of which not all are successful. In fact, it may be difficult to set the wheels in motion. The whole library staff may be committed to sustainability and lance a new sustainability project, the energy levels are high – and then nothing happens. The project makes no difference at all.

Success stories are often highlighted, and we can learn a lot from them. However, it might be illustrating to look at failures too. Sometimes we can learn more from the difficulties than from the success.

Action models for environmentally sustainable action

Present theories of leadership emphasize a simple action model. The crucial claim is that as far as the employees understand and accept the common goal, adequate actions follows. Thus, if librarians understand and accept environmental sustainability as an important value and aim in their work, they should act accordingly. In other words, the presumption is that management’s function is to make the goals clear and take care of the preconditions for working, such as human and material resources, smooth communication, trust, etc. Thus, the chief librarian’s job is only to clarify the goal “green library” and remove hindrances for action – thereafter, successful environmental action results quite mechanically. This theory is admirable at least in the sense that it trusts the staff. The message is that librarians are educated, competent and rational, and – if the management trust in them – librarians know what to do to attain the commonly accepted goal, like environmental sustainability. (See figure 1.)

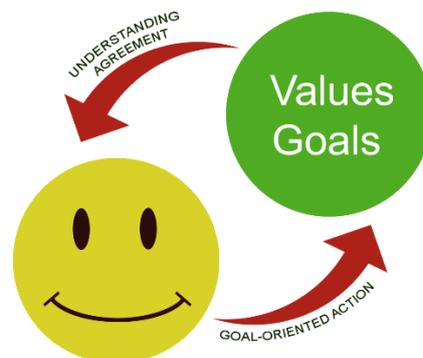


Figure 1: Simple model for goal-oriented action

This action model is simple, but unfortunately, the human mind and working life are complicated. The first difficulty for this model is that action does not begin mechanically but presumes decision. The more complicated the goal is, the more urgent the need for a rational decision is, and the harder it is to make one. Thus, librarians should have a clear idea of the goal and all the relevant information and be able to make a rational decision to act so that the

environmentally sustainable goals are attained. Now, it may be assumed that librarians are rational agents and professionals on information search but the demand to have all the relevant information and the capacity to make the right decision on this basis may be challenging. There are several reasons for this: a) the goals are complicated and may be vague, b) it is impossible to have all the relevant information, c) information may be uncertain. Furthermore, there are several other difficulties. (See figure 2.)



Figure 2: Modified action model for goal-oriented action

The situation guides the possible actions. In many cases, we cannot choose how to react or act but must conform our behaviour to the situation. This guidance may be legal, social, or bureaucratic. Librarians, who wish to attain environmentally sustainable goals, must follow some regulations and act in organizations where people have different job titles, statuses and responsibilities. Librarians act in interrelated networks, for example, with property managers, caretakers and cleaning companies. And finally, our actions have unintended consequences. The outcome of our actions is not always what we intended, our actions have side effects and surprising reactions may arise.

This circle may help us to understand why it is so difficult to act in an environmentally sustainable manner and turn libraries into green libraries. However, the crucial point is in the beginning, in understanding and accepting environmental sustainability as a preferred goal.¹ This may seem a controversial claim since, in general, librarians are well-informed on climate change and other environmental threads. It may also be assumed that librarians are responsible actors in their societies. Librarians know the difference between fiction and non-fiction, facts. It could also be claimed that librarians advocate environmental sustainability. Unfortunately, corresponding action does not always follow. Environmental sustainability or “green library” are too ambiguous concepts.

¹ It may be noted that sustainability may mean ecological or economic sustainability, or equity – but this is hardly a problem since the focus is already on environmental sustainability.

Definitions for *green library*

There is no compact definition or criteria for green libraries. New World Encyclopedia gives the following characterization, which is very similar as Wikipedia's definition:

There is no univocal definition of a green library. But there are a number of central themes that run through all of them, which seek to minimize the negative and maximize the positive effects the building will have on the local environment. Green libraries seek to reduce the use of water and energy by designing the building to maximize the use of natural and renewable resources. They also integrate actual plants into the building design, preferably with drought resistant and/or native vegetation. Furthermore, the maintenance of high standards of indoor air quality to help ensure the health of the people who inhabit the building.

The focus is here on *green buildings* and LEED criteria. On the other hand, for example, Wikipedia adds to this definition an extra sentence: "...and responsible waste disposal (recycling, etc.)". This brings in the criteria for green offices, which are used, for example, by eco-certificates like *Eco-Compass*, which is in use in Helsinki City Library.²

If we accept these definitions, librarians do not have anything to do with green libraries. Librarians do not build libraries, they run libraries. Thus, this leaves green libraries for local politicians, architects and engineers. Moreover, greening a library means building a new one, or completely renovating of the old building, which is again a job for architects and engineers. Librarians are not needed for this and can seldom influence the designing and construction project. The decisions are made elsewhere, and librarians must just accept the situation.

On the other hand, the criteria for *green offices* are not characteristic for only libraries, but all offices and even households should have sustainable routines: we all should save energy, recycle and sort our waste. It may also be noted that – again – this is not a job (only) for librarians. The cleaning company and municipal authorities arrange the treatment of waste. In practice, librarians do not clean libraries nor make the cleaning contracts but must conform to the prevailing situation.

Green building and green office routines are an important part of environmentally sustainable libraries, but they are not the whole story. They lay the basement for a green library and this should not be underestimated. It is great if a library may present new sustainable architectural solutions to the community or show example in environmentally friendly way of acting - and librarians should push their cooperation partners to this direction.

Broader definitions for green library

Preceding discussion shows that a broader definition of green library is needed. The discussion should not concern only green library buildings but green library services and green librarianship.

Green library services and librarianship should include features, which are typical for libraries and for libraries only. To begin with, libraries are information centres and, thus, libraries offer (also) environmental information. This core function should be emphasized, and it may be demanded that a green library should have *green collections* and offer an *open access to reliable and updated environmental information*. Information work is in the core of librarianship.

² <https://ekokompassi.fi/en/>

Moreover, libraries are pioneers in sharing. Libraries share collections but also spaces and devices: libraries may have community sitting rooms and urban offices, free computers and printers and even tools for loan. Libraries may also exhibit environmental issues by events, lectures and exhibitions. Finally, libraries can take mentorship on environmental issues and guide children, community, or even decision makers, into a more sustainable manner to act. Green librarianship might help to clarify the goal, the concept of green library, and thus, motivate librarians to act. But is this all there is?

Criteria for IFLA Green Library Award

The previous discussion broadens the standard definition of green library and emphasizes the role of green librarianship. However, it has turned out that even this characterization is too narrow.

Green libraries have now been awarded by *IFLA Green Library Award* four times, since 2016. During this period, there has been about 120 submissions from all round the world, which all have been evaluated. For example, In 2019, there were 34 submissions from around the world, including Austria, Botswana, Bulgaria, Colombia, Egypt, France/Reunion, Hungary, India, Iran, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Singapore, Slovenia, South Africa, and USA. Reviewers (18) who were as diverse as those who submitted evaluated these submissions. They were a blend of LIS students, library professionals (from public and academic libraries) and architects.

The evaluation process has been hard and some special difficulties have appeared. Reviewers' observation has been that the submissions are not commensurate, or comparable. Libraries do environmental work in very variable circumstances and there are geographical, cultural, political and economic differences. Thus, in some cases, great library complexities are built with newest sustainable hi-tech solutions while elsewhere village habitants build a library for children using recirculated materials, or habitants are taught the basics of recycling and sorting the waste. University libraries may offer students inter-disciplinary courses on environmental information search while some public libraries attempt to increase environmental awareness by making handicraft with children using recycled materials, or trees are planted on the library courtyard for shadow and nutrition. All these projects may be relevant and efficient, environmentally sustainable par excellence – only the problems, preconditions and resources vary different parts of the world.

This suggests that there is no single, compact definition for green libraries but clusters of alternative criteria, which a library should fulfil to be qualified as a green library. Therefore, in 2019, the following criteria were created to assist the evaluations:

1. Environmental management and social engagement

Is the environmental work organized and made visible?

- a) Does the library have an (official) environmental strategy or policy?
- b) Does the library have a clear plan (such as action plan) for environmental sustainability?
- c) Does the library engage its society/users to environmental sustainability?
- d) Does the library inform its society/users about its own environmental practices?
- e) Does the library communicate its green positioning through its website?

2. Green library building

Does the library fulfil the following LEED and other criteria:

- a) Location or site selection: Is the library reachable by public transport or by walking?
- b) Building materials: Are the materials such that they do contribute as little waste as possible, do not cause much damage to the natural environment, are recyclable and durable? Are the materials produced in a sustainable manner?
- c) Water consumption and energy efficiency & consumption including lighting, heating and cooling
- d) Green power and renewable energy
- e) Indoor air quality and natural ventilation: necessary air ventilation
- f) Use of daylight
- g) Interior design: Is it durable and timeless, changeable? Are the materials sustainable?
- h) Sustainable designed rooms for special collections etc. (Book stocks, archives)
- i) Green roofs or gardens

3. Recycling and sustainable practices

Has the library taken care of basic recycling and recirculating?

- a) Basic recycling: Paper, plastic, glass, cardboard, bio, metal
- b) Separating waste and used ICT devices
- c) Water and energy saving routines
- d) Deleted books and other items

4. Green collections

Are collections and information on environmental issues consciously developed?

- a) Does the library have a strategy to achieve information of environmental sustainability?
- b) Does the library have an up-dated and relevant collection on environmental sustainability (in different formats)
- c) Has the library arranged an easy access to environmental information? (Green corners etc.)

5. Green services

- a) Does the library offer information retrieval on environmental sustainability?
- b) Does the library offer education or assistance on environmental information retrieval?
- c) Does the library offer working spaces and ICT devices for common use?
- d) Does the library offer tools or other items for lend?
- e) Does the library arrange events or lectures on environmental sustainability?
- f) Does the library systematically run programs on teaching green information literacy?
- g) Does the library guide, educate or encourage children on environmental sustainability?
- h) Does the library give citizens an opportunity to arrange environmental events or represent their environmental projects?

6. Sustainable projects

- a) Does the library have special projects on environmental sustainability? Which?
- b) Does the library cooperate with partners in terms of achieving sustainability goals? (SDG 17)
- c) Does the library measure its sustainability impact in any way?

7. Others

Other sustainable practices, like urban gardens, green walls or roofs, etc.

This list of criteria was found to be an improvement but it was still pointed out that the submissions are incommensurable. Therefore, it has been suggested that there should be two categories for the IFLA Green Library Award:

National or global impressiveness: environmental achievement par excellence (big libraries with big projects...)

Local or social significance: significant achievement for the library/society (libraries with small budget doing significant work...)

It is likely that this kind of division will be tested when evaluating the IFLA Green Library Award winner for 2020. However, the improving process of the evaluation should also take account on those arguments, which reviewers gave for the top submissions in 2019. Reviewers appreciated, for example, the following points:

- Diversity and breadth of sustainable activities, pervasiveness (target groups, projects)
- Participation and stakeholder involvement
- Empowering the community, social responsibility
- Effectiveness without big budget
- Provable results
- Applicability, a model which can be scaled and shared
- Innovative green architecture
- Locality

Conclusion

Environmental sustainability does not concern solely green buildings or green offices routines but includes green collections and library services. A green library should offer an easy access to reliable and up-dated environmental information and promote sharing: spaces and devices in common use. Moreover, a green library should increase the environmental awareness in their communities. However, communities are very different and there are geological, cultural, social and economic diversities. For this reason, the definition and criteria for green libraries should not be too strict or narrow, but libraries' environmental work should focus on libraries' environmental impacts or increase of environmental awareness in a certain situation, which includes the acute environmental problems, preconditions and resources.

Acknowledgments

Figures 1 – 5: Antti Elomaa (2019)