Librarians speak to the world! The way libraries can weigh in on multi-stakeholder forums: the example of WSIS+10

Jérémy Lachal
Director, Bibliothèques Sans Frontières / Libraries Without Borders, Paris, France
E-mail address: Jeremy.lachal@bibliosansfrontieres.org

Abstract:

What is WSIS and why is it important for libraries? Why is it important for IFLA? What are some of the developments that will impact libraries in the future and how will the outcome of WSIS negotiations make libraries stronger? This paper approaches these questions and emphasizes the role that librarians can play in multi-stakeholder forums to influence international regulations. It shows how librarians have been assigned a historic task in the age of globalization.

Keywords: WSIS, Governance, multi-stakeholder forums, Internet governance, development issues

Librarians speaking to the world? That has to be some sort a joke, right? Librarians are only supposed to read, catalog and reference books, and what's more, tell people to hush when they are in a library, but they are definitely not supposed to speak! Alright, fine, maybe they get to debate about where to index the last Harry Potter book, and on a good day, they might even answer a question or two from an adventurous user. But speaking to the world? I think I must be losing my mind. Besides, what could a librarian tell the world, anyway?

I am only joking, of course, but to tell you the truth, not entirely. We know that librarians are not known for addressing the public, or drawing attention to their work or the tools at their disposal. This is especially true in the digital age when Google would like to become a super librarian and if possible replace us.

Even so, librarians have been assigned a historic task because the world we live in is constantly changing and globalization is reducing distances, but at the same time, social bonds are weakening, leading people in a search for meaning, points of reference and places where they can link-up and reconnect with others. Libraries are precisely the ideal place to create both individual and collective narratives. Furthermore, they are no longer just places where knowledge is passed on; they are also places of co-construction where the future is re-created in a collaborative approach; they serve as toolboxes allowing communities to empower themselves for development and embark on a pursuit of freedom.

I founded the NGO Libraries Without Borders six years ago, and today we are present in more than 20 countries, among which there are some of the poorest in the world, but also some of the richest in both Europe and North America. Yet, whether in post-earthquake Haiti or in disadvantaged French *banlieues*, we have always observed that in a changing world, libraries remain wonderful points of reference, continuity and connection that allow people to interpret and find answers to the complexities of the world. However, this all depends on the ability of libraries to adapt, innovate, listen and of course, speak to the world.

So, how does one speak to the world? Well, for starters, we can begin at the local level, by addressing our communities, by inviting people to discover what we do, by hosting meetings and debates. We can also try to shape cultural policy at both the regional and national levels. Or we can think big and try to transcend borders, which is what we are interested in the most today. That is the role of the multi-stakeholder forums, which bring together international civil society players, policy-makers and international organizations, among others. Of the many that exist today, all of them are complex and even be intimidating, especially when we attend for the first time. They also seem disorganized, their purpose hazy, and sometimes you get the impression that there is a slight disconnection from reality. There are endless discussions followed by hours of work preparing a declaration that very few people will read. In any case, the talks are usually mere rhetoric and we wonder what could actually come of them.

However, if we take a closer look, multi-stakeholder forums represent a great platform from where we could project our voices and be heard. So in the end, some of the discussions can result in concrete actions. The first thing that characterizes an MSH is their tendency to use tongue-twisting acronyms such as WSIS, for the World Summit on the Innovation Society.

The WSIS was **a United Nations-sponsored conference first held in Geneva in 2003, and again in Tunis in 2005. The conference addressed the problems of information-access and communication in the Information Society.** One of its main goals was to develop ways of bri**dging the global digital divide** separating wealthier countries from poorer ones, namely by increasing Internet access across the developing world. The General Assembly of the UN incorporated the summit into the Millennium Declaration, looking to ICTs as a way to attain the Millennium Development Goals. The conference also emphasized a multi-stakeholder approach so that international organizations and the private sector could work alongside governments.

The Geneva plan of action identified 11 guidelines, and it focused particularly on the role of public governance authorities, infrastructure, capacity-development, ethics and cultural diversity, as well as international and regional cooperation.

The Tunis meeting resulted in the official creation of the Internet Governance Forum, which aims to bring together representatives from various stakeholder groups such as governments, businesses, and private citizens to discuss public policy issues relating to the Internet.

One of the strengths of the WSIS was the implementation of the Stocktalking report, a multi-stakeholder follow-up process. The purpose of the report is to provide a detailed register of activities carried out in order to highlight any progress made since that landmark event. This centralized database on current and past projects is a priceless source of information for stakeholders who can adhere to successfully tested practices even as it steers them towards innovative solutions.

The WSIS+10 review process began in 2013 and its findings were integrated into the UN Millennium Development Goals review process. The first event of this review process was organized last January at the UNESCO Headquarters in France, and the culmination of the process is scheduled to coincide with the global negotiations for the post-2015 framework for MDGs to take place in 2015.

So why should librarians be involved in the WSIS+10 process?

I would say that there are at least 3 good reasons to do so:

1. First, public libraries are on the agenda of the WSIS because they have the capacity to offer Internet access, foster computer literacy and teach technological skills. The WSIS+10 review process presents a singular opportunity to create a dialogue between library representatives, policy-makers and private citizens to highlight the role that libraries can play in **bridging the global digital divide.**

2. Secondly, and more broadly, public libraries can contribute to the achievement of Millennium Development Goals in areas like information-access, education, security, openness and privacy.

3. And last but not least, getting involved in the WSIS+10 process could prove a chance to advocate for the sustainable funding of libraries throughout the developing world and to encourage good practices.

What is the position of IFLA today with regards to the WSIS?

With many partners, including IREX, EIFL, Makaia, TASCHA, The Riecken Foundation and Read Global, and with the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, IFLA launched the Beyond Access Initiative to advocate for the role of public libraries in achieving MDGs. The initiative released an Issue brief last November on how to provide Internet access through public libraries that resulted in a set of recommendations for governments as well as for libraries.

The report recommended that governments:
- Officially recognize public libraries as preferred venues for public internet access, establishing programs and partnerships that offer free internet services through library branches.
- It also recommended that they include libraries in plans for ICT and broadband expansion, as well as in digital inclusion policies.

On the other hand, libraries were encouraged to:
- Give its staff access to ICT training.
- And to participate in local and national initiatives and debates relating to Internet policy, digital inclusion, broadband access and open data.

As you can see, IFLA has an important role to play within the WSIS+10 process. With the question of Internet access as a tool for individual and collective development becoming a central issue, the need to address it proves ever more pressing. Moreover, access to information is a fundamental human right and by being open to all, libraries stand as both its promoter and protector.

By taking the WSIS as an example I hoped to show you how librarians, through their professional organizations and IFLA, can influence international regulations. While the WSIS concentrates its efforts on issues related to Internet governance, many other forums are exploring extremely delicate subjects that touch upon freedom of expression, intellectual property rights, human rights, and more. Given the fact that librarians are directly concerned by all of these issues on a daily basis, and that very often both the restrictions they face and the opportunities they enjoy hinge on the decisions taken in similar forums, your say in these matters is as important today as ever before. Besides, corporate lobbies have been hard at work, and you can imagine that their motives are not as non-profit as yours, if you get what I mean…

So after having said all this, I'm sure that you're now ready to speak to the world and engage in multi-stakeholder forums!