



CHAPTER 2

DEVELOPMENT AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION 2019

QUALITY EDUCATION • DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH • REDUCED
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Chapter 2

Making it meaningful, making it equitable: the role of libraries in delivering development

The provision of access to information is the core mission of libraries. By acquiring, preserving and organising information and allowing users to read and apply it, libraries have long been at the heart of our cultural and research infrastructure. They are guardians of much of the world's documentary heritage, as well as the source of the raw materials for innovation.

They also have an important social mission. In the 19th century, the building of libraries formed part of the effort to educate and enable those who were not among the elite. Complementing the move to develop labour rights and universal education, they formed a part of a new offering of services – and opportunities – to everyone.

While the world has changed, the core mission of libraries remains relevant, and arguably more so than ever. As it becomes clearer and clearer what can be achieved with information, it becomes more and more imperative that everyone has the possibility to benefit.

The costs of non-access are clear. As detailed in the previous chapter, those who lack meaningful access to information miss out on opportunities for employment or entrepreneurship, cannot engage in research and innovation or in civic life, and are prevented from communicating with friends, family and those who share their interests.

Moreover, a lack of access can cut people off from their cultures and, at the most basic level, from the information they need to make the right decisions for themselves and their communities.

Not having the ability to find, access, apply and create information can too often reinforce social and economic disadvantage, which in turn can raise further barriers to accessing information. This, in effect, creates a bottleneck to equitable development, making it harder to achieve the objectives of the UN 2030 Agenda. As this chapter looks to show, libraries can provide an effective way out of this situation.

As IFLA's Library Map of the World shows, there are at least 2.3 million libraries worldwide. While many serve specific communities (such as school, academic and special libraries – e.g., institutional or parliamentary libraries), this includes more than 357 000 public libraries, with a mission to help all of their users. This represents a huge potential resource.

Yet libraries do not exist in a vacuum. They depend on a number of conditions to exist, and to be able to fulfil their missions. Clearly funding is crucial, not only for an adequate building and staff, but also for collections and other infrastructure.

Libraries have a two-way relationship with the different elements of the Development and Access to Information (DA2I) Framework. They benefit from good performance in each of the four pillars of the Framework, but, crucially, also support them. Indeed, there is strong potential for a virtuous circle.

This chapter will explore these issues and illustrate the contribution that properly enabled libraries can make. Finally, it will relate the examples discussed to the Sustainable Development Goals.

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Libraries and connectivity

The first pillar of the DA2I Framework focuses on individuals' ability to connect to the internet, be it through a wire or cable connection (or a combination of this and Wi-Fi), or through mobile broadband. Clearly library users also benefit from connectivity, and indeed libraries increasingly require it in order to carry out their missions.

However, this section makes the case that the provision of public access to the internet in libraries is a key part of any connectivity strategy, including in the most advanced countries. This is because internet access in libraries represents a unique value proposition, not only as a stepping stone toward a greater share of home connections, but also as a complement to this even as some countries approach 100 percent internet use. In short, there is a strong two-way relationship between libraries and good performance on the first pillar of the DA2I Framework.

As highlighted in the first chapter, cost remains an important barrier to internet use. Public access in libraries provides a response to this, especially when an effort is made to ensure that costs are either zero or minimal for those who could not afford it otherwise.

Yet cost is relative. Where someone sees great value in something, they will be ready to pay a high price. In contrast, if they feel a product or service has little worth, they will not even be ready to pay small sums. By offering free or very low-cost access, libraries can help overcome this situation, giving new users an opportunity to experience the internet for themselves. Having discovered what is available, users may be readier, sooner or later, to pay for a home connection.

It also remains the case that even in the best-connected countries, many people remain disconnected, by necessity or by choice. For all of the reasons set out in the introduction describing the impacts of information poverty, the presence of libraries as a "fall-back" option is crucial. As will be discussed later

in the chapter, libraries also offer key complementary support and training that is usually unavailable to a home user.

Case study 1: libraries and community networks, Perafita, Spain

One promising way in which libraries can support connectivity is through acting as hubs and meeting centres for community networks. These are local internet networks that are owned and run by the community, rather than big internet service providers. With their focus on the needs of a local area, they have proved to be an effective means of delivering better and broader connectivity than the market will provide.

In the case of the guifi.net project in Catalonia, Spain, the library in the village of Perafita became the node for an extension of the network. Given the central position of the library, and the fact that it was already connected to high-speed internet, it was an ideal place to site a transmitter. Crucially, however, it already offered a telecentre, and so was a good location to organise workshops and discussions. The library itself saw greater use of its own resources, while internet usage in the community as a whole rose sharply.¹

Case study 2: 'kids on the tab,' Kibera, Kenya

While phones may be increasingly ubiquitous, they are often not suitable for learning or other deeper forms of interaction with information. For example, access to technology is still rare in the informal Kenyan settlement of Kibera, which is home to around a million people. Young people there also struggle with education, with none from the settlement ever having gained entry to prestigious "national" schools, to which entry depends on performance in exams.²

To combat this, the Kenya National Library Service set up "Kids on the Tab," a programme giving local children access to tablets preloaded with educational content, as well as support to

learn how to make the most of the internet as a whole. Working with an educational agency, the programme complemented the formal education system, aiming to make learning more interactive, engaging and effective – something that would not have otherwise been possible even for those who did have access to smartphones.

The results were impressive. Already oversubscribed at the start, the programme saw a third of participants gain admission to national high schools. The children also became more enthusiastic about learning and developed key digital competences and skills. After getting a better education in youth, their prospects are far brighter.

Libraries, skills and equity

The second and third pillars of the DA2I Framework address the social and cultural context, as well as the ability of users and consumers to get the most out of access to information. These pillars are closely associated with efforts to deliver greater equality and effective education systems – areas where libraries make a particularly strong contribution.

Regarding skills, libraries have two unique strengths. First is the expertise and experience of their staff in accessing and making use of information. Librarianship is a profession focused on learning how to navigate the sea of available information, and on teaching others to do the same.

This teaching can consist of helping users find the book or information that corresponds to their needs. However, it also implies developing information literacy among users. This is the skill that allows others to know where to find, how to evaluate, and in what ways to make use of information. With growing concern around the impacts of deliberate misinformation, the ability to spot the difference between the reliable and unreliable is a crucial response (with far fewer negative repercussions than efforts to ban "fake news").

Older people are particularly susceptible to being deprived of access to information, given the risk that they are left behind by a market focused on new devices and younger users.

The second strength is the fact that libraries are open to all, at all stages of their lives. They both complement schools (and can even precede them by helping develop early-age literacy) and provide a permanent second chance for those who do not succeed the first time in formal education. In light of rapid changes in the information environment, this role is particularly crucial. In this context, libraries can provide skills themselves that can promote employment, inclusion and civic engagement, in a more or less formal way, or can act as a platform for other groups to offer training.

In addition to skills training, libraries can also help address forms of inequality that result from a range of social and cultural factors. For example, whole groups – women and girls, migrants and refugees, older people, people with disabilities – can be excluded from opportunities to benefit from information. This exclusion can take place through formal rules and cultural practices (the right to own a phone, for example), an inability to take advantage of public services (due to language issues), or a simple failure to adapt to need.

As highlighted in the introduction, there can be a risk of a vicious circle where individuals or groups who are marginalised are also starved of access to the information they need to improve their lives. This, in turn, simply reinforces their exclusion. There has been discussion of the connection between information poverty and other forms of poverty, and so of the need for interventions (notably through libraries) to break this cycle.

Here, too, libraries have a role to play by offering a universal service. This comes both through

the nature of the space they provide and the development of services to meet specific needs. The 2017 DA2I Report, for example, illustrated the particular role of libraries in promoting gender equality in access to information.³

Case study 3: gen connect, Shoalhaven, Australia

The potential of libraries as a platform for inclusive skills provision is underlined by Shoalhaven Libraries in Australia. In a community of around 100,000, almost a third of households are made up of older people who have either never had children, or whose children have moved away.⁴

Older people are particularly susceptible to being deprived of access to information, given the risk that they are left behind by a market focused on new devices and younger users. This can result, for example, in loneliness and failure to take advantage of eGovernment services. As a result, the Shoalhaven library decided to act to help ensure that all city residents could gain the skills they need to make use of new technologies.

Instead of offering formal courses, the library reached out to local schools to find young volunteers, who were more than happy to share their skills in using devices and services. Older people were then able to benefit from an hour of free one-on-one support each week from their new, younger “tutors,” under the name “Gen Connect.”

While for the older people, the learning was the most important aspect of what they viewed as a highly successful programme, the chance to connect with younger members of the community came a close second. The young tutors themselves particularly appreciated the relationships created. Overall, Gen Connect not only built digital skills, but also helped combat

exclusion and built a stronger sense of community.

Case study 4: reading to dogs, Bashkortostan, Russian Federation

People with disabilities are at particular risk of enjoying fewer educational opportunities than others, thanks to a lack of relevant materials and support, compounding their potential to be excluded in later life. In particular, children with disabilities can suffer from a lack of confidence in reading aloud to adults or their peers, holding them back from doing so, and thus from developing a core skill for learning in general.

Libraries in the Russian Republic of Bashkortostan have sought to break this cycle by offering canine reading therapy – reading to dogs instead of people. It has been shown that this can remove the hesitation or embarrassment that children would feel otherwise. This service has been particularly helpful for poorer families that cannot afford more expensive private options.

The programme has led to greater confidence in reading and communicating with others, and it has helped build the ability of the children to empathise with others, leading to broader social integration.⁵

Case study 5: learn to discern, Ukraine

Given concern about deliberate misinformation online, the example of the Learn to Discern project run by IREX in Ukraine is powerful. At a time of high political tension, Ukrainians have been subject to extensive politicised use of information, risking creating a sense of apathy and disengagement in the population.⁶

IREX’s approach has aimed to go beyond traditional media literacy content, not least given that many

people now access their news through social media rather than traditional news sites. Through an interactive curriculum tailored to the local media environment and needs, and by training 428 grassroots media literacy trainers, it was possible to run courses both in libraries and in other institutions. Taking a cascade approach, those who took part in courses were then encouraged to spread their learning with those around them, complemented by billboards in public places. Crucially, those working in libraries ensured that the project was open to people of all ages around the country, and not limited to youth.

The project has had a measurable impact, with half of participants regularly fact-checking news three months after the course, up from 21 percent before. Ninety-two percent had checked news at least once, and 91 percent shared the skills gained. Meanwhile, a survey of the people who saw the billboards and advertising campaign in its first two weeks showed that 54 percent identified that they needed media literacy training.

Other examples

In providing skills, there is a need to tailor content to individuals' needs. The specific needs of youth – in particular those who may be at risk of marginalisation for other reasons, such as homelessness or sexuality – can pose a specific challenge, but dedicated library staff and a willingness to listen can make a difference.⁷

The same need to tailor programming is present with other at-risk groups. There are examples of libraries developing programmes to support employment and entrepreneurship focused on women (in China and Northern Macedonia), on Roma (in Croatia) and on immigrants (in Sweden), to offer just a few cases.⁸

Libraries and liberties

The fourth pillar of the DA2I framework looks at key laws affecting freedom of expression and freedom of access to

information. As in the previous sections, the activities of libraries both gain from, and contribute to, better performance in this field.

It is clear that libraries themselves benefit from free expression (including the freedom to publish), which supports a strong flow of new books, articles and ideas. Without this supply, libraries would not have much information to which to give access. Sadly, there are numerous examples of laws (and a fear of them, leading to self-censorship) leading to materials being censored or even removed from library shelves.

Libraries are also less able to support researchers and creators when there is less freedom. Those carrying out research rely on academic freedom to pursue their work in line with their best judgment.

Yet as mentioned, libraries also help make rights become a reality. On a basic level, the relationship between free expression and free access to information is clear in the Universal Declaration. By giving people the possibility to read and learn, libraries empower them to create.

Libraries also support transparent and participatory governance. Many have realised their potential as places to help users take advantage of open government initiatives, to encourage political awareness and engagement. There are also examples of libraries simply helping users understand their own rights, and thus realise them.⁹

Finally, libraries can support efforts to build more peaceful and stable societies, not only through promoting inclusion in their services and collections, but also as memory institutions that can enable healing and reconciliation.¹⁰

Case Study 6: Parliamentary Library, Myanmar

In Myanmar, as part of the transition to democracy, the need for an effective parliamentary library was recognised by the government and donors. With

members of parliament gaining new powers to scrutinise the decisions of the executive and hold them to account on behalf of their constituents, they needed to be well-informed.

Working with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the library developed a training programme for the local staff, with parliamentary librarians from other countries spending time there in order to share knowledge and practices. The result has been an operational research service whose work, even within the first year, has been used by almost all members of parliament, notably on issues such as domestic violence, international development loans, and land law reform.¹¹

Case study 7: legal information access centre, New South Wales, Australia

While the law is dispensed in courts and tribunals, these are not usually the best places to access information about the law. Law libraries themselves tend to be sited within universities, and so not necessarily accessible to the general public. However, the expertise that law librarians have is undoubtedly helpful for people looking to understand and assert their rights.

The Legal Information Access Centre (LIAC) in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, has a record of almost 30 years of delivering access to justice through the Find Legal Answers service in public libraries.

The result of a collaboration between the State Library of NSW and the Law and Justice Foundation of NSW, the LIAC has produced materials that are comprehensible to the general public and trained public librarians to help people use them. The libraries have then worked with organisations representing groups that may have the greatest need for support, such as the Tenants' Union. It has received almost universally positive feedback from users, whose number is growing steadily.¹²

Other examples

In the United States, a network is developing libraries' potential as centres where the public can make the most of open data. The public, but less formal, nature of libraries makes them an ideal place for individuals to work with this information. Chattanooga Public Library, for example, has been running the city's online open data portal since 2014, and now hosts 280 datasets that have received hundreds of thousands of visits.¹³

Médellin, Colombia, has also seen a powerful example of libraries even acting as centres for the collection of open data, in this case around air pollution. The Makaia Foundation worked with the city and local libraries to install pollution sensors in branches, and then provide users with data literacy training in order to be able to interpret the information received. The project has seen strong participation, with an increase in understanding of the issue of air pollution, and greater engagement in local government debates about how to reduce it.¹⁴

There are also efforts to encourage engagement in the political process at the national level in the United States. The Columbus Public Library in Wisconsin organised a Kids Vote, encouraging

young people both to see how democracy works and to debate the merits of different candidates.¹⁵ A broader campaign in the run-up to the midterm elections in November 2018 saw libraries across the country encourage voter turnout and engagement in the issues. Meanwhile, in Taiwan, China, libraries identified key topics of political discussion in elections and provided courses and reading lists for library users in order to understand more about the underlying issues.¹⁶

Conclusion: The SDG connection

The examples given in this paper provide illustrations, around the world, of the contribution that libraries can make to strengthening each of the pillars of meaningful access to information under the DA2I Framework. By enabling connectivity and access to technology, providing skills and learning for all (even those at risk of marginalisation), and strengthening democracy and accountability, libraries are making real contributions.

A noteworthy point is that many of the examples given could have been cited in more than one of the sections. This echoes the insistence in the UN 2030 Agenda of the fact

that actions in different areas of development are interconnected. It is also a reminder that libraries are well-placed to support the delivery of all the Sustainable Development Goals.

In the rest of this year's Development and Access to Information Report, experts will discuss the role of access to information in delivering five of the Sustainable Development Goals in focus at the 2019 High-Level Political Forum.¹⁷ In each of these areas, there is evidence of how libraries can make a difference.

The multiple impacts of library interventions also recall the concept of "development accelerators" proposed by the United Nations Development Programme.¹⁸ This sets out an approach to planning that identifies actions that can bring progress on a variety of fronts by resolving key "bottlenecks."

As set out in the introduction, if information poverty – a lack of meaningful access to information – is a bottleneck, then the world's libraries would appear to be a very strong example of a development accelerator. The only challenge now is to ensure that all of them have the recognition and support they need to realise this potential.

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