

**“A World with universal literacy”: The role of libraries and access to information in the UN 2030 Agenda**

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**Abstract**

In September 2015, after more than three years of negotiations and intense involvement from many stakeholders, including the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), the Member States of the United Nations adopted the post-2015 Development Agenda to succeed the Millennium Development Goals, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. This paper outlines and reflects on the key steps in IFLA’s campaign and the importance of coalitions and national advocacy to realize the inclusion of access to information, universal literacy, public access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and cultural heritage in the UN 2030 Agenda.

**Keywords**

Access to information, literacy, development, SDGs, United Nations, advocacy, cultural heritage, ICT

**1. Introduction**

The new United Nations 2030 Agenda is an inclusive, integrated framework of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with a total of 169 Targets spanning economic, environmental and social development (United Nations, 2015b). They lay out a plan for all countries to actively engage in making our world better for its people and the planet. The UN 2030 Agenda will help all UN Member States focus their

attention on poverty eradication, climate change, and the development of people. By achieving this Agenda, no one will be left behind. All countries in the world must achieve the Goals. The goals are universal, and indivisible – all Goals and targets must be achieved in their totality.

Libraries have an essential role in helping to meet this grand challenge by providing access to information, public access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT), helping people to develop the capacity to effectively use information, and by preserving information to ensure ongoing access for future generations.

## **2. The importance of access to information**

Access to information is a key enabling right for governments to deliver quality, inclusive services to its people (Ashwill and Norton, 2015). Information should be regarded as one of the most fundamental rights in the current era. It is a fundamental requirement for personal and social development, and for participation (Habermas 1989 as cited in Britz, 2004; IFLA, 2014c).

Public access to information supports the creation of knowledge societies, and includes the infrastructure, ICT and media and information literacy capabilities that people need to effectively use information, and preservation to ensure on-going access for future generations. In this definition, the type of information that should be provided goes beyond information made available by government or required under Right to Information legislation, but while acknowledging the public's right to access information and data, it is essential to respect the right to individual privacy (IFLA, 2014c).

Access to information supports development by empowering people, especially marginalised people and those living in poverty, to exercise their rights, be economically active, learn new skills, enrich their cultural identity and take part in decisionmaking (IFLA, 2013b).

### **3. IFLA's engagement in United Nations processes**

IFLA has a unique role and position in the library sector at the United Nations, holding consultative status at many UN agencies. IFLA has utilized this status to work with, and within, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), amongst others. Changes to processes at these agencies which has gradually provided more space and opportunities for civil society has enabled IFLA and others to take a larger role in negotiations and in helping to shape outcomes. This engagement carried through to IFLA's role in the post-2015 negotiations. Processes, objectives and outcomes vary greatly from process to process, and between different agencies of the UN. Although WSIS and WIPO differ greatly from post-2015, they provided crucial exposure and experience.

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), led by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and UNESCO, has been a key forum for IFLA to influence policies around ICTs and to advocate for access since 2003 (Raseroka, 2006). WSIS aimed to promote the use of technology to improve lives and bridge the digital divide. ICTs facilitate and enable development, however by the end of the WSIS process there is still a great disparity in access and skills. WSIS supports public access as one means to bridge these gaps (International Telecommunications Union, 2014). Engagement in WSIS since its initiation proved to be a critical turning point for IFLA, elevating the Federation's influence on the global stage, and laying the foundations for IFLA's future advocacy role and the capacity building needed to reinforce it at the local level.

Legislative and licensing restrictions, and organizational challenges have proliferated in the digital era, making resource sharing more difficult than in the past (Britz, 2004; Smith, 2002). Over the past three decades, Intellectual Property Rights have expanded greatly in nearly all geographies, unbalancing the amount of material in the public domain and creating new forms of ownership where copyright was not intended (Boyle and others, 2004; LIBER, 2015). In 2004, WIPO agreed to a

Development Agenda that would consider the impact of its policies on access to knowledge amongst other aims (Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2005). This move further opened the door for libraries to join the WIPO agenda along with groups advocating for education and the visually impaired, the latter of which resulted in the Marrakesh Treaty (World Intellectual Property Organization, 2013). IFLA has engaged with WIPO Member States since 2008 through the Standing Committee on Copyright and Related Rights (SCCR). IFLA works with the International Council on Archives (ICA), Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL) and Corporación Innovarte on copyright limitations and exceptions to enable libraries and archives to preserve their collections, support education and research, and lend materials (IFLA, 2014a).

#### **4. The beginnings of the post-2015 development agenda**

The process to create the post-2015 development agenda, to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), began to accelerate at the Rio+20 conference in 2012. Following that conference, at which an initial set of Sustainable Development Goals was drafted (UN Economic and Social Council, n.d.), the format for negotiations on the post-2015 development agenda was established and included a series of open meetings and negotiations.

As was widely reported by the UN and civil society, the structure of meetings provided an unprecedented opportunity for engagement by civil society in the process of negotiating the new agenda (European Commission, 2015; United Nations News Centre, 2015). This contrasted with the MDGs that were criticised for having been developed by a small group in a top-down approach. Together with citizen consultations such as the MyWorld survey which gathered more than 10 million responses (United Nations, 2015a), the development of the agenda to replace the MDGs sought to be much more inclusive (CIVICUS and Stakeholder Forum, 2014). Though not without flaws, the process was widely welcomed by civil society and by IFLA (IFLA, 2013a, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Transparency, Accountability and Participation (TAP) Network, 2015).

## **5. Objectives of IFLA's advocacy**

IFLA's advocacy objectives were to (IFLA, 2014b):

- Work with the international library community to develop its position on the post-2015 development framework, and to develop a strong aligned voice;
- Work with allies in civil society and the development community to advocate for access to information as an element of the post-2015 development framework;
- Work with Member States to raise awareness of libraries as agents for development access to information in the post-2015 context.

IFLA took full advantage of the post-2015 process and its existing consultative statuses with the UN, and was represented at each of the UN Open Working Group and Intergovernmental Negotiation meetings throughout 2014-2015 in New York which developed the components of the post-2015 development agenda: the Declaration (including vision), SDGs, Means of Implementation and Follow-Up and Review processes. These meetings were complemented by a series of online consultations at different stages of the process. Combined, IFLA was able to advocate through meetings and consultations with clear consistent messages. In parallel, IFLA sought to advance the role of culture in the SDGs as a signatory and coalition partner of the Culture 2015 declaration, and participated in related meetings including the World Culture Forum in 2013.

## **6. Elements of IFLA's advocacy in the UN 2030 Agenda – analysis and lessons learned**

IFLA's advocacy strategy consisted of several elements, often overlapping and reinforcing:

1. Utilise an existing vehicle – IFLA ALP
2. Frame libraries in the bigger picture of access to information
3. Get involved at the beginning of the process, from Rio+20
4. An endorsed declaration, with broad support across libraries and civil society

5. A clear set of asks and talking points, repeated consistently across interventions, documents and consultations
6. Advocacy within civil society and government to gain support for a broad definition of access to information
7. Rapid response to consultations as they arose on all elements of the agenda

### **6.1. Utilise an existing vehicle – IFLA ALP**

The IFLA Action for Development through Libraries programme (ALP) oversaw the strategy and advocacy on the UN 2030 Agenda within its larger remit of capacity building and highlighting the contribution libraries make to development. As a strategic programme reporting to the IFLA Governing Board, ALP aims to strengthen the ability of the library and information sector to advocate for equitable access to information and resilient, sustainable library communities and delivers capacity building programmes in all regions of the world. Through advocacy backed by capacity building, ALP ensured that global advocacy was well supported by awareness of IFLA's objectives throughout its membership.

### **6.2. Frame libraries in the bigger picture of access to information**

Based on IFLA's global experience, it was decided to advocate within the framing of access to information, and to highlight the role of libraries in providing that access. Choices about language and framing are essential when the number of issues that can be tackled within a process or agreement are limited. As the SDGs would be limited in number, it was important to galvanize support around concepts that would be likely to be more broadly supported and which could fall under issues such as poverty eradication, health, education, and rights. To maximise chances of success and to garner support from inside and beyond the library field, IFLA focused on a limited number of issues; access to information, public access to ICT and cultural heritage, each of which encompassed the role of libraries as an essential provider of access, skills and stewardship.

Access to information is a complex, constructed issue advocated by many sectors far beyond libraries – but in its broadest definition includes rights and

legislation (such as Right to Information and Freedom of Information acts), access to all kinds of information as well as government information and data, and the infrastructure, ICT and media and information literacy capabilities that people need to effectively use information, and preservation to ensure on-going access for future generations.

This definition presents advantages and disadvantages:

*Advantages:* Existing base of support from some Member States, and history of successes such as the role of libraries in society, Right to Information legislation, and Access to Information streams in other non-UN processes such as the Open Government Partnership.

*Disadvantages:* Entrenched opposition by some Member States, narrowly defined definition of Access to Information advocated by some influential civil society organisations that includes only officially published government information, broad concept that can be difficult to define.

Awareness of these advantages and disadvantages enabled IFLA to develop a clear strategy and build coalitions with other organisations to advocate for access to information in its broadest definition.

### **6.3. Get involved at the beginning**

Opportunities for greater influence of outcomes tend to occur at the beginning of negotiation processes. The process began to take pace after the 2012 Rio+20 conference, and continued for a further three years until the adoption of the UN 2030 Agenda.

IFLA began working early, together with many other organisations including Article 19, Beyond Access and Development Initiatives, to advocate for the inclusion of a target on access to information. In the SDGs context, goals were defined as ambitious, actionable commitments that are limited in number, but global in nature and applicable to all. While targets are specific, measurable objectives that helps to achieve one or more goals (Co-Chairs of Open Working Group 10th Session, 2014).

The SDG goals include poverty eradication, gender equality, climate change and education, amongst others. Goal 16 concerns peace and justice:

“Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”.

Access to information emerged as a target within the Goal early on, with the eventual, agreed text reading:

“Target 16.10: Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements”.

The timeline (Figure 1) shows the major activities and outcome documents that led to adoption of the UN 2030 Agenda in September 2015 (in blue), and the timeline after implementation begins on 1 January 2016 (in red). By the end of the Open Working Group meetings at the end of 2014, the SDGs including a target within Goal 16 and target 16.10 were already largely agreed (IFLA, 2014d).

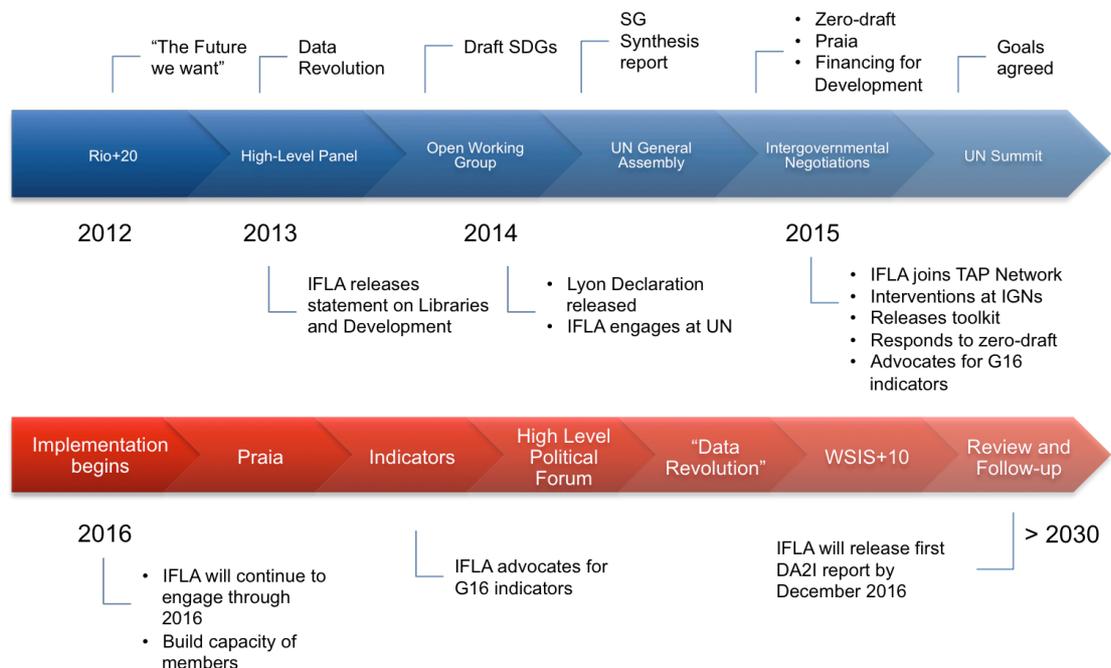


Figure 1 Timeline to the UN 2030 Agenda

During the negotiations, the inclusion of the target 16.10 was not guaranteed, and was perceived to be at risk at certain points of the process. Although it is not possible to evidence a specific moment, organisation or decision that secured the inclusion and wording of target 16.10, several factors contributed:

- On the record support from a range of Member States;
- Reluctance from Member States to reopen negotiations on the text of Goal 16 at a crucial point in time, to prevent the risk of the Goal being dropped altogether by non-supportive countries (Pham, 2014);
- Leadership by leading civil society organisations, including the Global Forum for Media Development and Article 19 to keep the issue clearly defined, and on the agenda of Member States (Orme, 2014);
- Negotiation amongst civil society including IFLA to amend the wording of 16.10, and compromise to accept the resulting language.

#### **6.4. An endorsed, declaration, with broad support across libraries and civil society (Lyon Declaration)**

IFLA developed the *Lyon Declaration on Access to Information and Development* in 2014. More than 600 institutions and associations from within and beyond the library sector, including development agencies, media organisations, gender, ICT and education campaigners signed between August 2014 and December 2015 when the Declaration was closed to new signatories, making the Declaration the most successful campaign of its type IFLA had undertaken.

The purpose of the Lyon Declaration was to call upon the Member States of the United Nations to make an international commitment to use the post-2015 development agenda to ensure that everyone has access to, and is able to understand, use and share the information that is necessary to promote sustainable development and democratic societies. The Declaration commits that increased access to information and knowledge, underpinned by universal literacy, is an essential pillar of sustainable development. It is a cross-cutting means of achieving all of the SDGs, and increasing access to information underpins all other Goals.

With the weight of 600 signatories behind it, the Declaration provided a document that could be continually and consistently referred to in interventions and consultations and was a means of demonstrating support across civil society for access to information and the role of libraries in development. IFLA Headquarters staff and IFLA ALP drafted the Declaration, in consultation with a small group of influential civil society organisation and representatives of the French library community to generate support and enthusiasm ahead of the launch at the World Library and Information Congress in Lyon in August 2014.

#### **6.5. A clear set of asks and talking points, repeated consistently across interventions, documents and consultations**

Global action must be backed by national action and outreach to influential countries and decision makers. A toolkit was developed in January 2015 to raise awareness of the post-2015 development agenda and to encourage national-level library representatives, such as library associations and institutions to organise advocacy meetings with decision makers (IFLA, 2015f). The toolkit included talking points for each topic, including access to information, public access to ICT, and cultural heritage, along with examples from libraries around the world. Later in 2015, IFLA released guidance on advocating for the inclusion of libraries in national development plans (IFLA, 2015e), proposed indicators to measure access to information, and a second toolkit on implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda (IFLA, 2015d). Librarians in countries including Australia, Germany, Sweden, Singapore, the United Kingdom, Ghana, Guatemala, Colombia, Uganda and several others successfully held meetings with their representatives using one or more of these materials.

These capacity building materials were reinforced by IFLA's responses to consultations throughout the post-2015 process utilising the same key consistent asks. Sessions at the IFLA World Library and Information Congress organised by IFLA ALP and others, and the use of social media helped to keep the profile of the post-2015 development agenda high across the profession.

A key outcome for IFLA was the inclusion of the text, “a world with universal literacy” in the final vision of the Agenda. IFLA consistently asked for the inclusion of universal literacy from the Lyon Declaration onwards, and it was an ask in IFLA’s responses to consultations on UN drafts and an intervention on the floor of the UN by IFLA President-Elect Donna Scheeder on 19 February 2015. IFLA was the only organisation that advocated for universal literacy, and warmly welcomed its inclusion in the final UN 2030 Agenda. Ambassador Macharia Kamau, Co-Chair for the intergovernmental negotiations at the UN on the post-2015 development agenda, noted in a press conference following the adoption of the Agenda that the committee aimed to integrate or characterise all issues raised by civil society in the process (UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, 2015; UN Web TV, 2015). IFLA’s consistent ask led to a successful result.

#### **6.6. Advocacy within civil society and government to gain support for a broad definition of access to information**

Working in coalition was essential to achieve IFLA’s other asks, helping to strengthen support for IFLA’s positions within civil society, and to identify champions that could also take IFLA’s message forward. As outlined earlier, access to information is also defined in different ways by different organisations within civil society – for instance, for Right to Information campaigners it is about legislation, for transparency advocates corruption data is often foremost. Advocacy across civil society was important so that a broad, public access to information approach would be agreed. IFLA worked in coalition with other leading civil society organisations including Article 19, CIVICUS, Development Initiatives, Beyond Access and cultural organisations to inform initial strategy and positions (IFLA et al., 2013). To work further across civil society, IFLA joined the steering committee of the Transparency, Accountability and Participation Network (TAP Network) in 2015, a coalition of 180 civil society organisations (TAP Network, n.d.) seeking to highlight these issues in the UN 2030 Agenda. IFLA contributed to TAP Network, positions, statements and advocacy strategy. Combined with TAP’s presence in New York, this increased opportunities for engagement across the entire UN 2030 Agenda process. To advance the role of culture in the SDGs, IFLA was a signatory and coalition partner of the Culture 2015 declaration (Coalition for Culture, 2014). Many civil society

organisations signed the Lyon Declaration, demonstrating the success of this approach. IFLA succeeded because civil society succeeded – the commitment by the UN to include civil society in the process provided many entry points to meetings, consultations and Member State representatives. By working in coalition, IFLA could amplify its voice within the access to information movement and develop valuable working relationships with leading organisations over time.

A parallel success was recognition of the role of libraries in development by governments. Ministers and country representatives from Angola, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote D'Ivoire, Lesotho, Guinea, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, South Sudan and Swaziland signed a declaration in support of providing the resources and enabling environment necessary to support the contribution of libraries in meeting the SDGs at a meeting before the World Library and Information Congress in Cape Town in August 2015 (Cape Town Declaration of African Ministers, 2015).

### **6.7. Rapid response to consultations as they arose on all elements of the agenda**

The UN 2030 Agenda is more than the SDGs, and includes (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015):

1. Declaration
  - Vision of the world in 2030
2. Sustainable Development Goals (17 goals, 169 targets)
  - What the world needs to achieve by 2030 – from eradicating poverty to good education, sustainable cities, peace and justice
3. Means of Implementation
  - Resources, including finances, required to meet the goals
4. Follow-Up and Review – including global indicators (to be finalised and agreed in 2016)
  - How we know which countries are on track in meeting the Goals

IFLA responded to consultations on each part of the process, many of which were only open for a few days, from the declaration to the indicators and how the Agenda will be financed. As the UN 2030 Agenda is implemented, each country will take a different approach and will adapt and localise the SDGs and the Agenda for local context. Different elements of the whole Agenda will be relevant to different countries at different times. The UN 2030 Agenda is a political commitment, which means that everyone, including libraries and civil society, will have a role in making sure governments are accountable for implementing the SDGs.

IFLA followed the same set of strategies as the negotiations on the SDGs to advocate for the inclusion of appropriate indicators to measure access to information, public access to ICT and cultural heritage. To ensure that governments are accountable for providing access, services and skills that live up to the SDGs, it is essential that the indicators chosen to measure the Goals and targets be appropriate. If the wrong indicators are chosen, governments may invest resources for public access to information elsewhere. Together with the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), Article 19 and other civil society organisations, IFLA advocated for the indicator, “Existence and implementation of constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information” to measure target 16.10. IFLA worked across agencies to build support from UNESCO, UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the World Bank Group (Lemieux, 2015) and others. After a lengthy period of negotiation, the indicator has been included in the list of recommended indicators at the time of writing, March 2016 (Alexovich, 2016).

As a lesson learned throughout the post-2015 process, all of these elements and strategy described above needed be present (although not all at the same time) along with the opportunity, or window for engagement to be successful in this context. However, the exact combination of strategy, advocacy opportunity, coalitions and messaging vary greatly from issue to issue, and from process to process and must be researched and responded to thoroughly each and every time.

## **Conclusion**

IFLA ALP, as the committee that oversaw IFLA’s work on the UN 2030 Agenda, provides capacity building on advocacy through the Building Strong Library

Associations programme and International Advocacy programme to library associations, libraries and individuals around the world. The UN 2030 Agenda campaign provided the opportunity to test whether approaches on paper worked in reality. As an example of a planned, sustained campaign for change, backed by clear, consistent communications, engagement of coalitions, libraries and associations, it exceeded its goals.

IFLA will continue to engage with the review and monitoring of the Agenda in coming years. These include meetings of the High Level Political Forum to review progress towards meeting the SDGs. To ensure that governments are on track with meeting target 16.10, IFLA will measure the impact of access to information and report on progress.

Global action must be supported by local advocacy, and with the support of libraries and librarians at all levels to support and promote the UN 2030 Agenda, the difference that access to information and libraries make in every library will ensure that the sector makes a counted, vital contribution to achieving the SDGs by 2030.

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