



Public libraries and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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International Federation of
Library Associations and Institutions
2020, Vol. 46(4) 328–346
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DOI: 10.1177/0340035219898708
journals.sagepub.com/home/ifl



Abstract

As motors of change driving development, public libraries, with their commitment to information provision and access, are crucial to the realization of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This article contributes to emerging Library and Information Science scholarship on the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by arguing for the central roles played by public libraries in realizing its goals. The purpose is twofold. First, it overviews the agenda's history coupled with the start of a literature review of the Library and Information Science research on it. Second, it presents a conceptual framework in which to approach the agenda's goals and associated targets within the context of public libraries. The ultimate aim is to establish a base for and expand awareness of the UN 2030 Agenda within the Library and Information Science discipline, in addition to promoting the importance of public libraries in advancing sustainable development efforts generally and the agenda specifically.

Keywords

Access to information, access to knowledge, information and development, principles of library and information science, public libraries, sustainable development, types of libraries and information providers, United Nations, UN 2030 Agenda

Submitted: 23 October 2019; Accepted: 29 November 2019.

Introduction: Motors of change driving development

As anthropogenic alterations accelerate, sustainable development efforts must be urgently adopted and advanced by all. As António Guterres, the present UN Secretary-General, states, 'the coming years will be a vital period to save the planet and to achieve sustainable, inclusive human development' (United Nations, 2019a). Public libraries play important roles in these efforts to advance sustainable development for the benefit of both people and planet. Fiona Bradley (2018: 118) argues that 'libraries have an essential role in helping to meet this grand challenge by providing access to information, public access to ICT (information and communication technology), helping people to develop the capacity to effectively use information, and by preserving information to ensure ongoing access for future generations'. Public libraries are 'motors of change', and their facilitating of information access is a 'driver of development', for both individuals and societies.¹

As motors of change driving development, public libraries, with their commitment to information provision and access, are crucial to the realization of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (herein referred to as the UN 2030 Agenda). Officially named 'Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', the UN 2030 Agenda was formally adopted in September 2015 by all 193 members of the UN at an historic international summit on sustainable development at UN headquarters in New York City. Coming into force on 1 January 2016, this ambitious document represents an unprecedented programme promoting shared prosperity and wellbeing for all of humanity and the planet.² Over the course of the following 15 years – which at the time of this article's writing approaches the one-third mark of its existence and

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implementation, with varying degrees of success thus far³ – all UN members and countries are committed, by consensus, to mobilize resources and efforts to address and achieve the Agenda's comprehensive goals and accompanying targets. Public libraries are important resources that must (continue to) be consulted, harnessed, and used to secure sustainable development and, ultimately, a more equitable, inclusive and healthy world.

The importance of public libraries to sustainable development efforts are implicitly recognized within the UN 2030 Agenda. It envisages:

a world free of poverty, hunger, disease and want, where all life can thrive . . . A world with universal literacy. A world with equitable and universal access to quality education at all levels, to health care and social protection, where physical, mental and social well-being are assured. (United Nations, 2015a)

This vision is advanced by public libraries' capacities for providing information, inclusive spaces, and various educational, cultural, and social opportunities to all people.⁴ They can help ensure a world where the wellbeing of all individuals, and by extension their wider communities and climates, are assured and can thrive.

While there is growing literature on the UN 2030 Agenda and its applications to and implications for various sectors, especially within the fields of environmental science, economics, health studies, law, feminist studies and human rights, it is an emerging, and relatively under-explored, topic within the Library and Information Science (LIS) scholarship.⁵ The emerging LIS literature that addresses the Agenda mostly concentrates on particular aspects or case studies of the role of libraries or librarianship, such as the roles played by academic librarianship, LIS pedagogical responses, and country- or region-specific concerns within the context of the Agenda.⁶ This emerging work on the UN 2030 Agenda is making important interventions into the LIS discourse; however there remains a need for broader recognition of the roles played by public libraries in helping realize the Agenda.

This article contributes to this emerging LIS scholarship by arguing for the central roles played by public libraries in realizing the Agenda's sustainable development goals (SDGs). The purpose of the article is twofold. First, it overviews the UN 2030 Agenda's history coupled with the start of a literature review of the LIS research on it. The intention of this overview and literature review is to provide a point of departure for further research on the Agenda within the context

of public libraries. Second, this article presents a conceptual framework in which to approach the Agenda's SDGs within the context of public libraries. Comprised of communal, cultural, educational, economic and democratic contributions that public libraries offer, this conceptual framework presents a case for public libraries in fulfilling the Agenda's SDGs and, in so doing, establishes a foundation upon which to build further analyses of the important roles played by public libraries in sustainable development efforts.

It is important to note that this article does not claim or intend to present a detailed discussion of every goal or target of the UN 2030 Agenda or their many complex features and implications. There is, as aforementioned, an impressive interdisciplinary literature addressing the complexities of this grand global effort. The article, instead, makes its own humble intervention in this ongoing interdisciplinary work by establishing the theoretical connections between public libraries and the roles they can play in achieving the Agenda's SDGs. Indeed, since this article explores and emphasizes the theoretical connections public libraries make with this policy document, it is hoped that it can serve as a basis to conduct further practice-based and/or evidence-focused research on this topic. The ultimate aim is to expand awareness of the UN 2030 Agenda within the LIS discipline, in addition to promoting the importance of public libraries in advancing sustainable development efforts generally and the Agenda specifically.

The following discussion is arranged into three main sections connected by the argument for public libraries' important contributions towards realizing the UN 2030 Agenda's SDGs. The first section presents an overview of the now-classic definition of sustainable development coined by the Brundtland Commission and its recognition of the significance of information for such efforts. The second section provides a descriptive account of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It explores the interventions made by the international library community in ensuring that information access was recognized and included within the Agenda. The third section offers a conceptual framework of public libraries' contributions to community, culture, education, economy and democracy as a taxonomy in which to help situate and begin analyzing these public institutions' roles in sustainable development efforts. The concluding section reiterates the need for public libraries in going forward with the Agenda as it reaches the one-third mark of its mandate. It was the Brundtland Commission in the 1980s that first acknowledged information's importance for sustainable development.

The Brundtland Commission on Sustainable Development

The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) – popularly known as the Brundtland Commission after the former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, the United Nations-appointed chairperson of the committee – provided, arguably, the classic definition of sustainable development. In its 1987 report entitled *Our Common Future*, the Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as ‘development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (United Nations and World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Although this definition mainly focuses on environmental sustainability, it nevertheless remains relevant today and can be expanded to include the need for sustainable development of society and the economy. Thus, sustainable development recognizes that progress includes intersecting and interlocking economic, social and environmental dimensions. It respects the environmental, economic and social needs of both current and future generations. It involves managed, orderly and reasonable growth that actively consults all sectors of society and that ultimately does not exhaust environmental resources.

The Brundtland Commission’s report further acknowledged the importance of information, and access to information in particular, in helping achieve sustainable development. Gobinda Chowdhury and Kushwanth Koya (2017: 2130) highlight major parts within the report emphasizing the importance of information including ‘free access to relevant information’; ‘ensure that new technologies reach all those who need them, overcoming such problems as the lack of information’; ‘many developing countries need information [on various environmental, industry, and health matters and] trained people to apply such information to local circumstances’; ‘new technologies and potentially unlimited access to information offer great promise’; ‘augmented by digital communications and advanced information analysis . . . these data can provide up-to-date information on a wide variety of resource, climatic, pollution, and other variables’; and the need to pool together all this information. They further note that information access has been acknowledge in various

policy documents created by the UN (United Nations, 2012, 2015a, 2015b), European Commission (2010), the OECD (2010), and studies commissioned by national governments (for example, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, UK, 2013); as well as

by researchers (see, for example, Chowdhury, 2014; Nathan, 2012; Nolin, 2010). (Chowdhury and Koya 2017, 2130)

Information is indeed a central component of sustainable development efforts. Economic expansion, social equity and environmental protection must be treated, not as mutually exclusive concerns, but as mutually inclusive matters that must be addressed together. A lack of availability of and access to information results in barriers prohibiting full social and economic participation in society, knowledge about environmental challenges and opportunities, and a host of other complex environmental, economic and social issues. Such a lack consequently inhibits and undermines efforts to sustainably develop the environment, economy and society.

Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Nearly 30 years after the Brundtland Commission’s report, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, an ambitious, comprehensive plan for making the world a better place for all. Promising positive and productive improvement in people’s lives, economic growth and environmental protection, the UN 2030 Agenda affirms itself as ‘a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity’ (United Nations, 2015a). Its grand aim is to eradicate poverty, enhance prosperity, expand opportunities, strengthen peace and protect the environment for the benefit of everyone, everywhere. It represents an unprecedented global vision and commitment to improve the world, ensure sustainable development and ensure no one is left behind.

Applying to all countries, developed and developing alike, the agenda represents a historic undertaking that is global in nature and universally applicable. Although it is not legally binding, the Agenda has considerable moral force in having been adopted by consensus by every UN member. Further, while the Agenda recognizes and respects diverse circumstances and contingencies, every country nevertheless shares responsibility for achieving these goals and targets, albeit through their own particular but meaningful ways and means. All countries share responsibility whilst each has its own unique role to play in realizing the Agenda’s vision.

Constituted by 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are comprised of 169 targets, the UN 2030 Agenda presents a comprehensive approach for establishing a better world for all. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to explain each SDG,

it is worthwhile to present them in their entirety to help illuminate their ambitious and comprehensive nature, and also because they will be situated within the framework for approaching public libraries within the context of sustainable development later in this article. The Agenda's SDGs strive to:

1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere;
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture;
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages;
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all;
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls;
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all;
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all;
8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all;
9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation;
10. Reduce inequality within and among countries;
11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable;
12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns;
13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts;
14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development;
15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss;
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;
17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development. (United Nations, 2015a)

Designed as integrated and indivisible components, the Agenda's SDGs and associated targets are

mutually inclusive of one another. They cannot be achieved in a fragmented manner; instead, they must be implemented together as a whole. Achieving one goal and its targets, in other words, requires the concomitant meeting of other, indeed all, goals and targets.

The SDGs and targets, additionally, are importantly balanced between three main dimensions of sustainable development, namely social, economic and environmental dimensions. It therefore adopts a more holistic approach to sustainable development connecting social inclusion, economic growth and environmental protection. This balancing helps ensure that the diverse perspectives and needs for a truly complete approach to a better world are included. Like the interlinked nature of the SDGs and targets, these three dimensions are similarly interrelated to the extent that each must be addressed to ensure a better world for all. The Agenda cannot be fully implemented or realized in a piecemeal fashion. It requires social, economic and environmental considerations, expressed through the SDGs and targets, and translated into reality through implementation.

The roots of the new post-2015 agenda were planted in a previous UN programme, entitled the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which intended to meet the needs of the world's poorest people and societies during the first decade-and-a-half of the new century (United Nations, n.d.). The MDGs were launched in 2000 with a target year for fulfilment set for 2015. Constituted by eight goals and associated 21 targets, including halving extreme poverty rates, providing universal primary education and halting the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, the MDGs concentrated on addressing social issues in developing countries. As the MDG period neared its conclusion at the end of 2015, the international community recognized the need for a new development agenda beyond 2015 in order to continue extending the successes achieved by the MDGs, completing what these previous goals did not achieve, and expanding the remit to cover additional issues and dimensions.

The new post-2015 agenda would be uniquely different from the MDGs in several significant ways. First, it would call for all countries to promote prosperity and protect the planet. It would extend its focus beyond poorer states to include rich, middle income and poor alike. Second, the scope would be broadened beyond the eight MDGs to more fully combat the complex challenges confronting the world. Third, while the new agenda would build upon the MDGs, it would also expand their focus to include not only social considerations but also economic and

environmental issues. It would therefore adopt a more holistic approach to sustainable development connecting social inclusion, economic growth and environmental protection. And, fourth, it would facilitate an inclusive negotiation process involving all 193 UN member states in addition to participation of civil society and citizens surrounded the creation of the new post-2015 agenda. This inclusive negotiation process was unprecedented insofar as it included diverse perspectives and inputs from various communities and stakeholders instead of an exclusive top-down process involving a small community of experts.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), for example, played a significant role in helping inform the creation of the new agenda by advocating for the importance of information access in helping to meet the emerging sustainable development goals and targets. Bradley (2016) provides a detailed examination of IFLA's engagement with the post-2015 agenda negotiations and its contributions to the resulting 2030 Agenda. She explains that:

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. (Bradley, 2016: 120)

By illuminating the need for importance of information access, not only for each SDG, but also for connecting them together, IFLA embarked on a successful campaign to include information access in the final version of the agenda.

During the negotiations, IFLA promoted the importance of libraries in advancing sustainable development. It issued a formal statement affirming that libraries represent 'important development partners, both by providing access to information in all formats and by delivering services and programmes that meet the needs for information in a changing and increasingly complex society' (IFLA, 2013). Governments and other stakeholders were confronted with a unique opportunity to leverage their public libraries for realizing sustainable development efforts. IFLA emphasized public libraries' positive impact on local communities through providing of free access to information, facilitating access to cultural heritage and knowledge, establishing diverse opportunities for individuals, empowering people for their own self-development, providing expert information guidance,

and contributing to and working with their multi-stakeholder societies.

The Lyon Declaration, moreover, was another IFLA initiative to advocate for the inclusion of information access and skills within the negotiations. Launched at the 2014 World Library and Information Congress in Lyon, France, the declaration argued that information access and skills have the twin effects of supporting sustainable development and improving people's lives. The declaration stated that 'increased access to information and knowledge, underpinned by universal literacy, is an essential pillar of sustainable development' and, further, that libraries 'have the skills and resources to help governments, institutions and individuals communicate, organize, structure and understand data that is critical to development' (IFLA, 2014). The Lyon Declaration called upon all UN member states to make an international commitment to ensure universal access to information coupled with developing information skills. Garnering the support of 600 signatories from many civil society organizations, this document revealed the strong support from international civil society for advancing information access and advocating for the role of libraries in sustainable development efforts.

These advocacy campaigns successfully secured the inclusion of universal literacy in the Agenda's vision statement in addition to a major SDG target on information access. The SDG 16 – promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, providing access to justice, and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels – includes Target 16.10 to 'ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements' (UN, 2015a). Achieving full information access requires everyone to have access and associated skills to use information effectively. Public libraries provide information access, information skills development and other educational opportunities to help individuals seek, locate, organize, structure, communicate and use information for personal, social, cultural and development-related goals, needs and efforts.

Public libraries, however, are more than tools for implementing the SDGs. They are also reliable mechanisms underpinning the delivery of these goals. There are 320,000 public libraries worldwide (as well as more than one million academic, research, school, national, parliamentary and special libraries) representing established, trusted networks that should be leveraged to meet the SDGs.⁷ Their provision of information further represents a cross-cutting issue supporting all of the SDGs. As IFLA (2019a) states, public libraries and information access can help

contribute to improved outcomes across the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by promoting universal literacy, including media and information literacy, and digital literacy skills; closing gaps in access to information and helping government, civil society and business to better understand local information needs; providing a network of delivery sites for government programmes and services; advancing digital inclusion through access to ICT, and dedicated staff to help people develop new digital skills; serving as the heart of the research and academic community; and preserving and providing access to the world's culture and heritage.

In this sense, public libraries serve as the proverbial golden thread weaving the goals together into a colourful tapestry for achieving sustainable development. They ensure that people have the information they need to manifest the SDGs into practical results. While the SDGs could appear to be disjointed because of this sweeping ambition – indeed, some critics claim the SDGs should stand for ‘senseless, dreamy, garbled’ (Easterly, 2015) – this golden thread reveals their intertwined nature. A framework for approaching public libraries within the context of the UN 2030 Agenda can shed further light on public libraries’ roles in helping implement and connect the SDGs. Let us now turn to such a framework that situates each SDG within one of its major components.

A framework of public libraries’ contributions to the UN 2030 Agenda

The SDGs of the UN 2030 Agenda are comprehensive to the extent that they could appear overwhelming, especially in terms of their fulfilment; however, public libraries, as ‘public sphere institutions’ (Vårheim et al., 2019: 93) and their provision of information access, help bring together and realize the UN 2030 Agenda’s ambitious SDGs. This article now introduces a conceptual framework of public libraries’ contributions to community, culture, education, economy and democracy to approach the Agenda. These five components are not mutually exclusive but instead are symbiotic, informing and influencing each other in a matrix that makes public libraries significant to individuals and communities.

The Agenda’s SDGs can be situated within this conceptual framework’s five components to illuminate the multidimensional ways in which public libraries connect and contribute to these goals and their integrated social, economic, and environmental dimensions. This framework can be applied at both global and local levels. It can be scaled for either broad or narrow analyses, or more general or granular applications, for approaching the roles of information

and public libraries in diverse contexts. This framework, moreover, can be applied either wholesale or piecemeal. Its components do not necessarily need to be applied in their entirety, but instead could be applied separately, combined in various constellations, or be taken together for analysing public libraries’ contributions to individuals, communities and sustainable development efforts. For instance, the framework’s component of democratic contributions may not apply to every setting or situation, particularly in non-democratic countries or contexts, and, as a result, could possibly be omitted from some analyses. The framework therefore provides multiple potential pathways in which to approach and analyze public libraries’ contributions to individuals, communities and sustainable development efforts.

Ultimately, the aim of this conceptual framework is to provide both a foundation and possible points of departure for further research and studies into public libraries and their importance and implications for the Agenda specifically and sustainable development generally. The following discussion focuses on a selection of goals and associated targets for inclusion for two interrelated reasons. First, as aforementioned, it is beyond this article’s scope and space to provide an exhaustive examination of either the full Agenda or every possible aspect or feature of public libraries’ contributions to sustainable development efforts. Selecting specific goals and associated targets had to be made to ensure a more concentrated approach and focused discussion. Second, the reason behind the goals and associated targets chosen for analyses is their relevance and resonance with issues relating, both directly and indirectly, to information access and public libraries. This selection, in other words, is based on the chosen goals and associated targets being particularly germane to the work, interests and purview of public libraries. Further and other studies on public libraries and the Agenda could possibly explore other SDGs and associated targets. But, for now, let us start applying this framework to the following selection of the SDGs from the UN 2030 Agenda.

Community contributions

Communities benefit from the presence of public libraries since they are unique public places. They are community places that ‘contribute to the quality of life of their communities’ (Chow and Tian, 2019). Public libraries can help improve the quality of life by offering free and open access to diverse kinds and formats of information, free spaces for assembly and engagement, and opportunities for individual leisure

and education. Their community contributions to their communities can consequently be leveraged to help realize the Agenda's third, fifth and eleventh goals. Specifically,

- Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

Public libraries can provide free access to credible, quality health information to help inform individuals about their personal health as well as inform their communities about health issues, treatments and other resources.

- Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Public libraries promote gender equality by making available equitable and inclusive spaces and information access for women and girls, and indeed all sexes and gender identities. Public libraries provide safe meeting places, programmes and lectures on women's rights and health, and various educational services for lifelong learning including literacy training for women and girls. Public libraries also help specifically implement Target 5.b – enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women – by providing free access to ICTs accompanied by different programmes on literacy for and training on how to use them effectively.⁸

- Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

Public libraries play significant roles in helping build and maintain inclusive and resilient communities. They 'function as robust community centers, often providing services that people cannot get elsewhere' (Scott, 2011a: 191). They are 'trusted community institutions contributing to the creation of social capital among patrons . . . [making] use of their resources and the institutional capital in their communities, contributing to community resilience and social capital creation' (Vårheim, 2017). Their provision of open, equitable, inclusive and safe spaces for all individuals and groups, along with their provision of information, are important factors in helping ensure successful and sustainable cities and human settlements. They are consequently vital components of (an increasingly diminishing) public sphere; indeed, they might be 'the nearest thing we have . . . to an achieved public sphere' (Webster 2002, 176).

Public libraries, moreover, help address the information, sociocultural and humanitarian needs of all

individuals, including those from marginalized and disadvantaged groups. For instance, they 'are on the front lines of the current refugee crisis . . . assisting refugees to reconstruct information communities and landscapes, build resilience and social capital, and reconnect with their homelands while simultaneously connecting with their new communities' (Kosciejew, 2019: 94). They are offering language (often English as a second language) classes, resettlement assistance (how and where to find and secure food, housing, work, school registration, etc.), and help learning about and complying with governmental regulations.⁹ Public libraries thus help ensure refugees are included in their new communities 'by making relevant information available, accessible, and usable, through the provision of free information resources, services, and technologies in addition to other logistical and humanitarian assistance, social support, and communal spaces' (Kosciejew 2019: 94).

- Goal 11.b. By 2020, substantially increase the number of cities and human settlements adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, resilience to disasters, and develop and implement . . . holistic disaster risk management at all levels.

Public libraries are essential resources in times of emergency and crisis.¹⁰ In the United States, for example, the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has formally recognized public libraries as essential community organizations. Since they are typically well established in their local communities, they can help develop local policy on issues and plans relating to disaster risk management. Further, they often play vital roles in disaster recovery efforts 'even when other government actors fail. Libraries are centers of local information and have local knowledge. Patrons, as well as government agencies and NGOs, benefit from public libraries' local grounding' (Vårheim, 2015: 2). Public libraries 'are able to be staffed and opened quickly so librarians can interview disaster victims for actual needs. This dependable mechanism has proven to enhance a community during the marked low moments that disasters cause' (Mabe and Ashley, 2017: 27).¹¹

Many public libraries, in fact, either contribute to and/or intervene in emergency situations by taking on various roles

to support disaster recovery in communities . . . periodically adjust[ing] their policies and services based on

what their community needed at the time. These practices are not only indicative of a resilient system, but if integrated with emergency management could support a more resilient community. (Veil and Bishop, 2014: 723)

Cultural contributions

Culture is promoted by and through the presence of public libraries. They are cultural places. Culture is presented and protected, in many practical ways, by and through public libraries. Their cultural contributions to their communities can be harnessed to help support the Agenda's Goal 11 Target of 11.4. Specifically,

- Goal 11.4 Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural . . . heritage.

Public libraries play essential roles in the development, safeguarding and preservation of cultural heritage in all forms from print to digital resources. Public libraries help 'broaden their community's cultural understanding and awareness of the world through [their collections,] programming, displays, and discussions' (Scott, 2011a: 201). They collect, organize, preserve and make accessible diverse kinds of cultural resources of their communities and, indeed, of the world, thereby making available diverse facts, ideas and perspectives. This cultural accessibility nourishes creativity and intellectual activities that, in turn, lead to the creation of more culture.

Educational contributions

Educational opportunities are expanded through public libraries. They are educational places. They help reduce barriers to learning by providing free, equitable and inclusive pathways for acquiring and developing new knowledge and skills. They not only make information both available and accessible, they also represent places of thinking; put differently, they are places associated with obtaining information and thinking about and reflecting upon that information. Their educational contributions to their communities can be extended to help achieve the Agenda's fourth goal overall and, in particular, Targets 4.4, and 4.6. Specifically,

- Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Public libraries are learning environments providing safe spaces for education, where individuals can engage in study and research in order to increase their

education, stimulate their imagination, and garner new perspectives and possibilities for self-discovery. They consequently support other educational institutions and efforts within their communities by providing lectures, programmes and services for diverse purposes and needs from language instruction to literacy skills development. Their supportive role for formal education is further enriched by their provision of 'direct education through formal [and informal] instruction, for free, to many groups that at best are offered in only a few other venues' (Scott, 2011a: 203). Public libraries, for example, offer diverse programmes including children's programming, early childhood and adult literacy, language instruction such as English as a second language, civic education, and computer classes and digital literacy development.¹² They further provide access to diverse kinds of information which helps support research efforts in not only accessing and (re)using information but also creating new knowledge. Ultimately, public libraries support the lifelong learning and education of their communities.

- Target 4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical . . . skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.

Public libraries help support and advance the development of technical skills, specifically digital and related technical and literacy skills, for all individuals, from youth to adults with varying degrees of knowledge and experience, that, in turn, helps them in their employment or in their search for and securement of employment. By offering classes and programmes for developing, expanding, and/or refining digital knowledge and skills, public libraries help individuals develop abilities to efficiently and effectively access, analyse and produce information in diverse forms and formats for their diverse work needs.

- Target 4.6 By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy.

Public libraries are places of and for literacy. They have, historically, helped promote and support reading and numerical literacies for all ages. They offer diverse programmes on reading and writing for youth and adults. They often play important roles 'in developing early literacy skills and a love of reading in children . . . [as well as] working intergenerationally and developing a national culture of reading' (Campbell-Hicks, 2016: 121). Some public libraries

also ‘support increased financial literacy in their communities’ (Smith and Eschenfelder, 2013: 299) by offering programmes on financial literacy, including for general matters for personal or organizational financial management and tax compilation and submission assistance.

Economic contributions

Economies are enhanced by public libraries. They are places for economic development at both local and national levels. They help enable entrepreneurial activity, support local businesses and assist individuals search for jobs or new employment. They can also positively increase their communities’ reputation by attracting visitors who could then visit, support and shop at surrounding businesses.¹³ Their economic contributions to their communities can be further employed to help secure the Agenda’s eighth and ninth goals. Specifically,

- Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

Public libraries provide free and equitable spaces and access to information, ICTs, skills training and other educational opportunities that can help individuals develop skills and build knowledge for employment and other economic opportunities.

They offer services for employment searches and government benefits, especially for individuals who may not have computer or Internet access or may require assistance navigating the job market or government platforms. This assistance includes helping people navigate job sites, complete online applications, compose resumes and learn interviewing techniques.

This information access and skills training further benefits local businesses and entrepreneurs in conducting research, especially on local matters, that can help their economic development and growth. In fact, public libraries:

can play a significant role in the economic development of their [local] communities. Economic development in [their local] communities... benefit from many of the same resources and services all enjoy at public libraries, including free and public Internet access, space, education, question answering, and materials on many business-related subjects. (Bishop et al., 2016: 37)

These public institutions provide places where local businesses and entrepreneurs can access information and conduct research to support their ventures,

in addition to access resources on local matters that can benefit their local endeavours.

Further, public libraries’ provision of free access to ICTs, Internet access, and digital and technical literacy programmes to help individuals create, consume, share, navigate and otherwise use digital information. In fact, public libraries are increasingly prioritizing ‘their roles in promoting digital inclusion and view digital inclusion efforts as central to their missions to serve their communities’ (Bertot et al., 2013: 270). This free provision of digital technologies, services and the Internet help bolster educational and research infrastructure and, in more economically underprivileged and/or rural communities, represent the main sources for digital inclusion. Indeed, public libraries’ provision and promotion of ICTs and the Internet increases individuals’ connectivity to diverse kinds of professional and personal opportunities.

- Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.

Public libraries, significantly, are parts of infrastructure themselves. They form part of the backbone of the vital ‘social infrastructure’ (Klinenberg, 2018a), the physical places providing the settings and context for social participation. Social ties are forged when people have access to robust social infrastructures. Living near and having access to public libraries ‘brings a host of social benefits, such as increased trust, decreased loneliness, and a stronger sense of attachment to where we live’ (Cox and Streeter, 2019a). According to a recent study on the importance of place (Cox and Streeter, 2019b), individuals who live in close proximity to public libraries, along with other amenities, are more content with their communities, exhibit more social trust and display lower levels of loneliness. Cox and Streeter discovered that even after accounting for factors including urban or rural residents, social class, educational level, gender and race, greater amenity access to places like public libraries predicts feelings of community satisfaction, social trust, and social inclusion (2019b: 1). As parts of social infrastructure, public libraries therefore help foster increasing social participation through contact, communication and collaboration among neighbours, friends and other community members.

Democratic contributions

Democratic principles and practices are upheld by public libraries. They are, in many ways, democratic places. Public libraries often serve ‘as both symbols

of freedom and democracy and as mechanisms to support those values through open access to information and culture' (Byrne, 2018: 285). Extensive networks of well-provisioned and well-used public libraries help strengthen democracy; indeed, 'strong public library systems tend to go hand in hand with strong democratic values and traditions' (Byrne, 2018: 291). Public libraries facilitate, for example, some of the fundamental features of democracy, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association. Their democratic contributions to their communities can be further used to help advance the agenda's tenth, sixteenth and seventeenth goals. Specifically,

- Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries.

Public libraries help reduce inequality in two fundamental ways: first, by providing open, inclusive and safe civic spaces for all people located in urban and rural areas; and second, by providing free and equitable access to diverse information and other socio-cultural and educational services available to all individuals. They are truly 'palaces for the people' (Klinenberg, 2018a) offering space, information, and opportunities 'for everyone, regardless of whether they're a citizen, a permanent resident, or even a convicted felon – and all of it for free' (Klinenberg, 2018b). Public libraries, in these ways, can often reasonably claim the mantle of being democratic institutions.¹⁴

Further, public libraries can help reduce inequality among countries through regional or international collaborations, partnerships and support.¹⁵ They can help build each other up through efforts such as resource sharing and interlibrary loans; professional development programmes, bursaries and scholarships; fundraising efforts and volunteer arrangements; and specialized curriculum in library schools focusing on international librarianship, information issues and social 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.

Public libraries help contribute to peaceful and inclusive societies by providing safe, inclusive and open civic spaces. Their 'welcoming of diversity and respect for all users – from the indigent to the wealthy, the infant to the senior, the educated to the less informed – models democracy for the

community' (Byrne, 2018: 293). They help inculcate civic understanding by actively engaging with their communities, embracing minorities and responding to local information, cultural, educational and other social needs, thereby promoting 'democracy in a practical, 'grass roots' manner . . . [being] 'radically inclusive' for their communities' (Byrne, 2018: 293). In this sense, they not only provide information but also advance social justice and inclusion whilst simultaneously foster community for all people. As inclusive public places, they 'often help establish the foundation upon which, given sufficient time, trust levels are based and can increase' (Kosciejew, 2019: 90). As many individuals may increasingly feel alienated, atomized and afraid, public libraries can help serve as community hubs to promote and facilitate increased social interaction and connection.

- Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

Public libraries represent a well-established network of community-based, cultural and information institutions in urban and rural areas in most countries that can help promote, implement, and advance local and national development plans. Many public libraries 'have the skills and resources to help governments, institutions and individuals communicate, organise, structure and use information and data for development' (IFLA, 2017). Thus, these public institutions 'in addition to providing the recreational and educational resources desired by their communities . . . actively offer resources relating to law, government, public policy, town planning, health and the many other fields of interest to an active citizenry' (Byrne, 2018: 293). These resources, collections and services offered by public libraries further represent and serve as essential tools for decision-making at all levels, including for deliberations regarding the creation, implementation and monitoring of sustainable development efforts.

Ultimately, the Agenda's global vision requires the support of local advocacy and action to turn it into reality. Global vision and 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 . . . [can help] ensure that the sector makes a counted, vital contribution to achieving the SDGs. (Bradley, 2016: 124)

Indeed, 'libraries, in every part of the world, can be reliable mechanisms for underpinning the delivery of

sustainable development programmes' (IFLA, 2013). These public institutions are ideally situated within their local communities to help translate this global vision into local action by providing public access to information, literacy skills development and other educational opportunities, cultural heritage provision and protection, and inclusive and equitable community spaces.

Conclusion: Going forward with sustainable development efforts

Going forward, sustainable development efforts rest upon access to and the provision of information. Economic, social and environmental development suffers when and where there is a lack of information. Public libraries are motors of change that can help drive development for a sustainable, prosperous, inclusive, and healthy future for all people.

As the UN 2030 Agenda reaches its one-third mark, both its implementation and the work of public libraries in helping achieve its SDGs remains ongoing. IFLA and the international library community continues advancing the Agenda through raising awareness, contributing resources and services to meet various goals and targets, and collaborating with the UN and other organizations in making sustainable development of the economy, society, and environment a reality for all. In 2016, for example, IFLA launched the International Advocacy Programme (IAP), which is a capacity-building effort 'designed to promote and support the role libraries can play in the planning and implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda and the SDGs' (IFLA, 2018b). The IAP has been holding and hosting activities, workshops and follow-up actions to raise awareness of and advocate for (public) libraries as key partners of government, industry and other actors in supporting the Agenda.

Further, in 2019, the Ministers of Culture of Latin American and Caribbean countries, with the advice and support of IFLA, issued the so-called Buenos Aires Declaration (re)affirming and emphasizing 'the place of access to information both as a universal human right and as a cross-cutting driver of development' and recognizing 'the indispensable contribution of [public] libraries across the region [and the world] to development' (Forum of Ministers and Secretaries of Culture of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2019). Since the declaration's launch, IFLA has begun work on extending its reach to more countries to support the roles of information access and (public) libraries in achieving the SDGs (IFLA, 2019b).

By increasing awareness of the UN2030 Agenda, this article emphasized and promoted the ways in

which public libraries address, contribute to, and realize sustainable development efforts. To this end, this article's twin objectives outlined the start of a wide-ranging literature review and exploration of public libraries' intersections with sustainable development efforts. First, it began a literature review of the emerging LIS research on the Agenda and other LIS-related research that can be leveraged to both demonstrate and support the centrality of public libraries in sustainable development efforts. This literature review also provides numerous points of departure in which to continue expanding and exploring their importance for these efforts. Second, this article presented a conceptual framework of public libraries' contributions to community, culture, education, economy and democracy, applying it as a taxonomy to situate and discuss their contributions to the Agenda's SDGs. This framework offers a model for further analyses on the intersections between public library values, assets and functions with the Agenda; moreover, it can be scaled to different degrees of analyses, from the global to the local, whilst its various components can be applied individually, in combination with one another, or in their entirety.

There were admittedly some challenges encountered in conducting this research into and analyses of public libraries and sustainable development. One challenge involved the degree of detailed coverage of this topic. It is important to reiterate that it is beyond this article's scope and space to present a comprehensive or total overview of all the literature pertaining to the rich and varied contributions made by public libraries to individuals and communities. It is also beyond this article's scope and space to present a complete conversation on all these important contributions. This article, instead, aims to begin such an overview to both start and stimulate more conversations about public libraries' contributions and, specifically, their contributions to and for sustainable development efforts within the Agenda's context.

There also appears to be an apparent lack of substantial engagement with the roles and contributions of public libraries to realizing the UN 2030 Agenda emanating from discourses within more developed countries and regions. A large portion of the literature on this specific topic appears to be from scholars and professionals working within or focusing upon undeveloped or underdeveloped countries and regions. This work is necessary and vital, and it is hoped this article can help contribute to further ongoing and other studies being done within these countries and regions. But this seeming regional imbalance in engagement with and focus on this topic illuminates that scholarship from certain areas is not adequately

addressing or tackling public libraries and their roles in achieving the Agenda to the extent that it needs. Sustainable development, after all, is a global concern that requires concerted, collaborative and cooperative efforts across multidimensional boundaries. This article can begin to contribute to filling this apparent research gap, stimulate increased scholarly and practice-based research, and connect and support other interdisciplinary, as well as multinational and multicultural studies, on this topic from diverse scholars, professionals and other interested parties from various countries and regions at all levels of development.

Applying this conceptual framework was also challenged by the seemingly minimal scholarly attention to public library services for various issues relating to natural heritage. Goal 11.4, for instance, states the need to strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural *and* natural heritage. Libraries of all stripes are conducting important work in protecting and safeguarding cultural heritage. Public libraries are of course instrumental in these efforts, especially at local levels. But it was a challenge to find any substantial scholarship on (public) libraries' roles in providing services relating to, let alone protecting and safeguarding, aspects or issues of natural heritage. Greater research on public libraries' contributions to and for natural heritage could help further reveal their important roles in these efforts, not to mention their roles in achieving all aspects of Goal 11.4.

Possible next steps that public libraries could potentially take in approaching the UN 2030 Agenda are numerous. They include addressing the aforementioned challenges encountered in this particular research, in addition to continuing scholarly research, conducting more professional studies, and generating practice-based evidence on the impacts of and values represented by public libraries within the Agenda's context. By providing a basis upon which to conduct further studies into this topic, this article can serve as a springboard for additional attention to public libraries, sustainable development, and the UN 2030 Agenda. It could, for instance, be used to help inform both qualitative and quantitative approaches measuring the impact and value of public libraries' work on and for the Agenda. Additionally, while this article focused on how public libraries support the Agenda and how the SDGs fit into current public library practices, a possible goal for future research could be adjusting the question to examine how public libraries can innovate to better serve and meet the Agenda's SDGs or what particular actions and steps can public libraries adopt to advance sustainable development efforts.

Public libraries matter for our lives, societies and sustainable development. Ultimately, this article is a foundation upon which to build, and a framework within which to apply, further research into the important intersections between public libraries, information access and sustainable development efforts. It is hoped that, through its humble contribution, this article can help the UN2030 Agenda's ambition to ensure that no one is left behind and, in so doing, help enable, empower and include everyone in achieving a better future for all.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. See Carlton 2018; IFLA 2018a, 2019a, 2019c, 2019d.
2. See Bryant 2015; Ford, 2015; Jones and Kweifio-Okai 2015; Sengupta 2015; Wooldridge 2016.
3. See the United Nations 2019 SDG Report.
4. Public libraries' claim to be open to all people, however, may not always be practically realized. There are instances where not everyone is equally welcome. Critical race theory is interrogating this claim; see, for instance, Al-Qallaf and Mika, 2013; Burke 2010; Gibson et al., 2018; Hudson, 2017; Pawley, 2006; Velez and Villa-Nicholas, 2017. There are also expanding inquiries into other social justice issues within public library contexts; see, for example, Berman, 2005; Gorham et al., 2016; Jaeger et al., 2015, 2016; Kim and Sin 2008; LaBossiere et al., n.d; Pateman and Vincent, 2016; Wheeler, 2005; Williment, 2019. There is also growing recognition that public libraries can create or reinforce hegemony and even foster their own sociopolitical agendas; see, for instance, Jaeger and Sarin, 2016.
5. See, for example, Abelenda, 2014; Atkinson and Fankhauser, 2019; Bebbington and Unerman, 2018; Bexell and Jönsson, 2017; Biermann et al., 2017; Bowen et al., 2017; Brende and Høie, 2015; Browne, 2017; Caiado et al., 2018; Chasek and Wagner, 2016; Chasek et al., 2016; Dodds et al., 2016; Elder and Olsen, 2019; Enns, 2015; Esquivel, 2016; Filho et al., 2018; Fitchett and Atun, 2014; French and Kotzé, 2018; Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Galli et al., 2018; Griggs et al., 2013; Hák et al., 2016; Halati and He, 2018; Haysom, 2018; Kamau et al., 2018; Kanie and Biermann, 2017; Koehler, 2016; Kostoska and Kocarev 2019; LeBlanc, 2015; Lim et al., 2016; Lu et al., 2015; Morton et al., 2017; Musindarwezo, 2018; Nilsson et al., 2016; Ntona and

- Morgera, 2018; Okech and Musindarwezo, 2019; Omisore et al., 2017; Pogge and Sengupta, 2015; Pradhan et al., 2017; Ruhil, 2017; Sachs, 2012; Scholte and Söderbaum, 2017; Stevens and Kanie, 2016; Sridhar, 2016; UN Women, 2018; Utama et al., 2015; Van Norren, 2014; Vandemoortele, 2014; Waage et al., 2015; Webb et al., 2017; Winkler and Williams, 2018; Wood et al., 2018; Wood and DeClerck, 2015.
6. See, for instance, Abata-Ebire et al., 2018; Anasi et al., 2018; Bradley, 2016; Chowdhury and Koya, 2017; Igbinovia, 2016; Koya and Chowdhury, 2019; Nicholas and Perpetual, 2015; Onah et al., 2015.
 7. There are admittedly other respected networks – from public school systems and universities to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – that can also be leveraged for sustainable development efforts. Public libraries, however, are uniquely qualified because of their being open and free to all people. Public school systems, however, are geared towards teachers, staff and their pupils (and pupils' families), some NGOs are subject-specific, such as focusing on human rights or environmental concerns, and even others may require fee-based memberships or subscriptions, and so on.
 8. For more detailed discussions of library services and programmes that help advance and empower women and girls, see, for instance, Audunson et al., 2011; McKenzie et al., 2006; Smallwood and Sanborn, 2017; Ulvik, 2010; Yoshida, 2013.
 9. For a more detailed examination of the vital roles played by public libraries in addressing the plight of refugees see, for instance, Koscieljew 2019.
 10. For more in-depth coverage of the roles played by public libraries in disaster risk management and recovery contexts, see, for example, Bertot et al., 2006; Dickerson, 2007; Featherstone et al., 2008; Hagar, 2012; Halsted et al., 2014; Mabe and Ashley, 2017; Robertson, 2015; Vårheim, 2015, 2016; Steward, 2014; Young, 2018.
 11. There are, admittedly, other organizations, including civil society organizations and welfare agencies, that contribute humanitarian interventions during emergencies. Public libraries, however, are particularly special in such interventions insofar as they often provide wide-ranging assistance and support, such as information provision coupled with humanitarian, shelter, relief, and other services, whereas other organizations typically concentrate on one particular kind of assistance or support.
 12. Public libraries play many educational and literacy roles; for further discussion, see, for example: Arndt, 2016; Batchelor, 2017; Bertot et al., 2012, 2016; Bossaller, 2017; Clark and Hawkins, 2011; Jaeger et al., 2012; Julien and Hoffman, 2008; Koik, 2019; Koscieljew, 2019; LaPierre and Kitzie, 2019; Lopez et al., 2016; Lor, 2018; McLoughlin and Morris 2004; McShane, 2011; Ottonica et al., 2018; Rhinesmith and Urbano Stanton, 2018; Sabo, 2017; Stevenson and Domsy, 2016; Subramaniam et al., 2018; Zapata, 1994.
 13. Public libraries often contribute to local and national economies in various ways; see, for instance: Aabø, 2005a, 2005b; Arts Council England, 2014; Audunson et al., 2019; Franks and Johns, 2015; Goulding, 2016; Hancks, 2012; Herrera, 2016; Hildreth and Sullivan, 2015; Liu, 2004; Mehra et al., 2016, 2017; Miller, 2017; Reid and Howard, 2016; Scott, 2011b; Seleb and Kolo, 2017; Stenstrom et al., 2019; Summers and Buchanan, 2018; Taylor et al., 2012; White, 2014; Wyatt and Leorke, 2017.
 14. Yet not all public libraries in all contexts aim or intend to be democratic institutions. Depending upon context, public libraries can serve undemocratic ideologies and regimes; for a contemporary example of non-democratic public libraries, such as North Korean libraries, see Koscieljew 2009a, 2009b.
 15. Many public libraries and library associations collaborate across borders and other boundaries. IFLA is arguably the preeminent example of such international collaboration. For other discussions on aspects of public libraries' international cooperation, see, for example: Chakraborty and Das, 2014; Mark, 2007; Norman, 2013; Saurombe and Ngulube, 2018; Weinberger, 2012; Yarrow et al., 2008.

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