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**Submissions from entities in the United Nations system, international
organizations and other stakeholders on their efforts in 2023 to
implement the outcomes of the WSIS**

Submission by

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions

This submission was prepared as an input to the report of the UN Secretary-General on "Progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society at the regional and international levels" (to the 27th session of the CSTD), in response to the request by the Economic and Social Council, in its resolution 2006/46, to the UN Secretary-General to inform the Commission on Science and Technology for Development on the implementation of the outcomes of the WSIS as part of his annual reporting to the Commission.

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IFLA WSIS Submission 2023

In 2023, libraries have continued to play a pivotal role in the delivery of the wider WSIS agenda by serving as gateways for the population to access information in a more meaningful manner. Libraries have and will continue to adapt to a world that is increasingly digital, but more importantly, as community centers they remain in a unique position to ensure that this transition is as inclusive as possible and that it is aligned with the local needs of internet users.

The post pandemic period has encouraged IFLA to put special emphasis on capacity development of library staff and on building strategic partnerships with non-library stakeholders and like-minded organizations that share the same goals and values.

During the coming months, we consider it important to reaffirm the great value that lies in relying on the global library infrastructure and services to protect and improve equal access to information for everyone.

We see significant alignment between the principles, objectives and recommendations shared earlier this year in the Global Digital Compact policy brief, and the role and vision of libraries for the coming years. We believe that the goal of bridging the digital divide can be more easily accomplished with the involvement of libraries and their engagement in digital cooperation strategies in the long-term. Similarly, we welcome the references to the key role of libraries in helping internet users to be safe and confident in the UNESCO Guidelines on Platform Regulation.

The concept of meaningful access must also be recognized by government and stakeholders as a crucial part of libraries' mission to deliver on internet goals as with the right policies and support, libraries can serve as cost-effective, sustainable centers for inclusive internet access.

Throughout the course of this and the coming year, IFLA will undergo the process of updating its own Internet Manifesto. This document will help clarify libraries' positions' with an international unified voice including areas such as freedom of speech and expression, importance of equity and access to information, online digital and algorithmic literacy and access to data and knowledge globally. It is also intended to serve as a means of mobilizing libraries themselves to see themselves more clearly as internet governance actors, and build a sense of agency and responsibility for contributing actively to the vision of a people-centered internet.

Trends and Experiences

As outlined in last year's report, and using the IFLA Library Map of the World as a source, a third of the public libraries for which relevant data is available are still not connected to the internet. However, we still lack data from a large number of countries.

Ensuring that all libraries are connected to the internet remains a big challenge for

the coming years, in order to ensure that people have a key backstop option for getting online, and so not being left behind. We know that – both as an access point of last resort, and a complement to ‘private’ access, public internet access through libraries makes an essential contribution to an overall connectivity offer.

If we want to meet the target of connecting all libraries to the internet that has been set as part of the WSIS agenda, more efforts need to be focused on this area for example to encourage the sort of experimentation and innovation driven forwards by the Gigabit Libraries Network.

The issue of libraries’ connectivity has parallels with efforts to bring schools online, and we see strong potential in efforts to ensure that public and community libraries are covered by the GIGA Initiative. Even within schools, it will also be important to connect not just classrooms, but also school libraries, as these are not only key players in supporting educational success, but can also serve wider communities to support digital and information literacy, education, social, economic and cultural development. Through a collaboration between IFLA and GIGA, we can hope to address both the data and the connectivity gaps, and catalyse partnerships to ensure that all libraries have the capacity and resources they need to succeed.

Overall, and where there is data, public access in libraries continues to see a corresponding rise in use in many countries, particularly in those where funds and attention has been directed towards renewing library services and infrastructure. But while access to infrastructure is critical, without this access being inclusive, useful, sustainable and affordable, and linked to human capacity development and relevant content, it will not achieve its positive potential.

Another important trend to highlight is the role that libraries have played in supporting the United Nations 2030 agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, through their provision of access to ICTs and ICT-related services. In 2023, a good number of library associations have increased their engagement with the 2030 Agenda. According to the [EBLIDA](#) report, a good 84% of national library associations and/or library agencies state that there is a clear promotion of SDG-oriented schemes, with a selection of SDGs that are relevant at national level and the definition of well-established policies. This result confirms that awareness, at least at top level, has increased, together with the understanding that SDGs are a central drive for library development.

In particular, over the past year, libraries have continued to offer access to information and education via the internet (SDG 4), to support the workforce by offering skills training to employed and unemployed citizens (SDG 8), to enable people to access government and other resources for their well-being (SDG 3), to enhance access to information for people in remote areas (SDG 10). Many, if not all of these results have been attained by the internet access they offer to the population and via the support and guidance offered by their staff.

It is also important to mention the advancement of generative artificial intelligence and its relation to the emerging concept of fourth generation rights that addresses the right of people to be independent individuals in a world where choices are increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence is becoming

increasingly prevalent in all areas of human activity, including libraries. New solutions are being developed to significantly simplify certain library procedures and processes. These include the automation of routine processes, such as automatic categorization of library materials, personalized book and resource recommendations based on user information needs, advanced information search and filtering, recognition of various images and audio recordings, digitization of manuscripts and rare books, library system management, preservation of library materials, and more.

Governments need to take libraries into account in the development of regulatory policies related to the use of artificial intelligence and actively involve them in participatory multistakeholder processes.

The emergence of the notion of fourth generation rights arguably provides an opportunity for libraries to underline their own contribution not just to digital citizenship (in a more civic, political sense), but to digital personhood. Through helping people not just to be internet users, but informed, empowered internet users.

Lastly, lack of funding remains an issue to be addressed as even though there have been positive funding trends noticed during the past years. This has been mainly observed in clusters of wealthier countries which continues to harm certain regions.

In this sense, decision-makers should pay attention to intervene in processes that may target funding legislation in order to ensure that libraries can meet the local needs of their users.

Lastly, other trends worth taking into consideration include the rise in price of telecommunication and internet services that is regularly cited as one of the major barriers to access the information. Affordability of the internet is a key piece towards the achievement of inclusive connectivity and libraries can also offer support for those who are not yet able to access it and may effectively act as a first step towards digital literacy.

In the context of rapid growth in the digital economy, we need to ensure that the growing ubiquity of the internet is matched by action to equip citizens with the necessary digital skills and capacities for the job market and civil life. The development of these skills requires a space and localized use of knowledge for the capacity development of citizens and those are two aspects that libraries already have experience of engaging with.

Innovative Policies

Just as in 2022, the [LEO Libraries project](#) run by the Gigabit Libraries Network keeps exploring the possibility to use new technology (low earth orbit satellites) to connect libraries that would be offline otherwise. While the project continues at a pilot stage, libraries in remote areas are starting to reap the benefits of the new possibilities that internet access has given to them.

It is also valuable to highlight the initiatives that are undertaken by the [National Library of Indonesia](#), that has a big focus on increasing economic growth and social

inclusion via ICT-enabled training. Their library transformation program provides assistance to 136 districts/cities with 96 village libraries in 34 provinces. Initiatives include digital literacy training to allow unemployed people to find jobs and access vocational schools, enabling access to information for small business owners and teaching workshops in data science and digital marketing to individuals who want to scale up their small businesses.

Overall, many in these communities and individuals have reported an unprecedented improvement in their life quality and access to welfare.

In Uganda, as part of EIFL's [Digital skills@ your local library project](#), people have been able to enroll in digital and mobile literacy training offered by the Bugiri Public Library. Using their newly acquired skills, many locals were able to learn more about local resources and to set up a business to support their families. This program has worked with a network of 27 public and community libraries in Uganda to provide digital skills to young people and women. Fifty librarians and volunteers have been trained to teach these skills in their communities and in 2023, the amount of people who have reported to benefit from this program amounts up to 1,500. While many of these workshops are held in library buildings, librarians also sometimes go into the community to the most remote areas, visiting workplaces such as garages and shops to demonstrate how the access to internet via computers and mobile devices can help them improve their entrepreneurial, marketing and communication skills.

A similar initiative is taking place in Ghana, where public libraries across the country have partnered to teach thousands of school children advanced digital and literacy skills and connect them to digital learning opportunities and online educational resources. The '[Enhancing digital learning in schools](#)' project has built the digital and training skills of library staff, enabling them to teach school students aged from 12 to 18 advanced computer and information literacy skills and to connect them to digital learning opportunities. These libraries have turned into digital learning hubs that have helped many students access the internet in a safe and effective way and to further their education.

In countries with high and relatively high digital illiteracy, such as in the case of Tunisia, the [Erriadh Public Library](#) has sought to help primarily women to develop digital skills by launching a computer literacy club. This initiative aimed to give those who had left school without skills a second chance to build their ability to find work by giving them the knowledge and support to become computer literate. The course placed a particular emphasis on inclusive life-long learning, gender equality, and access to decent jobs and economic development. As a result of the conducted lessons, the assessment at the end of the program showed that 90% of the participants passed the course with good grades and used this for their own life improvement.

Recommendations and Actions

For government, decision-makers and non-library stakeholders:

- 1. Include libraries in national digital strategies, digital cooperation and inclusion**

processes and broadband expansion: Recognise that supporting libraries is a win-win situation where, by helping them, stakeholders will also be able to reach their goals in return. Building media and information literacy is just one particular area where governments should aim to incorporate public libraries as partners in their strategies. Similarly, with over 2.6 million libraries worldwide, the potential of this vast network to support digital inclusion can be fully realized by incorporating libraries into national broadband policies, from the planning to the delivery stage.

- 2. Enhance legislation to protect net neutrality and meaningful universal connectivity and access:** In 2023, and coming years, this continues to be a priority, as this is a precondition for the achievement of other goals and policy agendas. Governments, decision-makers and stakeholders should work together in support of library-related interventions in this area, as well as developing strategies to effectively monitor progress and adjust for the upcoming years.
- 3. Invest in digital literacy beyond connectivity:** The achievement of universal connectivity already features in the UN 2030 Agenda, but the Global Digital Compact process is already making the point that connectivity alone is not enough – this needs to be meaningful. In order to effectively integrate all individuals that are currently not able to make the most of the internet or whatever reason, capacity building efforts need to be put in place. These efforts should be context-relevant. This is where libraries can come into play as useful allies as they are community hubs and venues that have the potential to deliver digital skills to the general public.
- 4. Support open science/open research:** Governments should develop plans and take action in order to facilitate open science (open research), both within their own borders and in collaboration with others. This includes funding infrastructures, adapting research policies, adapting evaluation frameworks to favor contributions to open research and education, and ensuring pro-openness mandates for research funding, as well as to consider the impact of other policies on open science.
- 5. Consider libraries, as lifelong learning providers, as a core part of the education infrastructure:** Recognizing libraries as a core part of the educational ecosystem is crucial for equitable access to knowledge and meaningful internet access. Policies on educational connectivity should encompass lifelong learning and non-formal ways of education as the one offered by libraries. Libraries can be effective allies in the global transformation of educational strategies.
- 6. Disaggregate connectivity data to allow for meaningful policy responses:** As outlined in the 2022 report, there needs to be effective testing of the quality of connectivity, in particular, it is important to be able to understand the situation facing people in remote areas, as well as people and communities at risk of marginalization. This data should be published regularly, in a timely fashion, and publicly in order to allow for third party oversight.
- 7. Making the world's cultural and scientific heritage accessible to all:** By supporting digitization, access to and preservation of cultural and scientific heritage, creating and funding interoperable digital library systems and supporting the pivotal role of libraries and information services in the promotion of best standards and practices. In particular, governments should enable cross-border access and activities by removing unnecessary copyright-related barriers.

For libraries:

- 1. Actively engage in internet governance processes and to portray the work of libraries in this field:** library professionals have a long-standing expertise in the information services field and the internet is crucial to their work – they therefore have a key interest in shaping the way it works. It is also important to collect and share current policies and experiences among library professionals in regard to the use of the internet and ICTs.
- 2. Improve advocacy strategies:** Libraries should participate in local and national initiatives and discussions on internet policies, digital inclusion, broadband access and open data. When

governments convene stakeholders to establish policies on digital inclusion and technology access for all, librarians should insist on having a role in these discussions. Within key information initiatives, the library community must assert the critical importance of public libraries as a bridge between underserved communities and the potential of the internet.

- 3. Link global issues and individual experiences, and engage with non-library stakeholders:** Many internet and ICT-related themes directly intersect with library focus areas, as well as with a variety of pressing global challenges. Ensuring that a wide range of people in the library field are thinking in these broader terms, and are able to project our messages to decision makers is a key step in this process.
- 4. Promote openness and diversity, and advocate for access to public goods:** Libraries themselves should embrace their role in supporting digital public goods and the knowledge commons, and integrate this into their own planning and policies. They should be active in identifying what restricts this access, and find to these, either through their own work, or through advocating change more broadly.
- 5. Engage in partnerships for shared goals:** Connecting with other people in our and other fields must be an integral part of our practice. We should encourage joint research with partner organizations and individuals and strive to open a space for emerging leaders in our field. In building these connections, it is also important to think about permanence and how we can meaningfully engage librarians from different regions in different conversations.