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Submissions from entities in the United Nations system, international organizations and other stakeholders on their efforts in 2021 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 25th 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.

Part I: Summary

This contribution focuses primarily on WSIS Target 4: Connect all public libraries, archives, museums, cultural centres and post offices. As a leading organisation for libraries around the world, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), IFLA works to represent the interests and experiences of the global library sector.

Throughout 2021, libraries continued to leverage ICT to support meaningful access to information and digital inclusion for their communities – both when their doors were closed and when re-introduction of in-person services was possible. This work ranged from various approaches to providing public access to the internet and ICTs, to digital skills learning and support, and other ICT-based services tailored to help meet community needs - e.g. in such fields as education and employment.

There are ongoing efforts by stakeholders in various sectors to support library access to connectivity and ICT equipment, to help enable this work. Other initiatives include innovative public internet access models, data collection around good practices, and facilitating library participation in policy dialogues around meaningful digital inclusion.

Part II: Trends and experiences in 2021

Libraries continue to support digital inclusion and access to information. The rapid progression of the pandemic in 2020 significantly impacted libraries' traditional work to support meaningful digital inclusion and access to information, particularly as many needed to limit or completely forego physical access to their premises.

The 2020 IFLA contribution to WSIS reporting reflected the different ways libraries continued to take on these tasks – including by digitising more services typically done in-person, expanding access to digital materials, and helping facilitate digital inclusion in their communities.

A year on, many such library initiatives have been maintained and new ones introduced: in the field of digital inclusion, for instance, this can entail ensuring WiFi access outside of the building, hotspot and laptop loan programs, public access to computers by appointment, and mobile libraries and bibliobuses offering access to, inter alia, WiFi and/or computers.[1] Over the past year, more data and information has become available to better understand the scope and impacts of such interventions and offers.

What public access in libraries means in 2021. Several new inquiries have offered further insights on what users are more likely to be disconnected when access via a library is not available. For instance, a report from the US suggests that several user groups – e.g. those who "speak a language other than English at home", are of "Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino

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[1] See e.g. https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/lake-county-news-sun/ct-lns-pandemic-library-services-st-0115-20210114-rna4m3brxzdddkd2hg67jgf2pq-story.html;
https://www.larazon.es/america/20210211/pmrkrauqnbcbpob4seqjqkfzsm.html;
https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/public-libraries-and-the-pandemic/stories-from-the-field-libraries-are-innovating-pivoting-and-collaborating/

origin or descent" or are Black or African American, are over-represented among respondents who say they lost their main access point to the internet when the public library closed.[2] Similarly, a 2021 Oxfordshire Digital Inclusion Project Report indicated that in the UK, 19% of library computer users did not have internet access at home, 30% - that they had no PC at home, and 11% - no mobile phone.[3] Such findings suggest the importance of library-based digital inclusion offers, particularly for the social groups which may be underserved or more vulnerable.

Efforts to ensure suitable connectivity and ICT equipment for libraries. That is why, throughout 2021, public access to the internet and/or computers was often among the priority considerations for library reopening and contingency plans. In Colombia, for example, Guidelines for library reopening issued by the Ministry of Culture and the National Library outline how PC and internet access can be reintroduced as safely and as soon as possible.[4] And in Portugal, the National Public Library Network issued a call for libraries to keep the public WiFi on and available even as the library buildings were required to close in January 2021.[5]

2021 also saw further initiatives striving to ensure that libraries have the connectivity, resources and equipment necessary to carry on their support for digital inclusion and access to information. These can take the form of government support – for example, in the US, the Emergency Connectivity Fund and Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) American Rescue Plan Act help boost library-based digital inclusion work.[6] In the Philippines, public access facilities and internet access have been made available in more libraries (alongside other locations) as part of the ongoing Tech4ED program.[7]

Various partnerships and other stakeholders have also been engaged to help maintain and boost the digital inclusion work of libraries. For example, the Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa National Library's New Zealand Libraries Partnership Programme helped, inter alia, to ensure that more public libraries can keep public internet free of charge.[8] And in Jamaica, a CHASE Fund donation to the national Library Service helped make more ICTs (i.e. laptops, tablets, printers) be made available for the public in libraries throughout the country.[9]

Making access meaningful: libraries expanding digital support and ICT-based initiatives to meet user needs. As the pandemic accelerated the digitisation of public and private services, many libraries continued to provide digital skills learning opportunities and support to help their communities navigate these. For instance, in Singapore and Lithuania, there are dedicated initiatives to help seniors build up their digital skills – which could of course also be done online during lockdowns as needed.[10] Safety and wellbeing online are also among the areas that libraries continue to champion – for instance, public

[2] https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/public-libraries-and-the-pandemic/findings

[3] https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxlaw/digital_inc_project_report_a4_final.pdf

[4] https://bibliotecanacional.gov.co/es-co/actividades/noticias/Documents/Lineamientos%20de%20reapertura%20de%20instalaciones%20y%20servicios%20en%20bibliotecas%20p%c3%bablicas_Junio%202021_final.pdf

[5] https://www.publico.pt/2021/01/21/p3/noticia/bibliotecas-deixar-sinal-acesso-wifi-aberto-apela-rede-nacional-1947333

[6] See e.g. https://www.imls.gov/blog/2021/09/state-library-spotlight-how-arp-act-stimulus-funds -are-supporting-digital-inclusion, https://www.naco.org/blog/fcc-awards-first-round-emergency-connectivity-fund-grants

[7] See e.g. https://dict.gov.ph/dict-agusan-del-sur-launches-provincial-library-digital-hub-acquires-computer-equipment/; https://dict.gov.ph/dict-installs-more-free-wi-fi-and-ict-equipment-in-sulu/

[8] https://www.librariesaotearoa.org.nz/korero-blog/building-capability-and-stronger-communities-during-tough-times

[9] https://jis.gov.jm/features/chase-fund-boosting-services-provided-by-libraries/

[10] https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/forum/2021/Agenda/Session/320

libraries in both Latvia and Lithuania set up a wide variety of digital educational and awareness-raising activities for the 2021 Safer Internet Day.[11]

As the health, economic and social impacts of the pandemic exacerbate and create new vulnerabilities, libraries leverage ICT to meet the evolving needs of their communities. Once such area is education – where it is crucial to mitigate the impacts of closures and disruptions of educational institutions on learning.[12] Where public, academic or school libraries had the ICT resources to do so, they continued to support remote education and learning – e.g. through provision of digital learning resources, homework or research help, reading initiatives to support literacy.[13] Such initiatives can also be a crucial element in strategies to help students catch up on lost time after schools reopening.[14]

Another area where libraries continue to leverage ICT is employment – which can be particularly important as the pandemic also left many people in significantly more precarious financial situations.

In Uganda, for instance, a collaboration between Electronic Information for Libraries, the National Library, Peer 2 Peer University and Maendeleo Foundation recently introduced the 'Digital skills @ your local library' project, which particularly targets women (who are more likely to experience digital exclusion) and unemployed youth (who could benefit from gaining marketable digital skills).[15] Meanwhile, ABSA Bank and the Ghana Library Authority have launched a partnership to offer e-learning resources that help young people develop marketable and work-related skills.[16]

Access to content remains a key issue, given the importance of this for allowing internet access to translate into real-world outcomes. The inadaptation of copyright laws to the digital space can mean, too often, that there are restrictions or uncertainty about what libraries can do with their collections. There have been calls for deeper investigation into eBook markets in the United Kingdom,[17] while in the United States, there are state-level laws to ensure that libraries can buy and lend eBooks.[18] There is a strong case for ensuring that the copyright exceptions and limitations on which libraries rely also work in the digital world, and that there be clarity that they can be used across borders.

Part III: Actions and initiatives in 2021

Alongside the initiatives listed in Section 1, there are various other library efforts focusing on highlighting good practices and supporting innovation.

IFLA's ongoing work in this field includes data collection on library connectivity and public access to the internet in libraries as part of the [Library Map of the World](). IFLA also occasionally initiates data collection on more specialised topics around libraries in the information society – for example, a recent survey on library practices in protecting the

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[11] https://www.ifla.org/news/safer-internet-day-experiences-in-latvian-libraries/; https://www.ifla.org/news/safer-internet-day-in-lithuanian-libraries/

[12] https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse

[13] See e.g. https://www.cilips.org.uk/librariesareessential-case-study-shetland-school-libraries

[14] https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/lga-library-investment-key-helping-children-catch-following-pandemic

[15] https://www.eifl.net/events/ict-training-camp-uganda, https://www.nlu.go.ug/close-digital-devide-project

[16] https://library.gov.gh/readytowork/; https://www.myjoyonline.com/absa-bank-and-ghana-library-authority-partners-to-boost-employment-prospects-of-youth/?param=

[17] https://academicebookinvestigation.org/

[18] https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/86528-maryland-library-e-book-bill-becomes-law.html

safety and wellbeing of youth online, carried out by the Libraries for Children and Young Adults Section.

IFLA continues to support library engagement in Internet Governance policy dialogues, including to facilitate multistakeholder cooperation and maximise the potential of libraries as digital inclusion and digital literacy champions. Some of the recent engagements include the World Summit on the Information Society Forum, the Internet Governance Forum, and the Asia-Pacific Regional Internet Governance Forum.

Furthermore, IFLA continues gathering information on policy frameworks and partnerships that can leverage library ICT resources to support meaningful access to information. Some of the recent work in this area includes overviews of the roles of libraries in digital skills policies and possible areas for cooperation between libraries and municipal authorities to support digital rights and inclusion.

The ongoing "10-minute Digital Librarian" series outlines innovative tools, good practices and measures that libraries can take to champion access to information in the digital information ecosystem. Other practical tools such as webinars – e.g. on becoming a learning organisation, on addressing misinformation – also help libraries explore such good practices.

The Dynamic Coalition on Public Access in Libraries has recently updated and finalised a 2-part paper that outlines the roles libraries play in national broadband plans and policies, and insights from the implementation of library-based digital inclusion policy measures on the ground.

Other partners in the library space are also active, for example in exploring the potential of low-earth orbit satellites to boost connectivity via libraries (see the Gigabit Libraries Network), while actors such as Libraries Without Borders promote connectivity and access to library collections.