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Submissions from entities in the United Nations system, international organizations and other stakeholders on their efforts in 2022 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 26th 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.

IFLA WSIS Submission 2022

The past year has seen continued affirmation of the role that internet access in libraries can play in delivering on the wider goals of WSIS, building on the combination of the opportunities created by the internet with the unique combination of spaces and staff offered by libraries.

Initiatives launched during the pandemic, in response to lockdowns, have shown a continued relevance, and seem likely to become permanent fixtures. These include new partnerships and new ways to turn connectivity into real-world impact. At the same time, there remain challenges about under-investment by governments in libraries, meaning that they are less able to fulfil their potential in many countries and regions than would otherwise be the case.

Looking to the future, and in particular in the context of efforts to promote school connectivity, we believe that it is time for a new affirmation of the value of connecting libraries as part of wider digital inclusion strategies. Such work should ensure that libraries are not set up to fail by encouraging and enabling partnerships, and ensuring that library staff have the skills, support and tools to realise their potential here.

Trends and Experiences

According to data available through IFLA's Library Map of the World, in countries for which data exists, 68.42% of the world's public and community libraries provide public access to the internet in one form or another.

Underlying this figure are two key challenges – first of all is the fact that just over two thirds of libraries being connected is clearly not enough in the light of the targets set as part of the WSIS programme.

The second is the fact that we still face a significant lack of data. Only 123 countries have provided data about the number of public and community libraries, and only 90 about the number of public and community libraries providing internet access, representing just less than 40% of the total. It is clear that a prior step towards realising the potential of libraries to support an inclusive internet will be to deepen the knowledge that we have about libraries. As underlined in IFLA's own statement on the topic, we need to ensure that, as part of efforts around open government, good governance, and digital inclusion, it is essential to collect and give access to data about numbers and location of libraries.

Linked to this is a first trend – the risk that the importance of connecting public libraries to the internet is forgotten as a goal amidst the very welcome new drive to bring all schools online. There are strong positive reasons for action here which in fact strongly complement the objectives of programmes such as the GIGA initiative. However, initiatives in this field don't necessarily include connecting libraries, as has been the case in Georgia for example.

First of all, connected public and community libraries help to consolidate the benefits that connected schools can bring by providing spaces and sources of resources for students, in particular those who do not have the opportunity to get online at home.

While the data could certainly benefit from being refreshed, PISA data from 2009 underlines the much higher reliance on libraries by students who don't have an internet connection at home. But also, libraries are front and centre of efforts to enable learning among people who have left school, and risk otherwise being left behind if we focus only on schools.

A second trend is growing concern about the ability of libraries which are connected to provide access to digital content – clearly a key reason for bringing libraries and their users online in the first place. On the positive side, we are seeing new efforts to coordinate access through libraries. For example, in the United Kingdom, progress is being made towards a single digital presence for libraries, while in Finland, work is underway to overcome the highly unequal access to eBooks from one library to the next. Elsewhere, new platforms bringing together curated digital content are appearing.

At the same time, the dependence of libraries on platforms open them to risk, as illustrated by the recent controversy around Hoopla, with a worry that the role of librarians in helping readers access content that meets their needs is being bypassed. Linked to this is the need to ensure that a failure to update copyright laws undermines the ability of libraries to provide information in the digital age. For example, this happens when there is a failure to regulate eBook markets or when provisions in law that enable libraries to do their job are not extended to allow digital uses.

A third trend is rather two conflicting trends – that in some countries there is meaningful investment in supporting libraries to provide internet access, but in others not. On the positive side, there is the investment of 60 million New Zealand dollars in ensuring that everyone can have internet access through libraries, or the 4.3 million Canadian dollars paid to improve internet access through libraries in poor and rural areas in Ontario. In Anambra State, Nigeria, there has been welcome investment, too, in developing the skills of librarians to support meaningful internet access. This sort of investment is vital in realising the potential of libraries by making their offer more attractive to users.

At the same time, there are also too many countries where libraries suffer from under investment (or no investment at all), representing a major missed opportunity.

A fourth trend, interestingly, is growing integration between different types of libraries in order to support access, as well as efforts to integrate library and community connectivity efforts. For example, university libraries often have greater possibilities to access the internet than other types of libraries, as well as more expertise and access to resources. In Panama, for example, there has been a drive to break down the distinction between public and academic libraries, drawing on the fact that university libraries tend to be better connected through the creation of 'Infoplazas'

A fifth is, as the world opens up post-COVID, the rediscovery of the possibilities to combine internet access with physical activities. For example, in France, there is a new drive to support citizen science through libraries, something that not only illustrates the possibilities of the internet.

Innovative Policies

As already highlighted above, there have been some welcome initiatives recently that have enhanced public access to the internet through libraries, in particular the additional funding provided for example in New Zealand and Ontario, Canada. These have, as mentioned, focused strongly on how to ensure that those most at risk of exclusion benefit. It has also been welcome to see countries integrate libraries meaningfully into digital inclusion strategies in general, rather than governments and libraries pursuing separate strategies in parallel.

Specific examples of innovative practices highlight the particular value and importance of collaboration between libraries and other actors. Such efforts have often in fact grown out of initiatives launched during the pandemic, both as a means of ensuring readiness in case of a return of lockdowns, but also simply because they have simply proved their worth.

For example in Kenya, Nakuru Public Library in the Rift Valley region, working with Kabarak University, worked with schools in the region to overcome the lack of understanding of how to use online tools in their teaching. The library proved to be well positioned to bring together different actors - publishers, ISPs and national agencies in order to deliver a whole package in support of meaningful and supportive internet access. Crucially, it was not just a case of providing purely technical skills, but also building confidence and delivering content. Clearly the initial focus was on ensuring that teachers were able to benefit from such tools to continue to fulfil their role, but the impact has been such that the programme is continuing. This work would not have been possible without combining the existing role of libraries as a hub and centre of expertise and connectivity.

Another initiative comes from Bangladesh, where the Wisdom on Wheels project equipped electric three-wheelers to act as mobile libraries in communities. These offered not just books themselves, but also a hot-spot which enabled students to follow classes online. During the pandemic, this provided an opportunity to allow children to continue learning while schools were closed, with tens of thousands of hours of learning provided. Crucially, this initiative underlined the value of viewing library connectivity in a more flexible way – i.e. including mobile libraries. As with the Nakuru project above, this is also an initiative that continues to be valid even as schools open up again, given continued challenges faced by children in accessing schooling.

A further example is from Nakaseke, Uganda underlines again how ensuring that libraries are connected can open up possibilities to expand traditional services and roles, to the benefit of societies. In this case, the possibility to access materials via the internet combined with an existing community radio station and committed staff allowed for the library to step in when the pandemic began in order to share materials with learners across the local area. As time went on, the library expanded to offer lessons through Zoom, again something that

Already highlighted above are examples from Panama, which are particularly interesting in that they operate at the national level. The Library System of the University of Panama has an explicit mission to provide access to information for society as a whole, reaching beyond the university community on its own. There is also the Infoplazas initiative, specifically aimed at bridging digital divides, many of

which are based within libraries as known local centres and equipped to deliver a wider variety of services.

A final example to highlight focuses more on the technical aspect of how to connect libraries to the internet. The LEO Libraries project run by the Gigabit Libraries Network explores the possibility to use new technology – namely low earth orbit satellites – to connect libraries that otherwise are offline. While still very much at the pilot stage, participating libraries and their users in remote areas have welcomed the new possibilities that this has offered. There are certainly interesting possibilities to experiment with such tools in developing countries also.

Recommendations and Actions

Already in our submission to the Global Digital Compact consultation run by the UN, we set out a number of suggested commitments by the library field in the field of connectivity. In particular, we suggested that libraries should:

1. **Embrace their role in meaningful connectivity**: supporting meaningful use of the internet should become a key mission of libraries, as already set out in the IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto. This should be accompanied by planning and action to realise this role, for example through delivering ICT training and digital literacy support, as well as provision of content, alongside literacy support.
2. **Coordinate the field through national libraries or national library agencies**: it will be valuable to build coordination and collective action and reflection across libraries in order to support a renewed focus on meaningful connectivity, and building connections with potential partners..
3. **Advocate for connectivity**: given their focus on access to information, libraries should join in national efforts, both governmental and non-governmental to act in favour of connectivity. This can also be an opportunity to set out how public access through libraries is a vital part of any universal connectivity strategy. Libraries and their associations/agencies can strengthen advocacy by gathering and publishing data about connectivity in libraries and use (without violating privacy).
4. **Draw on their own understanding of local information needs in order to deliver the most effective support**: libraries should be responsive in the support they offer to members of the community, and as far as possible tailor their offer to these, rather than trying to offer one-size-fits-all solutions. The same applies to the spaces and equipment that they offer, which should be as adaptable as possible.
5. **Libraries should offer free WiFi and other access to users, with as few restrictions as possible**: no-one should be unable to connect to the internet due to a lack of resources. Filtering obligations should be kept to a minimum. Where they are unavoidable, they should be applied in a transparent manner, and as predictably and objectively as possible.

In terms of recommendations to others, we set out the following:

1. **Ensure that access to information and participation in the information society is part of any national bill of rights or constitution**: while this access is part of

the Universal Declaration, it would send an important signal to citizens to include access to information in constitutions or other basic laws.

2. **Commit to connecting all of their own schools and libraries, and once this is done, work to ensure continuous improvements in connectivity and available hardware**: governments should establish and publish roadmaps to achieving these goals, using a standard template that best allows for comparison and mutual learning.

3. **Establish a suitable and dynamic definition of broadband connectivity**: this should reflect the quality of connectivity needed to make full use of the internet, and evolve over time to reflect new uses. A set of steps within this may be desirable in order not to ignore the value of even basic connectivity vis-à-vis none at all. Such a definition should also include access to connectivity in different forms, such as libraries, given that these complement home connectivity, and can offer critical resilience in times of crisis (see below).

4. **Disaggregate connectivity data in order to allow for meaningful policy responses**: 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 marginalisation. This data should be published regularly, in a timely fashion, and publicly in order to allow for third party oversight.

5. **Launch a renewed drive on literacy and integrate information literacy into curricula**: basic literacy skills remain a determining factor in being able to realise the full potential of connectivity, despite the exciting possibilities available to use the internet to support oral traditions and help people with low skills. Achieving universal literacy, including for adults, must receive a renewed focus.

6. **Make meaningful universal connectivity a core pillar of development assistance programmes**: those countries which are active in supporting development elsewhere in the world should look to support connectivity as a key precondition for the achievement of other goals, not least around education, health and beyond. Ideally, the connection between connectivity and the effectiveness of other policy agendas should be taken into account, and tools such as UNESCO's Internet Universality Indicators applied to assess where investment may be needed.

7. **Support strong and connected library fields**: As highlighted, libraries are a key part of the broader connectivity infrastructure, not only offering the only or a complementary venue for getting online, but also supporting effectiveness by providing help and resources which make connectivity meaningful. This can be about updating existing locations, providing mobile services, adding or strengthening library services in schools and other education institutions, or building new locations and ensuring they have the resources to operate over time, with trained and dedicated staff.

8. **Provide and protect public access options in times of disaster or crisis**: Recent disasters have demonstrated the degree to which people rely on libraries when things turn bad, as a shelter, source of electricity, and place to access the internet. With disasters likely only to get more common in coming years, public access options which can act as a secondary connectivity network are essential.

9. **Maximise the value and attractiveness of connectivity by supporting the creation of relevant services and content**: once people are connected, they should be able to do things online, such as engage with government services or access public information. A parallel key issue is to invest in making content

available in different languages. Crucially, we must promote openness in this – there is no point developing a variety of content if it is subsequently reserved only for the wealthiest thanks to the over-application of intellectual property rights. Furthermore, there needs to be investment in providing accessible content for people with disabilities. This will be aided by an expansive implementation of the Marrakesh Treaty, as well as wider copyright reforms to ensure that libraries can play the same role online as they have in person traditionally.

10. **Always ensure that there are fallback options for the unconnected**: with the above all being said, we must respect the right of people not to be online if they wish, as well as those who are not capable of digital only. This should not lead to exclusion from society however – 'Digital only' can be a risky way forwards.

11. **Legislate to protect net neutrality**: this remains a key determinant of the value of connectivity with the risk being that violations of net neutrality, including through zero-rating, lead to a skewed experience of the internet, driven by private rather than public interests. The internet should be regulated like a utility.

12. **Regulate to enable experimentation and alternative means of connectivity**: governments should not be protecting the monopoly or oligopoly positions of legacy internet providers, not only in situations where they are failing to deliver, but also where innovation could deliver better experiences. Newer forms of connectivity – community networks, TV white space, and low-earth orbit satellites should be enabled to demonstrate their potential to bring people online.

13. **Build trust in the internet**: the internet is too vital a resource for it to be desirable that lazy criticisms, fear-mongering, and over-simplification shake people's confidence in it. At the same time, there clearly are challenges to trust that need to be addressed, including anti-competitive behaviours, a sense of a lack of transparency, and worry about loss of privacy or individual choice. Governments should maintain a constructive attitude towards the internet, in order to avoid undermining people's incentives to connect, while taking proportionate actions to address challenges.