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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 24th 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 the leading organisation for libraries around the world, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) works to represent the interests and experiences of libraries of all types, around the world.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a dramatic shift to digital. This saw excellent examples of how libraries equipped with suitable ICT and connectivity were able to continue to support access to information and learning opportunities for their communities. However, the year also highlighted the progress that still needs to be made in equipping libraries with ICT, sufficient connectivity, and digital skills training for library staff where needed.

There are examples of initiatives in different countries and regions seeking to expand library connectivity and deliver on this potential. At a more political level, initiatives like the P4PA Call to Action and IFLA Library Connectivity Pledge seek to mobilise relevant stakeholders to utilise the potential of public access in libraries to drive digital inclusion. Meanwhile, different actors in the global library field continue to facilitate evidence-gathering and an exchange of good practices on how well-connected libraries can support response and recovery, as well as societal development at large.

Part II: Trends and experiences in 2020

As often noted, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted existing digital divides, which in turn risks further reinforcing health, educational, social and economic inequalities and cutting off people from essential – and sometimes life-saving – information.[1]

Over the past few decades, a key goal of public libraries – providing equitable access to information – has evolved to also include provision of public internet access, to help bridge these digital divides. As such, in 2019, more than 100,000 public libraries worldwide offered internet access for their users – 2/3 of those for which data is available.[2]

However, as public libraries around the world needed to close their doors during the various stages of the pandemic,[3] providing on-site access in many cases became impossible. This temporary unavailability of public access services in libraries **can impact the more vulnerable or marginalised groups the hardest.** In a library survey in New South Wales, for example, respondents noted that library WiFi and computers were regularly used by homeless members of the community, those with lower incomes, not currently in employment or otherwise subject to financial exclusion[4]. As such, these groups were particularly impacted if library public access facilities were unavailable.[5]

Nonetheless, libraries were ready to adapt their work to support digital inclusion to the circumstances. **To meet the demand and needs of users**, where circumstances permitted, some libraries were able to find ways to continue offering limited public access to ICT workstations and/or the internet, particularly for those who need it most. For instance, in the first half of the year in the UK and Australia, some libraries offered such services – e.g. by setting up separate

[1] https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20118.doc.htm
[2] https://librarymap.ifla.org/map/Metric/Libraries-with-Internet-Access/LibraryType/National-Libraries,Academic-Libraries,Public-Libraries,Community-Libraries,School-Libraries,Other-Libraries/Weight/Totals-by-Country
[3] https://www.ifla.org/covid-19-and-libraries#closures
[4] https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/news-and-blogs/blog/financial-and-digital-exclusion-often-go-hand-in-hand
[5] https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/nsw_public_libraries_the_covid-19_response_survey_report.pdf

rooms,[6] by appointment, by offering PC use for a restricted amounts of time, or through other approaches. These services helped meet the existing demand from the community: for example, an emergency offer of PC access in libraries across three locations in London, UK – Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea – during the weeks of lockdown saw nearly 400 access session per week.[7]

Others made sure to prioritise vulnerable users when re-opening became possible, seeing that available PCs and connectivity were actively used to access government services, keep in touch with friends or family, and search and apply for jobs online.[8] The government of Scotland pointed out that the demand for library IT access may increase as more people are applying for benefits or jobs online.[9]

Clearly, it is important that providing access should not lead to new risks for vulnerable people. As such, a number of protocols or guides for library reopening in different countries offer advice on how and when public PC or internet services may be made available – for example in South Africa, Netherlands, Jamaica, Estonia and others[10].

Public Wi-Fi access. In addition, libraries with suitable connectivity and resources have found various other ways to continue supporting digital inclusion. In the US, a survey in March 2020 examined the responses of public libraries in the United States. The survey results showed that over 90% of libraries kept their WiFi on when the building was closed, over 40% placed access points in a way that improved internet access outdoors; and over 20% offered hotspot loans during the pandemic.

For some of the library respondents, these measures were new and introduced specifically as a response to the pandemic.[11] Alongside these, libraries throughout the US employed other solutions to keep their communities online – from setting up extra hotspots in other locations to delivering connectivity through mobile libraries or vans, using TV White Space, and more.[12]

Beyond internet access: content and competences. Another key trend over the past months has been the rapid digitalisation of library services, where this has been possible. One important aspect was the steep rise in demand for digital materials in many countries. For example, in Ireland, statistics comparing the first weeks of March and April showed a 313% increase in the number of new users of eBooks and eAudiobooks, and 246% in new users of online magazines and newspapers.[13]

Similarly, in Singapore the National Library Board saw 82% growth in demand for e-book loans in April, compared to the same time last year.[14] In short, as the demand for digital content has grown sharply during the pandemic, libraries can help meet this equitably, at least as long as libraries themselves have the equipment and resources. This is a serious question. The electronic content market is relatively unregulated compared to the physical one, with libraries often facing significantly higher prices for eBooks as for physical ones. In order to ensure the sustainability of library offers, there is a strong case for action to current practices.

In addition, connected libraries and skilled librarians have been able to support learning and educational activities remotely throughout the pandemic. In Japan, Kenya, Egypt, Spain, USA and other countries, libraries have organised bookclubs, storytimes, homework help and various other activities to promote literacy and learning at large.[15] With UNESCO warning of a possible severe

[6] https://www.alia.org.au/australian-libraries-responding-covid-19

[7] https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/sites/default/files/Libraries%20in%20the%20pandemic%20-%20final.pdf

[8] https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/news/we%E2%80%99re-back-how-public-libraries-have-been-reopening-their-doors; see also https://www.lorensbergs.co.uk/case-studies-and-resources/public-library-reopening-poll-summer-2020/

[9] https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-public-libraries-guidance/pages/operational-guide-and-checklist/

[10] https://www.ifla.org/covid-19-and-libraries

[11] http://www.ala.org/pla/sites/ala.org.pla/files/content/advocacy/covid-19/PLA-Libraries-Respond-Survey_Aggregate-Results_FINAL2.pdf

[12] http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2020/05/digital-access-during-covid-19/

[13] https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/090bca-use-of-online-public-library-service-soars-during-covid-19-crisis-mi/

[14] https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/nlb-adds-8000-e-books-and-other-digital-offerings

[15] https://www.ifla.org/covid-19-and-libraries#services

learning crisis due to educational interruptions and disparities,[16] public libraries can offer valuable support for learning and education in their communities.

The importance of continued support for library connectivity. However, as suggested above, it is important to note that libraries' abilities to offer support for digital inclusion, access to content and learning opportunities is heavily dependent on their own ICT equipment, connectivity, resources and staff skills.

For example, a library survey carried out by African Library & Information Associations and Institutions (AfLIA), pointed out that libraries around the continent (public and otherwise) that were connected were quick to start offering various online services when their doors closed – e.g. information and e-reference services, digital content provision, service delivery through social media, mobile apps or online portals to ease access to library services and resources, and more.

However, other libraries were not able to offer online services, with a lack of connectivity, digital content, and skills of library personnel cited as reasons for htis.[17] Similarly, during the IFLA Asia and Oceania Section Leaders' Conversation on Public Libraries in the Post-COVID-19 World, it was pointed out that resources, better and faster internet connectivity, as well as building the technical knowledge of library staff were important steps to ensuring libraries can effectively offer key digital services.[18]

In general, these recent developments highlighted the demand for, and some of the key benefits of, library connectivity and their work in digital inclusion and access to content and learning. However, this work is strongly dependent on libraries having the connectivity infrastructure, ICT equipment and staff skills to offer these services.

Part III: Actions and initiatives in 2020

2020 has seen welcome action in a number of countries to draw on, or act to realise, the potential of connected libraries to deliver wider goals. Some initiatives are ongoing (for example, the government of Jamaica recently reported on its work to connect more than 400 entities, including libraries and other public institutions, to the national broadband network).[19] The government of Ireland and Microsoft Ireland have recently announced a project aiming to up bring online up to 200 households lacking good connectivity by extending the public library network through Airband technology.[20] The authorities of the City of Buenos Aires have also announced an extension of public WiFi through libraries[21].

In some cases, library connectivity measures have been explicitly framed as part of the pandemic response and/or recovery – for example, the CARES act in the US allocated funding for the Institute of Museum and Library Services to support digital inclusion projects. The recently announced New Zealand Libraries Partnership Programme, supporting COVID-19 recovery across the country's library system, includes measures for boosting library public internet and digital literacy offers.[22]

Meanwhile, the library field has seen an active exchange of experiences and good practices on how digital and ICT-enabled library services can be adapted in different contexts. For example, the Gigabit Libraries Network, working with IFLA, runs open weekly sessions "What is a Library if the Building is Closed?" to encourage libraries from the US and other countries to exchange their

[16] https://en.unesco.org/news/over-63-million-teachers-impacted-covid-19-crisis-world-teachers-day-unesco-urges-increased

[17] https://web.aflia.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/REPORT-TRACKING-THE-RESPONSES-OF-AFRICAN-LIBRARIES.pdf

[18] https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/asia-and-oceania/news/leaders_conversation_pl_final_version.pdf

[19] https://jis.gov.jm/more-than-400-public-entities-connected-to-national-broadband-network/

[20] https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/c3065-minister-ring-announces-innovative-project-to-provide-broadband-to-disadvantaged-students/

[21] https://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/noticias/la-red-de-wifi-gratuita-llega-las-bibliotecas-publicas-de-la-ciudad

[22] https://natlib.govt.nz/about-us/collaborative-projects/new-zealand-libraries-partnership-programme#free-public-internet

experiences with, inter alia, providing public internet access and digital services throughout the pandemic.[23]

Meanwhile, in 2020, IFLA has continued supporting library connectivity and public internet access in libraries as an important means of overcoming digital exclusion and barriers to access to information.

As a response to the pandemic, one of the key initiatives of the Partnership for Public Access, of which IFLA is a core member, is the launch of a *Call to Action* for governments, which emphasises the need for every community to be connected and highlights the role public access facilities can play in providing this connectivity. The Call also outlines the necessary actions - including ensuring that all schools have access to relevant content, and that libraries and other anchor institutions have the resources and capacity to offer public internet access, support and digital skills-building and learning opportunities.[24]

To mirror the Call, IFLA launched a *Library Pledge for Digital Inclusion* to mobilise commitment from global library field members to champion several key dimensions of digital inclusion – access and affordability, provision of relevant content and services, and digital skills-building, as well as support for equitable broadband policies. At present, the Pledge has reached over 600 signatories.[25] In parallel, IFLA released an infographic "Why Public Access Matters" - to help stakeholders communicate the value of, and advocate for, public access solutions.[26]

Meanwhile, the Dynamic Coalition on Public Access in Libraries, formally recognised by the Internet Governance Forum Secretariat, has continued working on an analysis of the role of libraries in broadband plans and policies. The first chapter looks at the text of various national-level broadband policy documents to identify the varied roles they assign to libraries – and policy mechanisms they set out to help libraires deliver on these tasks. The second chapter looks at several case studies of how such policies have been implemented in different countries - to help identify common themes and good practices that can help ensure a successful digital inclusion intervention through libraries.[27]

Beyond this work, IFLA has also looked into statistical correlations between internet and/or computer access in libraries and different dimensions of digital inclusion and digital inequalities, finding for example that higher numbers of libraries offering internet access tends to correlate with less pronounced gender and age-related digital divides, less digital exclusion among out-of-work people and those with lower formal qualifications, and others.[28] Much of this work draws on the statistics collected in the context of the Library Map of the World, which also includes case studies of libraries supporting development, often through internet access. [29]

Finally, in 2020 IFLA continued exploring and gathering evidence on how libraries equipped with suitable connectivity and ICT can support societal development and wellbeing. For example, two recent reports looked into the role of libraries in open government strategies, and policies aiming to support digital skills-building.[30]

[23] http://giglibraries.net/page-1712339
[24] https://p4pa.net/2020-declaration/
[25] https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/93399
[26] https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/93454
[27] https://www.ifla.org/digital-plans
[28] https://blogs.ifla.org/lpa/tag/librarystatoftheweek/
[29] https://librarymap.ifla.org
[30] https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/93125 and https://www.ifla.org/node/93526