

African governments in Support of Access to Information and Libraries for UN 2030 and AU 2063 Agendas

Speech given by Gerald Leitner, IFLA Secretary General at the Third Roundtable Meeting of Ministers Responsible for Public Libraries in Africa, 28-30 October 2019

[CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]

Your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you for inviting me here today, to take part in this meeting.
Thank you to the Minister of Education, Mr Opoku Prempeh.

And of course, thank you to Mandla, and the entire AfLIA team.

To be a librarian is to have a mission.

A mission based on a fundamental belief that people, if they are empowered, can develop further and faster, can take better decisions, more autonomously, and more sustainably than any top-down policy will allow.

An empowerment that starts with access to information. Because without knowledge, without information, we are in the dark, unable to draw on good ideas, unable to progress.

Libraries provide this access, equitably, meaningfully.

And in doing so, they create opportunities.

Opportunities for individuals, and nations to understand, to grow and to innovate.

Opportunities for individuals and communities to break the circle of inequality and poverty.

Opportunities that prevent the same old mistakes from being made, again and again.

Opportunities that set people, communities, our planet, on a better course.

This is not a new mission of course.

Libraries have been collecting, safeguarding, giving access to information for centuries, for millennia, around the world.

Acting as the memory of humanity, preventing us from slipping backwards, helping us move forwards.

When Newton declared that he was only able to see so far because he was standing on the shoulders of giants, these giants were to be found in libraries.

And thanks to libraries, today, we can all stand on these shoulders – as citizens, as workers, as academics, and – in particular – as ministers and decision-makers.

As someone who has spent almost their entire career advocating for libraries, trying to show, to convince people of their importance, I think we may even be in a golden age.

Those who would predict the demise of our institutions in the face of social and technological change have been proven wrong, time and time again. Libraries have known how to change, to adapt, to find new ways to provide new value to their communities.

But more importantly, I believe that there has never been a greater political acceptance of the importance of information, and access for all.

Because gone are the days when we believed that only the elite needed literacy.

Gone are the days of locking away information from the masses.

Gone are the days of ‘need to know’, replaced by the idea of a right to know.

We know, better than ever, that universal literacy, education, and access to information is not only a nice-to-have, but a must-have for any successful community.

That, in the face of information abundance, in the face of concern about the way the internet has developed, we need to build information skills, to help people navigate through all that is available, safely, confidently, effectively, is clear.

Indeed, we are at a time where it is clear that we cannot rely on greater resource use, on population growth, to increase prosperity. Our environment, our planet simply cannot take it.

We need to do things differently. We need to do better, rather than just doing more all the time. We must turn to information, to knowledge, to better ways of using this, to achieve our goals.

And we need to make sure these benefits are widely and fairly shared, we need to ensure that the possibility to find, understand and apply knowledge is available at every level, everywhere.

To deliver equality, to realise potential.

This is what libraries help us achieve.

Crucially, it isn't just me saying this. This acceptance, this acknowledgement is reflected in the two key documents in the title of this session – the United Nations 2030 Agenda, and the African Union's 2063 Strategy.

Strong calls to action, statements of commitment by all of the governments who signed them – all of you – over the long-term.

But of course, the fact that access to information features in these documents cannot be a goal in itself. We cannot simply declare victory, pat ourselves on the backs, and go home.

Rather, we need to act. Urgently.

As I hope to explain in my intervention today, the UN 2030 Agenda and the AU2063 Strategy, by recognising the importance of information, of libraries, in turn create an opportunity for you.

You, as ministers responsible for public libraries, have the opportunity to make an indispensable contribution.

To place yourselves at the centre of your governments' actions.

To show the power you have in your portfolios.

Because I believe that you have a great possibility in your hands, a great potential.

And I know that the library leaders you can see in this room are ready to join you in making this potential a reality.

We need to act – we need to act together.

To offer some background, I am sure you do not need much introduction to the UN's 2030 Agenda.

The most comprehensive, most universal agenda for stronger, fairer, more sustainable development, agreed in 2015 by all member governments of the United Nations.

More than any such document previously, it aims to look across the board, around the world, at all of the policy areas, the policy actions, which have an impact on people, planet, and prosperity.

To consider the interlinkages, to identify the cross-cutting drivers of development, in order to make a lasting impact.

17 Sustainable Development Goals, 169 targets, 232 indicators.

Access to information is in there. Not just once, but, more or less explicitly, 20 times.

To agricultural market information, to health information, to employment information.

Access to research and knowledge, to the internet, to the skills needed to use it.

Regardless of gender, of socioeconomic status, of geography, access to information is central to achieving the SDGs.

I believe this is not by accident.

Partially because, I hope, IFLA was so heavily involved in the preparation of the Agenda. Contributing, advocating, cooperating, in order to ensure that the role of access to information was understood!

In 2014, we launched the Lyon Declaration on development and access to information, subsequently signed by over 600 organisations. A clear sign of the strength – and breadth of support for our agenda.

But also, I think that the inclusion of access to information in the SDGs also happened because the governments, the negotiators preparing the 2030 Agenda were already coming to share the conviction I mentioned at the beginning – that by empowering individuals to take better decisions for themselves, we can build a better world.

It's a school of thought that is based in development studies and economics, and in particular the work of Noble Prize winner Amartya Sen.

A vision of development that is focused on the individual, on their rights, on giving the ability, the autonomy, the agency to do things better. On harnessing all of the inventiveness, the energy, the capacity of our populations to drive change.

By taking this as a starting point – how we can empower people – I think it was inevitable that world leaders settled on access to information as a key lever, a key pre-condition.

Now, I am convinced that, just as our conceptions, our views converged in the negotiation of the 2030 Agenda, we can only deliver its goals by continuing to work together, from the United Nations to each individual.

And indeed, this is a core part of the Agenda. Because it is more than just those 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

It is also a new way of working, a new way of thinking even about development, about government, about how we mobilise all actors in order to achieve policy goals.

It is also a set of processes and practices that should ensure that the SDGs remain front of mind. That we do not, that we cannot lose focus, lose momentum.

So there is a robust process for tracking progress, involving the creation of national development plans, regular reporting, a full indicator framework, voluntary national reviews, and other opportunities for governments to share information about their own implementation processes.

Each of these steps provide an opportunity to work with stakeholders, to mobilise them. Indeed, there is a strong focus in the 2030 Agenda on how governments are engaging with them.

The same goes for the African Union 2063 Agenda. While focused on the continental rather than the global level, it is no less ambitious.

No less ready to challenge governments to think differently, to think in a more joined-up way, for the benefit of their countries, for the benefit of their populations.

No less clear in its prioritisation of work in areas where libraries have so much to give.

It applies the same logic of people-centred development, focusing particularly on the need to empower women and youth. It recognises the information revolution as the primary trend affecting the continent's development.

And each of the seven aspirations refers, directly or indirectly, to the contributions that libraries can make through meaningful access to information.

A prosperous Africa based on embracing and harnessing the knowledge society, as well as the continent's cultural richness.

An integrated Africa supported by internet access for all.

An Africa of good governance, based on an informed and empowered citizenry.

A peaceful Africa, based on a profound respect for human rights, such as the freedom of access to information and the freedom of expression.

An Africa with a strong cultural identity, built on the active efforts of libraries to preserve heritage, and to give access and to promote contemporary creativity.

An Africa whose development is people-driven, where no-one is left disadvantaged by a lack of access to information.

And Africa as a strong, united, resilient and influential global player, not only building on the previous aspirations, but ready to assert itself as a key actor in research and in culture.

Libraries help achieve all this. I salute the work of colleagues here who are working hard to make this case, to prove it through their actions every day.

So what about the responsibilities of governments? It is not for me to tell you what you should and should not do.

Because your responsibility is not so much to us – the librarians sitting in this room.

Not even to the United Nations or the African Union.

But to citizens. Your citizens, the citizens of the world.

To ensure that they can benefit from the access to information, the access to knowledge, the access to culture that libraries can provide.

To give them the possibility of a place to learn, to develop, throughout life.

To help them get online, and gain the skills to use the internet competently and confidently.

To support the research that will lead to new cures, new opportunities, and new responses to climate change.

To engage fully in democratic and civic processes, to make their voices heard.

To be empowered.

So instead, I would like to focus on shared responsibilities – and on how we can work best together to fulfil these.

Because while the title of this session talks about responsibilities of governments, as I mentioned earlier, the UN's 2030 Agenda also underlines that there are responsibilities for stakeholders.

Libraries are of course included in this.

We also have responsibilities.

Fortunately, of course, responsibilities that line up well with our missions.

For all the reasons I have already set out, libraries bring thousands of years of experience of turning knowledge into action and progress.

They help inspire, engage, enable and connect their communities, building social capital, acting as a social infrastructure that facilitates progress across the board.

This is not to say that they do not need to innovate in the services they deliver, to innovate, to reach further. To help people navigate the abundance of information we now have.

In parliaments, in governments, in universities and schools, in communities and institutions.

To provide tailored support, to create a positive environment for all.

We are only too aware of the need to keep reflecting, to keep updating our work, to keep ahead of the curve.

But with the right attitude, and with the right support, success is possible.

We at IFLA are already determined to do everything we can to ensure that libraries can deliver change. To power literate, informed and participatory societies.

We believe we can do this best by coming together, by forming a strong and united field, at the national, at the global level.

This is why we have been driving our own transformation, our own efforts to develop new ways of working, new ways of thinking.

Because if libraries can inspire, engage, enable and connect their communities, I believe that IFLA has a mission to inspire, engage, enable and connect the global library field.

There is so much we can achieve by working together. Exploring and disseminating good practices, good ideas. Defining standards and guidance to raise the level of performance everywhere. Joining our voices, strengthening our voices, in favour of libraries as partners for development.

This is what we are looking to do with our new strategy. The IFLA Strategy 2019-2024.

This is not only about providing direction for me and my team at our headquarters. Not even only about providing direction for our sixty professional units, covering everything from acquisitions to women, information and libraries.

But it's about providing a reference point, a structure, a framework around which we can map actions taken across the library field, everyone. A means of identifying possibilities for engagement, and starting to make them happen.

A key step in the journey from Vision to Strategy to Action.

We are already looking to work with our members across Africa, around the world, to launch this process. And we will be organising a regional meeting next year to explore these possibilities.

To look at how, through IFLA, we can further support Africa's libraries, Africa's library associations.

How we can coordinate our actions, at all levels, to do better for all libraries, and all of the people they serve.

And how can a strong and united library field engage, interact with governments, with other actors, in order to deliver change.

Because when you work with libraries, when you work through libraries, to build literate, informed and participatory societies, you too are part of the library field, part of IFLA.

I said earlier that it was not my job to give orders, to say what governments should do.

But I did want to reflect on how we can work together, to fulfil our shared responsibilities. So, I hope that you will permit me to make some suggestions of where, and how, we can do this.

First of all, I encourage you to bring libraries into your stakeholder process around the SDGs.

The consultations, the designing of national development plans, the reporting, the creation of indicator frameworks.

Invite a representative onto your coordinating committee, or invite them to consultations. There is an access to information angle in so many policy areas. By inviting a librarian, you can be sure not to miss it.

Secondly, those countries that are undertaking a voluntary national review next year, why not celebrate libraries and the work they are doing.

Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gambia, Kenya, Liberia, Libya, Malawi, Morocco, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe – they are all involved, will all be speaking.

I hope that they will all reference libraries. And that we will see more librarians on the stage, alongside ministers, at the United Nations.

Third, include libraries into national development plans and broader policy and strategy documents. This is not just a question of recognition, but also an opportunity to think about interlinkages, how libraries can complement and complete the work of others.

Fourth, help us to gather data. This is essential if we are to move to the next phase of understanding the impact of libraries. We have, in the Library Map of the World, the biggest single source of information about libraries worldwide. But it is far from complete.

By sharing information, you not only put your country on the map, but you help build a basis on which we can develop new insights.

Fifth, gather and share stories. The Library Map of the World is not just about data, but also about examples – practical evaluated examples showing how libraries have changed lives.

Similarly, we want to develop comprehensive country profiles, so that others can understand your own national library fields better. But for this, we need you, your library associations.

And finally, simply, just be ready to think libraries. When you are planning any policy – on reading, on heritage, on skills, on public health, on innovation, on civic engagement –

talk to your national libraries, to your associations. Make sure you are not missing an opportunity to reach more people, to have more impact.

I have talked extensively about the work of two generalist intergovernmental organisations – the United Nations and the African Union.

But of course some of the most immediate, high-impact decisions are not being taken there, but rather in specialist agencies, such as the World Intellectual Property Organisation.

This is an area where you – and your representatives – can make a real difference, just as you did by driving forward the Marrakesh Treaty six years ago.

Marrakesh, we believe, offers a precedent – a model for protecting the benefits of copyright, while avoiding situations where it creates unnecessary and unintended barriers to public interest access and uses. It has been a model of success also, with 88 countries now adhering.

There are further areas where action is needed.

Among the major world regions, Africa has the lowest share of countries with basic exceptions for preservation, research or internal library copying, and even fewer with laws that enable libraries to use digital technologies to fulfil their missions. Africans risk being left with far fewer possibilities to access and use heritage, culture, and research than the rest of the world.

This is not acceptable, either from a legal or a moral point of view.

National reforms will help, but of course are not enough on their own. Given Africa's past, a huge share of its heritage is held elsewhere in the world.

Extreme weather caused by climate change poses a constant an existential threat, making effective preservation and storage in multiple locations a question of urgency.

Solutions need to be effective across borders, globally, something that only WIPO can achieve.

While we understand that there is also need to ensure the transparency and effective governance of collective management and other licensing, it is vital not to confuse this with the fundamental public interest activities and needs of libraries.

I therefore strongly encourage you to work with your representatives in Geneva, to ensure that they are reflecting the same strong support for Africa's libraries that I can see here.

We are counting on you.

These are just a few ideas. But by delivering on them, you will make it easier to harness the power of libraries to achieve your goals. And libraries are happy, are ready to do this, since these are their goals also.

In short, it is a case of joining our responsibilities, sharing them, delivering on them in the most effective way possible.

Of identifying those areas where libraries can help, using the SDGs and AU2063 as a framework, to coordinate with other government agencies.

And in doing so, to go faster, to achieve stronger results.

So to conclude, I want to return to something I said at the beginning. And I'm sure it's not something that's going to surprise you, coming from me, as the secretary general of a library organisation.

But as ministers responsible for public libraries, I believe that you not only have a great job, but also a great potential, a great tool in your hands.

Few other ministries can claim the same sort of reach into each community. Few can boast of such a network for delivering change. Few can point to examples of how they are making a difference in so many policy areas.

You have a unique potential to deliver on the goals, on the ambitions of these key agenda setting texts, these key cross-government strategies, thanks to libraries.

All that is needed now is to take hold of this opportunity, to deliver it, to turn it into reality.

So join us, take action, share your actions!

Thank you