

## IFLA and the role of libraries in the UN sustainable development goals

Jennefer Nicholson

*IFLA*

# IFLA AND THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

**Jennefer Nicholson**  
**Former Secretary General, IFLA**

Adopted by the UN in September 2015 the UN 2030 Agenda is an inclusive, integrated framework of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) spanning economic, environmental and social development. It is for all nations, unlike the Millenium Development Goals which were focussed on developing nations. The aim is that by achieving this Agenda, no one will be left behind.

The Agenda includes 17 Goals; 126 targets [+ 43 sub-targets]; and 230 global indicators for periodic reporting by Member States to the UN.

IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) has affiliation status with ECOSOC (UN Economic and Social Council) which had responsibility for conducting the process for SDGs – so IFLA could 'get into the room'. It collaborated with civil society, professional and other organisations, and was able to represent them throughout the nearly three year process. IFLA was also engaged in numerous other lead up activities through other UN organisations such as UNESCO. IFLA was a strong activist with its capacity to develop the strategy for success and implement this with great support from members and other organisations globally.

IFLA's advocacy focused on three areas that are fundamental to a sustainable society, and to the library profession and library services:

- Public access to information;
- Universal literacies;
- Recognition of the importance of culture, and cultural heritage in all formats.

Advocacy and lobbying were about the importance of these three areas being included in the SDGs, and activities illustrated how the library profession and library services contribute to these being achieved by UN Member States.

## **Public access to information**

Specific reference was achieved in:

- **Goal 16.** Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels:  
16.10 Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.

The importance of access to information is included in many targets for other Goals, such as:

- **Goal 5.** Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls:  
5b. Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.

Though not always specified, the success of all Goals is enhanced through having public access to good information, content and infrastructure – through libraries.

### **Universal literacy – in the vision statement**

IFLA believes that if you cannot read or write you cannot fully participate in society. If you cannot understand what you read, you cannot fully exercise your democratic rights. Librarians have long been advocates for the importance of literacy, media and information literacy skills, and have great expertise in teaching these within libraries worldwide.

Extensive advocacy resulted in universal literacy being embedded in the 2030 Agenda and its Goals and targets, within the Vision statement for the 2030 Agenda which states:

*“In these Goals and targets, we are setting out a supremely ambitious and transformational vision. We envisage a world free of poverty, hunger, disease and want, where all life can thrive. We envisage a world free of fear and violence. **A world with universal literacy.** A world with equitable and universal access to quality education at all levels, to health care and social protection, where physical, mental and social well-being are assured.” [par 7]*

### **Recognition of Culture and cultural heritage**

Culture is a sensitive area of debate within the UN, as recognition of culture can be used to justify some actions or practices that may conflict with other UN instruments such as Declarations and Treaties that encompass human rights.

IFLA advocates that culture is a basic need; that a community thrives through its cultural heritage, it dies without it. This has been incorporated in:

- **Goal 11.** Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable:  
11.4 Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage.

The statement in the Narrative was one of the last to be agreed. It acknowledges culture:

*Narrative: "We pledge to foster inter-cultural understanding, tolerance, mutual respect and an ethic of global citizenship and shared responsibility. We acknowledge the natural and cultural diversity of the world and recognize that all cultures and civilizations can contribute to, and are crucial enablers of, sustainable development."*  
[par 36]

The knowledge, expertise and practice of the library and information profession are embodied in the SDGs. The profession contributes to achieving the targets, and takes a leading role in assisting governments to meet and measure the indicators, through for example:

- standards, regulations, policies, guidelines;
- educational and practice requirements;
- ethics;
- programs and initiatives;
- statistics, research; areas of excellence;
- national, regional and global collaborations.