Using Libraries To Support National Literacy Efforts

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A network of libraries exists in almost every country: there are around 320,000 public libraries worldwide, of which about 230,000 are in developing and transitioning countries. In addition, there are more than a million school, community, research, university, national and special libraries (IFLA, 2016). Although literacy is at the core of most library activities, too often local, regional and national literacy goals and efforts are not systematically connected to libraries. As a result, these efforts fail to benefit from working closely with institutions that often have the long-standing trust of communities and already provide useful literacy services to children, youth and adults.

Libraries and lifelong literacy

Developing, sustaining and enhancing literacy skills is a lifelong and community-wide endeavour requiring strong commitment from society as a whole. Constant practice is needed at every age to foster literacy skills, and just by having access to a wide range of interesting and relevant materials and literacy opportunities, these skills can be developed and enhanced. Most individuals, families, schools and workplaces do not have the means to provide these materials and opportunities alone, and no single formal, non-formal or informal learning framework is equipped to tackle the literacy challenges of an entire community. However, by providing literacy activities and resources (whether in print or online) to all age groups and literacy proficiency levels, libraries of all kinds can make an enormous contribution to supporting a reading culture and the creation of a literate environment.

Nurturing early literacy skills

Because literacy development starts at birth, public and community libraries often devote special attention to supporting early literacy skills. They assist families in creating positive and stimulating home learning environments to build a strong foundation for their children's future reading motivation and literacy achievement. A wide range of empirical data (e.g. Lopez et al. 2016, and IREX/Beyond Access, 2016) indicates that reading to and with children in the first five years of life helps to foster a love of books and reading; develop their vocabulary; stimulate brain development; and build emotional bonds with parents, guardians and carers. These children begin school with a clear performance advantage. In several countries, for example, libraries partner with book-gifting programmes, which encourage children and adults to rhyme, sing, read, tell stories and look at picture books together (UIL, 2015, p. 95).

LIBRARIES STRENGTHEN FAMILY LITERACY AND LEARNING

Libraries can serve as partners in raising awareness of the important role played by families in developing the literacy skills of children and adults. To contribute to an intergenerational culture of reading and lifelong learning, libraries should:

- be conveniently located, inviting and welcoming;

- be a safe space for families, especially girls and women, to meet and learn;

- have comfortable and colourful furniture, so that children and families enjoy spending time reading and learning together;

- provide child- and family-friendly areas with attractive picture books, games, crafts, etc.;

- identify, create and provide resources in local languages with local content;

- provide digital devices for children and families to play interactive reading games;

- organize regular family literacy activities run by specially trained staff;

- engage families, carers and other community members in family literacy and intergenerational learning;

- reach out to vulnerable families in order to disrupt the intergenerational cycle of low education and poverty.

The school years

Children who are not introduced to books and reading until they start school have already missed out on fundamental stages of literacy development. If children learn how to read using only school textbooks, there is a risk that they will associate reading with memorization and exams rather than pleasure. It is essential to create time for independent reading both in and out of school, and to allow children to choose their own reading materials. To practise their literacy skills outside school lessons, children need a place where they can develop the joy of reading. Unfortunately, not all schools have a

well-resourced school library with a professional school librarian. However, public and community libraries can provide regular outreach services for multiple schools; for example, specially trained library staff can bring books to schools for children to lend and share, lead group activities such as story times, encourage teachers and students to use the local library, and support teachers in working effective literacy activities into their lessons.

Supporting the literacy skills of young people and adults

Libraries are an excellent resource for young people and adults of all levels of literacy proficiency. They enable users to locate relevant information by sharing newspapers, magazines and other reading materials, and by providing access to public computers and the internet. Academic libraries support young people and adults in developing the advanced literacy skills they need for their studies and research. Libraries in work settings, meanwhile, can provide the background knowledge for informed programme development and decision-making.

Public and community libraries also support youth and adults with low literacy skills by offering reading materials specially tailored to lower proficiency levels, providing access to technology and mentoring on how to use it, and assisting with job applications and other daily needs. Libraries have a long-established commitment to providing services to the most vulnerable people and reaching out to marginalized groups, such as prisoners, visually impaired people, migrants, home-bound people, the homeless or people in hospitals.

In communities with significant literacy challenges and development needs across all age groups, libraries can often be poorly resourced or non-existent; yet, by providing access to reading materials and offering literacy training, they have the ability to greatly benefit those who had no or little formal education. They can also encourage the use of newly acquired literacy skills by connecting literacy activities to practical livelihood concerns; for example by hosting microcredit groups, providing training in entrepreneurship and other life skills, creating local reading materials, and assisting in locating relevant need-based information on health, agriculture and other development concerns (Shrestha and Krolak, 2015).

Libraries and the Sustainable Development Goals

In September 2015, the Member States of the United Nations adopted *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, which includes seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) spanning economic, environmental and social development.

The *2030 Agenda* seeks to create 'a world with universal literacy'. Promoting this vision is at the very heart of libraries' mandate; thus, making smart use of libraries will help countries achieve the SDGs, particularly SDG 4.6, which centres on literacy: 'By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy' (United Nations, 2015).

LIBRARIES SUPPORT ALL THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Libraries and access to information contribute to improved outcomes across the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by:

- promoting universal literacy, including digital, media and information literacy and skills, with the support of dedicated staff;

- closing gaps in access to information and helping government, civil society and business to understand local information needs better;

- providing a network of delivery sites for government programmes and services;

- advancing digital inclusion through access to ICT;

- serving as the heart of the research and academic community;

- preserving and providing access to the world's culture and heritage (IFLA, 2016).

To ensure that everyone is able to acquire and enhance literacy skills, national development plans and education strategies should include community-based institutions like libraries. Provided they have the right staff and appropriate resources, libraries can offer the materials, expertise and community connections to support their users in developing the literacy proficiency levels they need to pursue their educational,

work and life goals. They can be the platform for community partnerships to facilitate integrated literacy and development activities. With their mandate of offering free and equitable access to reading materials and literacy activities, libraries are a practical and cost-effective way of sharing often limited resources.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and local library communities (as represented by national library associations and/or national libraries) can help individual countries achieve the SDGs and local development needs.

Both librarians and government officials need to develop knowledge and tools for effectively linking libraries to relevant strategies and plans. Practical guidelines and policy recommendations on how to establish this link, make it visible and measure its effectiveness will support national literacy and sustainable development efforts.

Policy recommendations

The following key policy recommendations are the outcome of an international workshop (UIL, 5–6 April 2016) on libraries' role in supporting national literacy efforts (UIL and IREX/Beyond Access, 2016).

1. Involve libraries in the policy dialogue surrounding literacy and ensure that libraries are an integral part of local and national literacy strategies and efforts.

Given libraries' unique mission, governments should ensure that representatives of the library community are included, along with other public and private literacy stakeholders, in policy dialogue on developing and implementing local and national literacy strategies and efforts.

2. Enable libraries to contribute to a literate environment that encourages everyone to develop, enhance and sustain literacy skills within a lifelong learning perspective.

Governments must ensure that libraries are able to provide free access to reading materials, literacy activities and information (both in print and online) in a safe and friendly environment where families and individuals can read and learn together. Libraries support literacy and learning needs from birth through to senior years and are an ideal community space for facilitating intergenerational and family learning.

3. Ensure that libraries are inclusive and have the knowledge and resources to provide relevant literacy materials in a welcoming space for marginalized, vulnerable and minority language groups.

Libraries should serve as a convenient hub where diverse groups can find relevant literacy materials and support. This includes materials, services and activities for people with different literacy levels and abilities. Where the availability of materials in minority languages is limited, libraries should support the creation of local content relevant to the community.

4. Institutionalize professionalization and invest in ongoing training for all library staff.

Training should be provided to help library staff develop a service- and needs-based approach to modern libraries; this should include an understanding of literacy challenges and strategies, the process of learning to read and write, and the impact local and national policies have on literacy. Training should also involve using ICT to develop and sustain literacy and digital skills.

5. Use data provided by libraries for better-informed policymaking and coordination of the various literacy efforts of different stakeholders.

Libraries should measure and evaluate their literacy activities and services and share their findings with governments and the general public. Libraries need to understand and be able to communicate the impact of their literacy efforts, particularly with regard to how they are contributing to local and national literacy goals.

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