



A Social Justice Mission

Libraries, Employment and Entrepreneurship

The World Day of Social Justice focuses on the need to ensure that technological progress, growth and globalisation benefit everyone. It offers a hopeful message – that human ingenuity and better connections between people can make societies more equitable, rather than increasing divisions.

The Day is the result of a 2008 Declaration of the International Labour Organisation on Social Justice for a Fair Globalisation¹. This focuses on the importance of giving everyone the possibility to work and earn a decent living at a time of dramatic economic change. It argues that long-term sustainability is only possible when there is respect for human rights and dignity, and when everyone can enjoy the fruits of progress.

The alternative implied by this is clear – growing concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, exploitation of cheap labour in developing countries while factories close elsewhere, and the risk of governments competing to have the lowest taxes or regulatory standards.

Libraries are, arguably, social justice institutions, committed to giving everyone the opportunity to learn, grow and develop. Indeed, they often have an explicit mandate to work with individuals and groups whom, under a purely economic logic, would simply be neglected². They have, in a much-discussed publication in 2018, been described as a key example of ‘social infrastructure’³, although arguably they have long formed part of a core public service offer⁴.

This mandate is often seen in terms of providing access to culture and education – both of which are human rights in their own respect under the Universal Declaration of 1948⁵. However, as this paper will argue, this is an incomplete perception, and risks underestimating the contribution that libraries can make to equitable national development, not least in the field of employment⁶.

In part, this is linked to an awareness of the power of information. Arguably, differences in access to and use of information arguably explain a large share of the differences in wealth we see between countries today. For example, around a half of the gap in Gross Domestic Product between South Korea and Ghana today – countries which had had a similar sized economy only a few years ago can be explained by differences in the stock and use of information⁷.

¹ ILO (2008), *Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalisation*, https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/mission-and-objectives/WCMS_371208/lang--ru/index.htm

² IFLA (2018) *Libraries and Freedom from Discrimination*, <https://blogs.ifla.org/lpa/2018/12/03/human-rights-day-7-libraries-and-freedom-from-discrimination/>

³ Eric Klinenberg (2018) *Palaces for the People*, <https://www.ericklinenberg.com/>

⁴ Grotelueschen, Gina (2015) *Moldovan Public Libraries Emerge to Address the Needs of a Multicultural Population*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1068>

⁵ UN (1948) *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

⁶ Mcharazo, Alli, Koskinen, Minna and, Mchombu, Kingo Jotham and Hamwaalwa, Namutenya (2017) *Libraries as engines for social and economic empowerment: Best practices and results from a partnership project between Tanzanian, Namibian and Finnish libraries*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1648>

⁷ Mchombu, Kingo Jotham and Mchombu, Chiku Mnubi (2014) *The Role of Information and Knowledge in Poverty Eradication in Africa: a case study of Namibia*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/996>



This role in supporting work and entrepreneurship is also connected to the long-standing fact that libraries have strong connections to their communities, and aim to design services that respond to the needs of their users. The growing understanding that the most effective policies are those which take account of local specificities also provides a case for the role of libraries.

This article explores the evidence of libraries' contribution to promoting social justice, as set out in the ILO Declaration. It starts by looking at the role of access to information, both in traditional and digital forms, as an essential means of allowing people to identify and realise opportunities. In a second part, it turns to the services that libraries are beginning to provide to jobseekers, drawing on their unique role in their communities.

It draws, primarily, on papers presented at IFLA's World Library and Information Congress, sharing perspectives and ideas from all types of library, all around the world.

Information as a Bridge

For anyone to be able to find a job, seize an opportunity for entrepreneurship or take up a training opportunity, they first need to know that it exists. This seems like an obvious point, but it is far from being the case globally. From an economic point of view, this is a source of inefficiency – ideal economic models talk about 'perfect information'. From a social justice point of view, this is a serious source of frustration, as chances for people to improve their lives miss out. This section therefore looks at the role of libraries in providing information.

Libraries Have Long Supported Employment...

Given the importance of information in helping people to find opportunities, it is not surprising that libraries have already been engaged in this field. In Uruguay, libraries were able to work with vulnerable women, assessing their needs and coming to understand that a lack of access to information – a connection with the outside world – was a serious challenge. Through providing this access to information, the libraries allowed them to build a bridge between the private and public sphere, including improved labour market outcomes⁸.

In Namibia, a similar assessment also showed that adults needed information to enable them to set up their own businesses, while young people wanted to find out about job opportunities. Libraries are therefore promoted as a key means of meeting this need, especially in those rural areas which have traditionally been less well informed, and so disadvantaged⁹.

Clearly libraries are not alone in this role. In those countries which do have agencies and organisations dedicated to helping people to find work, libraries play an important complementary role. They can be a space where there is not the risk of being stigmatised as unemployed, or can at

⁸ Sabelli, Martha and Szafran, Paulina (2014) *The librarian as agent of change in contexts of social vulnerability: an experience with young women in Uruguay*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/976>

⁹ Ilonga, Selma (2015) *Information and Knowledge Policy Framework to Enhance the Effectiveness of Namibia's Fourth National Development Plan (NDP4)*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1256>

least provide a quiet space for people to go about the process of applying for work or developing business plans, as remarked by library patrons in Mafetang, Lesotho¹⁰.

Many of their core functions, in particular around literacy, also make them an important player, supplementing formal education and sustaining lifelong learning¹¹. In this, they can act not only as providers, but also as an important platform where volunteers can offer their time in helping those needing to develop their language skills, a role that American libraries for example have been fulfilling since the 1860s¹².

The information libraries help provide can of course go beyond skills and jobs and extend to rights. This is indeed one of the objectives of the Global Online Access to Legal Information (GOALI) project launched by the International Labour Organisation, in partnership with US libraries. This responds to the fact that people need information in order to enforce their rights, with beneficiary libraries (in over 100 developing countries) adding traditional information literacy skills to help make the most of this resource¹³.

... and Continue to in a Digital Age

Libraries in many places have been leaders in their communities in adopting digital technologies and encouraging users to realise their potential. With ever more resources that were previously available in physical form now only appearing online, as well as a growing body of born-digital information, the internet is now a key tool in libraries' work.

This is of course as true for libraries work to help people find work as for any other element of their missions. Indeed, internet access has allowed libraries which had previously been neglected to reaffirm their place within communities. For example, the Global Libraries programme supported library connectivity in the 2000s and 2010s, and measured the results. In 2012, they found for example that 1.5 million adults across Europe had used libraries to apply for jobs, and a quarter of a million declared that they had found them in this way¹⁴.

This has not always been easy. There is still, in many countries, a perception among populations that libraries are not about a place to find work, and indeed that the internet is more about studying and

¹⁰ Moshoeshoe-Chadzingwa, Matšelisio 'Mamahlaphe (2014) *Life challenges and information needs of children and young adults in Lesotho: lessons from an internet-connected hybrid library*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/856>

¹¹ Ojiambo, Joseph B. and Kasalu, Judy S. (2015) *Development of Libraries in Kenya and Their Role in Economic Development*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1220>

¹² Hoerning, Beate (2017) *The importance of volunteer work for successful children's and adult literacy programs in US public libraries – a view from outside*: <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1757>

¹³ Van Snellenberg, Richelle and Horváth, Edit (2017) *Global Online Access to Legal Information (GOALI) – A New Legal Training Resource for Developing Countries*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1680>

¹⁴ Streatfield, David and Markless, Sharon and Cottrill, Julia (2015) *Gathering and using systematic evidence of public library service outcomes and of public perceptions of libraries to secure sustainability: the Global Libraries experience*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1243>



communicating that finding important life information or work opportunities¹⁵. Yet the European example is not alone.

In South Africa, survey work done among library card holders in Harare Public Library showed that looking for work was the single most common use of library computers. Nearly 40% used the terminals for this purpose, and nearly 30% responded that they had found opportunities in this way¹⁶.

This applies as much to job offers as to entrepreneurship. Again in South Africa, the National Library has made it clear that library computers are there for budding entrepreneurs as a means to grow their businesses, check tenders, process orders, respond to enquiries. Libraries themselves can provide space which may otherwise prove unaffordable for start-ups. As the Library notes, 'Without this support, many of the fledgling businesses that are run by young people would not survive as they would not afford the cost of office rental and Internet facilities in the formal business sector'¹⁷.

Clearly, as in the case of 'offline' information access, the traditional role of librarians in helping people to find the information they need (and underlining the risks) remains. There are dangers lurking online, especially for those who have not yet developed the knowledge and skills to use the internet confidently and competently. Through information and digital literacy, libraries can also help ensure people stay safe in their use of the internet¹⁸.

Libraries as a Helping Hand

Access to information is more than just about having access to a book or a screen. There has long been recognition that making use of information requires a set of skills, including understanding, evaluation, and the ability to apply it. Furthermore, in its Development and Access to Information Report 2017, produced in partnership with the Technology and Social Change Group at the University of Washington¹⁹, IFLA underlines that full use of information requires the right social and cultural environment, as well as the right skills. The second part of this paper therefore looks at additional efforts libraries are making to ensure access to information is meaningful, in particular for the most vulnerable.

Libraries are Working to Turn Access into Impact...

There is a strong emphasis in both the Sustainable Development Goals and the International Labour Organisation's own work on the importance of decent work. Skills are at the heart of this, allowing people to take on more fulfilling, challenging, and productive work.

¹⁵ Mchazaro et al (2017), idem.

¹⁶ Patel, Najma and Skarzynski, Janusz and Nassimbeni, Mary (2015) *Improving people's lives: measuring Harare Public Library's contribution to individual and community wellbeing*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1240>

¹⁷ Maepa, Maisela Edward and Marumo, Khomotso (2016) *The contribution of the National Library of South Africa towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1534>

¹⁸ Moshoeshe-Chazingwa (2014), ibid

¹⁹ Garrido, Maria and Wyber, Stephen (ed.s) (2017) *Development and Access to Information 2017*, <https://da2i.ifla.org>



Libraries have a major role in this, as underlined by Arts Council England: ‘Enabling people to develop new skills themselves is a vitally important purpose of libraries. This is central to the challenges of supporting individual resilience and adaptability, meeting the needs of UK employers for a highly skilled workforce, and supporting our growth as a knowledge economy’²⁰.

Libraries around the world have proved to be excellent venues to build the skills and confidence of job-seekers and future entrepreneurs.

A first type of service offered is career counselling, as for example in Koprivnica in Croatia, where the library partnered with others to create the Centre for Information and Career Counselling²¹. Complementing one-on-one coaching the library also developed workshops and forums to allow local people to share their ideas and best practices on finding employment.

In Romania, in a project coordinated by IREX and Biblionet, libraries developed both dedicated workshops and continuous services that saw 78 000 people seek job assistance through libraries, 28 500 apply for work, and 9000 securing employment²². In Macedonia, projects supported by EIFL led to the creation of modules for unemployed people, developing their communication, computer and language skills, with around 90% of participants reporting that the training had helped them in their search for work²³. In the US, the library in Winston-Salem established drop-in centres, allowing job-seekers to come by and seek advice when this worked for them²⁴.

The same goes elsewhere. In the Philippines, libraries worked with users to celebrate their values and existing skills, and help them understand how they could turn these into jobs or business ventures²⁵. In Tanzania and Namibia, 76% and 91% of participants in library computer training courses declared that they had a greater chance of employment as a result, and a quarter of small entrepreneurs made immediate changes to their businesses. Indeed, many wished that the course had been longer²⁶.

Such programmes can have a double dividend. In South Africa, libraries trained unemployed young people as cyber-cadets, enabling them not only to improve their own future employability, but also to pass on their knowledge to other library users, but also²⁷. In Moldova, the TEKEDU project

²⁰ Arts Council. (2013), *Envisioning the library of the future*, <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sector-resilience/envisioning-library-future>

²¹ Sabolovic-Krajina, Dijana (2016) *Participatory projects in public libraries – a tool for visibility and social betterment in local community*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1338>

²² Novak, Matej and Baran, Paul-Andre (2013) *Including libraries in development strategies*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/190>

²³ Lipeikaite, Ugne and Petuchovaite, Ramune (2013) *Everything counts: impact stories leading to success*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/207>

²⁴ Skinner, Katherine (2016) *People Experiencing Homelessness: How Libraries Can Be Community Collaborators and Catalysts for Change*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1497>

²⁵ Labangon, Donna Lyn G. and Mariano, Randolph (2018) *Full STEAM ahead: Empowering and catalyzing creative thinking and social entrepreneurial skills of the community through library makerspace*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/2107>

²⁶ Mchazaro et al (2017), idem.

²⁷ Maepa, Maisela Edward and Marumo, Khomotso (2016) *The contribution of the National Library of South Africa towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1534>

organised in libraries, trained disadvantaged young people in website development and design skills to create websites for local organisations, benefitting both the individuals and the communities²⁸.

... Especially for the Communities that Need them Most

As highlighted in the introduction, libraries have a responsibility to serve their communities. In many cases, relevant laws make it clear that special efforts are necessary to help those most in need. Libraries can indeed be particularly well adapted to fulfilling this role when it comes to supporting those who can work to find it.

There are strong examples of library programmes focused on helping specific groups find work, such as women or people with disabilities as in Macedonia, working in partnership with local government and employment offices²⁹. In China, where women have been more likely than men to be left behind by the major social and economic changes, libraries are helping them to find their way³⁰. Indeed, some libraries even create special spaces for women, in order to help them overcome cultural restrictions, for example in Nepal³¹.

Roma people, who face particular challenges in many countries, have benefitted from dedicated language and training programmes in Croatian libraries which have also led to better relations between institutions and community leaders³². Swedish libraries, meanwhile, have worked in particular with the Somali population to build confidence and language skills³³.

A recent trend has been for libraries to form partnerships with social workers, or even to hire their own, in order to help patrons. The potential of such initiatives is clear, as appears in the results of a survey of 17 libraries which have already undertaken such steps³⁴. Libraries seem well placed to help given their shared democratising mission with social workers, the importance of information in providing them with a point of entry into social services, the fact that libraries are often easily located and identified, and the desire of people needing help to look like 'normal' library patrons, rather than recipients of support³⁵.

Others, in a celebrated example, have offered services as simple as lending ties and bags so that job applicants can look smart for interviews³⁶.

²⁸ Grotelueschen, Gina (2015) *Moldovan Public Libraries Emerge to Address the Needs of a Multicultural Population*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1068>

²⁹ Lipeikaite and Petuchovaite (2013), *ibid*

³⁰ Yang, Rong (2013) *Serving women in China: practice and projects in a public library*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/230>

³¹ Shrestha, Sanjana (2013) *The changing role of community libraries: emerging centres for sustainable development*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/216>

³² Sabolovic-Krajina (2016), *ibid*.

³³ Willander, Linda (2016) *Literacy and Reading - Best Practices in Malmö, Sweden*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1475>

³⁴ Schmehl Hines, Samantha (2015) *Connecting Individuals With Social Services: The Library's Role*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1971>

³⁵ Skinner (2016), *ibid*

³⁶ World Economic Forum (2018), *This Library Lends out Ties and Bags for People Going to Job Interviews*, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/10/this-library-loans-out-ties-and-bags-for-people-going-to-job-interviews/>

This is not to say that this task is easy. Those who are in the greatest need can be very good at hiding this, because they feel shame about asking for help. They may also look for information in irregular ways, obliging librarians to make extra efforts³⁷. It may be necessary for libraries to find ways to overcome the perception that they are places only for intellectuals, and travel to places where the people who need help are³⁸.

Libraries themselves may need to think hard about rules and attitudes that can risk excluding those who need help³⁹. Even policies such as requiring a library card may serve to exclude people without fixed addresses⁴⁰.

Conclusion – What Makes Libraries Special?

There is clearly a rich variety of work going on in libraries in order to help people access information, and use it in a way that helps them find decent work and entrepreneurship opportunities. They do this by providing access to information, both in physical and digital form, by pursuing their traditional missions to boost literacy and information literacy, by designing training and other services to offer new support, and by tailoring their actions to the needs of users.

Through this, the particular strengths of libraries come out – the uniqueness of the space they offer, their holistic focus on their community⁴¹, and their potential as a platform for partnering with national and local government, NGOs and others⁴².

Given this, it is clear that while libraries tend to be seen as merely a tool of cultural or educational policies, they are in fact a key means of achieving broader social justice goals such as decent work for all, especially at a time of globalisation and technological change⁴³.

Libraries can also, more broadly, be a part of regeneration strategies, helping create a sense of confidence and optimism in entire areas suffering from the negative consequences of globalisation. The Word, a new library in South Shields in Northern England, has explicitly sought to give a sign that the area is ‘open for business’⁴⁴. Meanwhile, in Palestine, libraries can be essential community

³⁷ Buchanan, Steven and Loudon, Katherine and Tuckerman, Lauren (2015) *Reaching the disadvantaged and disengaged in times of crisis: towards an understanding of information behaviours to inform interventions*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1251>

³⁸ Kociska, Biljana (2015) *Choose a job you love - Career Development and Counselling Program as a new library service*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1295>

³⁹ Bunic, Sanja (2015) *Why they need us and why we hesitate: the homeless in the library*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1261>

⁴⁰ Bunic, Sanja (2016) *On the front line: Libraries contribute to a sustainable future supporting people experiencing homelessness*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1315>

⁴¹ Shrestha (2013), *ibid*

⁴² Kociska (2015), *ibid*

⁴³ Novak and Baran (2013), *ibid*

⁴⁴ Dickson, Steve and Shanks, Edward (2017) *The Word: A library for the 21st century, delivering social, cultural and economic objectives*, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1667>



centres in areas always threatened by violence and war, helping to create the social cohesion and capital that underpins social justice⁴⁵.

The potential for libraries to deliver social justice is clear – all that is needed now is the recognition, the partnerships and the support to make it happen.

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