



# Sanctuary, Storehouse, Gateway, Bridge

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Libraries' Role in Making Refugees Feel Welcome, 20 June 2018

**Libraries have long played a role in supporting marginalised groups, with refugees and other newcomers just one example of those who benefit from the access to information they provide**

**Libraries fulfil a variety of roles for newcomers, as safe spaces (sanctuaries), storehouses (places to record their experiences), gateways (to new lives in host communities) and bridges (to new neighbours)**

**Yet this is work is not necessarily easy. IFLA sections have produced valuable guidelines that help understand what may be necessary**

While the needs of refugees have been receiving particular attention in Europe in the past few years, people have long had to flee their homes and countries because of violence, poverty and other threats to their lives. Arriving in a new community, refugees are not only faced with the need to adapt and learn a new language and way of living, but can often bring mental and physical health challenges.

Libraries, in turn, have an increasingly clearly defined social mission – the meaningful access to information that they provide can help people learn, find work and communicate. This is most important for those members of their communities who might otherwise be isolated or unable to find opportunities.

Refugees in particular stand to gain from this support in accessing information, as long as this is offered in a way that works for them. The rapid arrival of a large number of newcomers in many European towns and cities has forced reflection, and adaptations in order for libraries to fulfil their mission.

This blog therefore looks at the different roles libraries can play in the lives of newcomers, drawing on papers submitted to IFLA's World Library and Information Congress in recent years. It also highlights ongoing challenges, and the guidance that IFLA standards can offer.

## **LIBRARIES AS SANCTUARY**

While food, shelter and medical care are clearly the first priorities for refugees arriving in a host country, more day-to-day needs rapidly raise their heads. Following difficult journeys, and often staying in noisy, emergency accommodation, libraries can provide a valuable moment of calm, for example in the case of the Vaclav

Havel Library in Paris<sup>1</sup>. In Toronto<sup>2</sup>, the reputation of libraries as a welcoming space has set them in good stead to welcome (often educated) Syrian refugees.

Clearly not all refugees will have the habit of going to the library, because of limited provision at home, education and cultural factors, or simply because they are young. In Nigeria<sup>3</sup>, children who were internally displaced following Boko Haram violence discovered the library through targeted activities such as drawing and craft.

To offer this sense of sanctuary, libraries themselves need to be effective at assessing the needs of their (new) communities. Papers from Tanzania<sup>4</sup> and Uganda<sup>5</sup> underline the complexity of this work, especially given the difficult situation of the refugees welcomed. A stubborn refusal to flex, and rather expectation that newcomers will assimilate, can alienate newcomers from the library, as a paper looking at the experience of Vietnamese refugees in Baton Rouge shows<sup>6</sup>.

Nonetheless, it is possible, and at least some lessons are applicable to a variety of different groups, as libraries in Hamburg have found.

## **LIBRARIES AS STOREHOUSE**

One element of helping people to feel at ease is to give them voice. For many who have lived through such an experience, committing their stories to the record can help provide a sense of completion, and assurance that what they have done and seen will not disappear.

Libraries of course have a particular strength in preserving the past, and many have organised or encouraged the creation of community archives. Papers presented at World Library and Information Congresses have explored the importance of both

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<sup>1</sup> MORTAIN, Lola (2016) *Welcoming migrants in a local library in Paris*  
<http://library.ifla.org/1438/>

<sup>2</sup> BOWLES, Vickery and GLASS, Elizabeth and NGAN, Elsa (2016) *Access, Opportunity and Connections: Leveraging the Powerful Brand of Public Libraries to support migrant, global populations - The Toronto Public Library's Support for Syrian Refugees*  
<http://library.ifla.org/1374/>

<sup>3</sup> OYELUDE, Adetoun A. and OSUIGWE, Nkem (2017) *Gender dynamics in the Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria: a review of internally displaced persons.* <http://library.ifla.org/1807/>

<sup>4</sup> OBODORUKU, Benedicta (2017) *Multiculturalism of Tanzanian Refugees in the Information Society and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).*  
<http://library.ifla.org/1881/>

<sup>5</sup> NEKESA AKULLO, Winny and ODONG, Patrick (2017) *Information needs and information seeking behaviour of women refugees in Uganda; Public Libraries' Role.*  
<http://library.ifla.org/1783/>

<sup>6</sup> STAUFFER, Suzanne M. (2016) *From Saigon to Baton Rouge: East Baton Rouge Parish Library and Vietnamese Refugees, 1975-1985* <http://library.ifla.org/1346/>

historical and more recent refugee crises, during the partition of India<sup>7</sup> and the Rwandan Genocide<sup>8</sup>.

While not specifically focused on refugees, the work of libraries in Colombia, both in reintegrating regions and populations previously cut off, and in supporting peace and reconciliation, provides a valuable example of what libraries can achieve<sup>9</sup>.

## LIBRARIES AS GATEWAY

While it may not always be sure how long refugees will stay, it is clear that it is not possible to remain in suspense for an extended period. Libraries are frequently therefore involved in opening a gateway to host societies, helping newcomers move towards developing some kind of normal life.

A key element of this is language, given how necessary this is to deal not only with administrative requirements, but also everyday activities. This stands at the heart of efforts in Hamburg<sup>10</sup>, while in the Netherlands, existing successful programmes to promote early years reading have been extended to newcomers through the Language Express<sup>11</sup> reading aloud programme.

Further support can be given with filling in official papers (as in Paris<sup>12</sup>), while in Skane, Sweden<sup>13</sup>, libraries are even part of the mandatory integration course offered to all new members of the community. In Sweden<sup>14</sup>, as in Nigeria<sup>15</sup>, Germany<sup>16</sup> and elsewhere, libraries have sought to coordinate actions with other institutions and agencies, in order to maximise the effectiveness of their support.

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<sup>7</sup> KAUR, Trishanjit and SINGH, Nirmal and KAUR, Simran (2017) *Collection and Preservation of Painful Memories of Refugee Women Survived during Partition: An Overview* <http://library.ifla.org/1803/>

<sup>8</sup> OLAKA, Musa Wakhungu (2015) *Collaborating to preserve and disseminate testimonies of child survivors of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda* <http://library.ifla.org/1161/>. See also OLAKA, Musa Wakhungu (2017) *The Girl Child and Genocide: Mapping Lived Experiences of Girls from Gitarama Prefecture who Survived the 1994 Rwandan Genocide*. <http://library.ifla.org/1808/>.

<sup>9</sup> SILVA, Cristina, MONCADA, José Daniel, ÁVILA, Javier David (2017), *Peace and Sustainable Development in Colombia: Reflections and Actions from the Library Sector*, <https://www.ifla.org/node/11257>

<sup>10</sup> BARCKOW, Anne (2016) *With open arms – The library service run by the Bücherhallen Hamburg for refugees*. <http://library.ifla.org/1437/>

<sup>11</sup> BON, Ingrid and KARIEN, van Buuren (2016) *Reading Express; service for newcomers and refugees*. <http://library.ifla.org/1333/>

<sup>12</sup> MORTAIN, Lola, *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> ÅKERBERG, Anna and LUNDBORG, Ann (2017) *Welcome to Skåne: a holistic and health promoting integration platform including libraries*. <http://library.ifla.org/2055/>

<sup>14</sup> *Idem*

<sup>15</sup> OYELUDE, Adetoun A. and OSUIGWE, Nkem, *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> BARCKOW, Anne, *ibid.*

For libraries, the experience of welcoming refugees can indeed be an opportunity to stress their role as a key social service and community hub<sup>17</sup>. They can help overcome the cultural gaps, such as those that disadvantage women, and so prevent them becoming development gaps, as in Greece<sup>18</sup>.

This is not necessarily easy again. As highlighted above, libraries may not always seem like welcoming places, especially when materials are not relevant to newcomers, or in a language they understand. Experience in Norway<sup>19</sup> underlines both the effort required from libraries, but also the impact that it can have when libraries really seek to make their services work for refugees. This applies as much for libraries in host countries as to mobile libraries visiting camps, such as Libraries Without Borders' Ideas Box<sup>20</sup>.

## **LIBRARIES AS BRIDGE**

Accessing services is important, but what builds communities and a sense of integration is personal connections. For example, while both locals and newcomers may use the same building, they may still not enter into contact with each other<sup>21</sup>.

This final step is also one where libraries as spaces can make a difference. With an effort to mobilise local residents, and the creation of attractive formats and spaces, libraries can help refugees build up contacts, networks and friendships. This has been the goal of the Sprachraum initiative in Cologne (working with local volunteers)<sup>22</sup>, as well as of projects in Malmö, Sweden<sup>23</sup>, and across the United States<sup>24</sup>.

## **SETTING STANDARDS**

As is clear from the above, there is a growing supply of experience in the library field on how (and how not) to help refugees, and newcomers in general, feel safe, welcome, and included in their new communities.

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<sup>17</sup> BARCKOW, Anne and PIERCE, Alyssa (2017) *Opening the library's doors to refugees*. <http://library.ifla.org/2066/>

<sup>18</sup> ARAHOVA, Antonia (2017) *Greek Libraries Supporting Women in Conflict Situations: Current and New Roles*. <http://library.ifla.org/1781/>

<sup>19</sup> BARKOUKI, Nisrin Maktabi (2016) *Finding rest in your mother language*. <http://library.ifla.org/1371/>

<sup>20</sup> LEONG, Jack Hang-tat (2016) *Library services for immigrants and refugees: actions and principles from a global perspective*. <http://library.ifla.org/1334/>

<sup>21</sup> BARKOUKI, Nisrin Maktabi, *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> DUDEK, Sarah (2017) *Meet your new neighbour at the Cologne Public Library! Facilitating integration into society by bringing locals and refugees together*. <http://library.ifla.org/1882/>

<sup>23</sup> NILSSON, Torbjörn (2016) *Malmö libraries for refugees* <http://library.ifla.org/1446/>

<sup>24</sup> FENTON, Michele T. (2016) *Come and Be Welcomed! An Exploration of Library Services to Immigrants and Refugees in the United States*. <http://library.ifla.org/1528/>

IFLA plays an important role in sharing this experience, and indeed a session at this year's World Library and Information Congress, organised by the Metropolitan Libraries Section, will focus on Libraries as Sanctuaries.

IFLA also has standards, notably the Multicultural Libraries Manifesto<sup>25</sup>, which offers relevant principles and guidelines on how best to serve diverse user communities. Many of the ideas proposed are fully relevant to libraries welcoming refugees, notably around the universal right to information, provision of this in a form (and with content) that is relevant, and a dedication to non-discrimination and reflecting the community served.

The IFLA Guidelines on Library Services to People Experiencing Homelessness<sup>26</sup> also includes an important section on the needs of refugee groups, echoing many of the points made in the Multicultural Libraries Manifesto in more depth (and of course highlighting the specific situation of refugees). It also contains a long list of examples drawn from IFLA's membership, which can serve to inform and inspire.

The stories told in the papers mentioned in this paper offer a rich idea of what it is possible for libraries to achieve, while the standards developed by IFLA's sections synthesise them into key lessons and principles. Nonetheless, integration is a long-term process, and many of those who, for example, came from Syria to Europe over the last five years are still on the margins of society. The work of libraries to help refugees is as important as ever, and will need to adapt to reflect changing needs, newcomer populations and expectations.

What is clear is that without libraries, and librarians, many people would have missed opportunities to build better lives.

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<sup>25</sup> IFLA/UNESCO (2012), Multicultural Libraries Manifesto, <https://www.ifla.org/node/8976>

<sup>26</sup> IFLA (2017), Guidelines for Library Services to People Experiencing Homelessness, <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/12642> (developed by the IFLA Library Services to People with Special Needs (LSN) Section)