



Libraries safeguarding cultural heritage

The [United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) calls on governments to *strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage* (target 11.4) as well as to *ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements* (target 16.10).

Documentary works in all formats, including digital, are a key part of our cultural heritage. Working with, preserving, and safeguarding them in order to provide access to future generations is at the core of the work of libraries globally. This form of cultural heritage is kept in a wide range of libraries, including special, national, academic and research, and public libraries.

Unfortunately, like many other forms of cultural heritage, documentary works are under constant threat of destruction. There are a wide range of reasons for this - from neglect, to destruction in conflict or natural disaster, to a lack of funding to preserve. Libraries globally have always been at the forefront of efforts to combat these threats by safeguarding, preserving and providing access to documentary cultural heritage. Providing the community with sustainable access to its heritage helps to foster creativity, build resilient societies, and further development.

It is therefore crucial to involve libraries in all discussions and actions around the preservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage, especially in the context of the 2030 Agenda. Thanks to their diverse approaches and incomparable expertise, libraries are key partners for any effort to ensure preservation and access to our cultural heritage for future generations.

Libraries playing an active role

There are many ways in which libraries are actively safeguarding and guaranteeing the long-term survival of documentary cultural heritage:

- Safeguarding Documentary Cultural Heritage in the face of violence: The Libraries of [Timbuktu](#)
In 2013 armed groups occupied Northern Mali and Timbuktu, a city famous for its cultural heritage and its vast number of public and private libraries with invaluable documentary heritage. To safeguard the manuscripts during the occupation, librarians and volunteers smuggled them to safety in Bamako with international support. The manuscripts have since been kept in the capital and are undergoing restoration and digitisation work. Libraries have been at the forefront of rescuing and preserving the unique heritage of Mali.
- Safeguarding Heritage in the Face of Natural Disasters: Great Eastern Japan Earthquake – [Japanese Library Association](#)



After the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake in 2011 libraries from across Japan and beyond came together to help rebuild lost infrastructures, safeguard and preserve damaged materials, and provide books, information materials and access to the population. Due to the united efforts of libraries and librarians the region's libraries managed to recover and provide its services to a population in need.

- Safeguarding Digital Cultural Heritage from Neglect – [The National Library of New Zealand](#)

The National Library of New Zealand has a legislative mandate to collect, preserve and make accessible material in both physical and digital form. Collecting digital materials and ensuring that they are part of the long-term preservation mandate of the library, guarantees access to our digital cultural heritage for generations to come and combats digital amnesia.

[IFLA supports libraries safeguarding documentary cultural heritage](#)

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has been actively representing libraries on the global stage for 90 years. In its [statutes](#), it is stated that IFLA's purpose is

*to promote high standards of delivery of library and information services and professional practice, as well as the accessibility, protection, and **preservation of documentary cultural heritage.***

To support this aim, IFLA has published the [Principles of engagement in library-related activities in times of conflict, crisis or disasters](#), which advises IFLA and its members on how to monitor areas at risk, and advocate for and raise awareness about disaster prevention. In order to minimise the effect of disasters on library collections and to provide information for UNESCO's safeguarding of cultural heritage efforts, IFLA also established a [Risk Register](#) for documentary heritage which identifies documentary heritage collections at risk from destruction, through either natural or man-made disasters, and encourages risk mitigation and disaster planning in line with the [Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction](#).

IFLA is also an active participant in the [UNESCO PERSIST](#) project, working to develop principles as well as practical support for libraries in their work with digital preservation to avoid a digital amnesia.

Together with the global IFLA library network and our partners from the Blue Shield and UNESCO, IFLA actively supports libraries world-wide in their efforts to safeguard and preserve documentary cultural heritage and advocates for legislative changes which will help to make preserved content accessible.

[IFLA urges policy makers to:](#)

- Support the inclusion of libraries in any global indicator measuring SDG target 11.4



- Recognise documentary heritage as an essential part of our global cultural heritage, and establish concrete plans and make funding available for its preservation
- Recognise libraries are crucial actors in the safeguarding of cultural heritage, and include librarians in relevant international and national efforts
- Enable libraries to fulfil their mandate to safeguard and preserve documentary cultural heritage by ensuring appropriate legal frameworks for their activities as well as adequate resourcing
- Include libraries and cultural heritage institutions in disaster risk reduction plans, and give them their due place in recovery programmes.