



Inspire, Inform, Indicate

How the UNESCO-IFLA Public Library Manifesto Makes a Difference

Statements and manifestos produced by organisations such as UNESCO and indeed IFLA are not legally binding, but rather aim to work by providing guidance for decision-making. Their success is measured in the degree to which they are used, either to stimulate, or to justify, the desired change.

At least in the library world, the IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto¹ is therefore perhaps one of the most successful. This is all the more impressive in the light of the fact that public libraries are organised and governed in very different ways from one country to the next. Visits to the page on the Public Library Manifesto on the IFLA website have risen over the past few years, instead of falling or staying stable.

As the manifesto enters its 25th year, it is worth looking at the different ways in which the Manifesto has been used, around the world, in order to understand its impact. As a non-binding document, this impact is felt in diverse ways, and at different levels, from national government to individual libraries, from policy documents to research and library websites. People's sense of connection to the international also plays a role².

After a short summary of the Manifesto, this paper will therefore look at three ways in which this is taking place: through providing an inspiration – a motivation – to libraries worldwide, through directly informing the development of policies and strategies, and finally as a basis for assessing libraries.

Evidence has been sourced from Internet searches in four languages, and from a call for examples and suggestions from members of IFLA's Public Libraries Section. This does not represent a comprehensive examination of available materials, but rather an indication of the different ways in which the Manifesto has shaped discussions and policies around public libraries.

¹ UNESCO, IFLA (1994), *Public Library Manifesto*, <https://www.ifla.org/publications/iflaunesco-public-library-manifesto-1994>

² Söderling, Asa and Elf, Gullvor (2015), *The International Library Manifestos and Media Strategies in Swedish Library Practice*, Swedish Library Association, <https://www.biblioteksforeningen.se/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/library-manifest.pdf>



The Manifesto

While it is now 24 years since the last revision of the Public Library Manifesto, the original version dates back to 1949, soon after the creation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)³.

The current version starts by underlining the importance of informed and educated people as the basis for freedom, prosperity, and the development of society. It then underlines the public library's role as a 'gateway to knowledge' which provides 'a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups'.

It then sets out the relationship of the public library to its users, in particular the need to provide services responding to the needs of all the community – including those in disadvantaged or difficult situations. It notes that 'All age groups must find material relevant to their needs', and stresses opposition to ideological, political or religious censorship'.

A second section looks at the mission of public libraries, offering twelve points covering libraries' role in education, developing creativity and a love of reading, supporting heritage and cultural diversity, delivering computer training, and providing practical information for individuals, communities and businesses.

A third section considers financing and governance. It sets out that public libraries should be in principle free of charge, and stresses that there should be budget, a policy, a national network, and agreed standards of service. It leaves open whether public libraries should be run by national or local government. Libraries should, it notes 'be an essential component of any long-term strategy for culture, information provision, literacy and education'.

The final section tackles operational issues. Public libraries should set out a policy, notably focusing on how they can serve community needs. It highlights, in particular, the value of partnership with other relevant actors, accessibility, adaptation to local contexts, and the importance of outreach. It sets out the role of the librarian as 'an active intermediary between users and resources', and notes that continuous professional development is required.

³ UNESCO (1949), *The Public Library – a Living Force for Popular Education*, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001474/147487eb.pdf>

The Manifesto Inspires

As highlighted in the introduction, a key goal of documents such as the Public Library Manifesto is to stimulate change and create energy. They need to inspire action, both at the level of governments (law, funding), and at the level of individual libraries, where choices are taken about what services to offer.

This function is important, as a clear and credible statement of objectives makes it easier to focus efforts subsequently on implementation. The Manifesto does underline the importance of services and ways of doing things that have indeed proved controversial in some situations – provision of (free) services to prisoners or the promotion of intercultural dialogue – and others which can risk being forgotten, such as support to local businesses, work with heritage or computer skills.

There are a number of examples where writers draw on the Manifesto as a key reference point – a desired goal for work. It appears in government white papers – documents that set out a vision of the future, of how things should be, and that can act as a basis for legislation. A good example is Norway's paper on libraries as knowledge centres, meeting places, and cultural arenas in the digital era⁴. This cites a large part of the manifesto in the section on public libraries as an inset box, giving key ideas around services for all particular prominence.

Libraries themselves have used the Manifesto in advocating for change to government. Estonia's libraries, for example, drew on it in making the case for a national public library law. This, they reasoned, would make it easier to resist cuts⁵. The Manifesto also helped structure other documents and policies and so understand what other initiatives were underway. In Malta, the Library Association took the Manifesto as a point of departure for defining its own set of standards⁶.

⁴ Department of Culture and Religion of the Kingdom of Norway (2017), Knowledge Centres, Meeting Places, Cultural Arenas in the Digital Era, <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/6a7ad6f5ba584c8aafdc8bfa5c8ba86b1/nn-no/pdfs/stm200820090023000dddpdfs.pdf>

⁵ Poldas, Mai (2015), Understandings of the Role of a Public Library in Estonia, Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries

⁶ Zerafa, Laurence, Samut-Tagliaferro, Mary (2012), Guidelines and Standards for the Development of the Malta Public Library Service: A Case for Public Lending (Branch) Libraries – Proceedings of Launch of Working Paper, <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/handle/123456789/13667/MaLIA%20Branch%20Libraries%20Standards.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

A current campaign in Colombia, aimed at reversing major cuts to public library budgets proposed by the government, places the Manifesto at the heart of its call to sign a petition⁷. This takes a direct quotation from the text, setting out the importance of delivering informed, educated societies as a prerequisite for development.

As a public document, the Manifesto is also available to researchers. For example in Kenya, it provided a point of departure and structure for survey work around staffing in public libraries across the country⁸. In India, it has provided a reference point for work on the modernisation of libraries in the digital era⁹. In Egypt, its reference to the importance of the role of librarians and their need for training has provided a justification and basis for research into the subject of professional development¹⁰.

Finally, the manifesto has been recommended as a key document for librarians themselves. A research project carried out by the Swedish National Library, working closely with UNESCO, recommended that the Manifesto be handed out to librarians in Laos and Vietnam. This would, as a part of their training, provide a valuable reminder, indeed almost a mission statement¹¹.

In the case of Toronto, a paper presented at the World Library and Information Congress in 2016 specifically underlined the power of the Manifesto as just such an inspiration in delivering services to marginalised groups¹².

⁷ Bibliotecarios a la calle (2018), *Open Letter to the Interior Ministry*, <https://www.change.org/p/iv%C3%A1n-duque-presidente-de-la-rep%C3%BAblica-de-colombia-s-o-s-bibliotecas-p%C3%BAblicas?signed=true>

⁸ Kinya, Henry S (2011), A Glance on Manpower in Public Library System in Kenya, *International Journal on Humanities and Social Science*, Vol 1, No. 12 http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_1_No_12_September_2011/18.pdf

⁹ Suseela, V. J. (2010), *Modernisation of Public Libraries in India – the Importance of ICT Applications*,

http://www.academia.edu/27354654/Modernization_of_Public_Libraries_in_India_The_Importance_of_ICT_Applications

¹⁰ Mohamed, Heba (2017), *E-training networks for public librarians: An experimental study to design a network for public librarians in Egypt*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt, and Mohamed, Heba (2019), *E-training networks for public librarians*, *Scientific Journal of Libraries, Documentation and Information*. 1 (1), 325 -351

¹¹ Thomas, Barbro (2009), *Development of Public Library Performance in Laos and Vietnam*, https://www.kb.se/Dokument/Bibliotek/utredn_rapporter/2009/Laos_Vietnam_Final_Report_2009-04-07.pdf

¹² Bowles, Vickery, 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/id/eprint/1374>

The Manifesto Informs

A second key function of the Manifesto is to inform policies and strategies – as a key part of existing policies. Again, the flexibility of the text is clear, with appearances in both national and local laws, as well as in individual library strategies.

A strong example of inclusion in national law comes from Czechia. The official guidance given to libraries in law sets gives over a section to the Manifesto, underlining in particular its points around equal offer of service, diversity of collections, free access, a focus on culture, education and information, and accessibility¹³. The Manifesto is also referenced in the official guidance to public libraries¹⁴.

The Manifesto has a similar function in France, where the website of the territorial civil service (a category of civil servants working in regional and local governments) incorporates it into guidance on provision of library services by municipal government¹⁵. This is particularly important in the absence of a public library law in France, a point made by the local government of the Seine Maritime library service¹⁶.

In Sweden, where national law requires local authorities to have their own library provisions, the Manifesto is a regular reference point for the development of local laws¹⁷. The same country also developed a scheme of 'model libraries' in the 90s, in order to provide living examples of the Public Library Manifesto at work¹⁸.

The Manifesto suggests that libraries themselves should have policies (or strategies). In turn, there are a number of examples of libraries which draw on the Manifesto in these policies. Richmond library in Canada places the document front and centre of its strategic plan for 2014-18 as a reference

¹³ Law No. 257/2001 Coll. of 29 June 2001 on Libraries and Terms of Operating public Library and Information Services (Library Act) of the Czech Republic – Explanatory Memorandum

¹⁴ Ministry of Culture of Czechia

¹⁵ Renaudin, Coline (2016), *Missions et Rôles des Bibliothèques*, Wiki of the National Centre for the Territorial Civil Service (2018),

<http://www.wikiterritorial.cnfpt.fr/xwiki/bin/view/vitrine/Missions+et+r%C3%B4les+des+biblioth%C3%A8ques>

¹⁶

http://www.mds76.net/medias/medias.aspx?INSTANCE=exploitation&PORTAL_ID=portal_model_instance_textes_de_references_pour_les_bibliotheques_publices.xml

¹⁷ Information acquired by e-mail

¹⁸ Hassner, K. (1999). The Model Library Project: A Way to Implement the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto. *IFLA Journal*, 25(3), 143–147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/034003529902500303>

point for the different activities it undertakes¹⁹. Barcelona City Libraries do the same²⁰, as does Rockingham City Library in Australia²¹.

There are also more high-level references, such as that on the home page of the Hong Kong Public Library authorities, where it is used to explain the purpose of libraries²². It also features on the pages of Fribourg City Libraries in Switzerland²³.

The Manifesto Provides Indicators

A final function of the Manifesto in the materials uncovered through informal searching is as a benchmark against which library services are measured. There are fewer examples in this area, it appears (or these are not publicly available), but the role of the manifesto as a means of assessing libraries' activities represents a powerful use.

Clearly the provisions of the Manifesto are high-level, and so do not provide specific targets. However, they can provide a basis for developing more specific outcome measures. This has taken place in Australia, where the Library and Information Association has connected the missions set out in the manifesto with outcomes and guidelines²⁴.

A book, behind a paywall, also looks to apply the manifesto to Wesfleur Public Library in the Western Cape, South Africa in order to assess what services are being offered. While full access to the publication was not possible, this suggests a particularly applied use of the Manifesto to support broader efforts to develop measurement tools for libraries²⁵.

¹⁹ Richmond Public Library (2014), *Strategic and Long Range Plan*,

<http://www.yourlibrary.ca/aboutus/pdf/2014-2018StrategicPlanPublic.pdf>

²⁰ Lake, John (2007), *The Public Library 2010 and its Role with the Internet*, Presentation delivered at the Aula Jordi Rubio I Balaguer Seminar, Barcelona,

http://www.ub.edu/biblio/aula/seminaris/IFLA_public_libraries.pdf

²¹ Rockingham City Library (2016), *Library and Information Services Strategy*,

[http://rockingham.wa.gov.au/getmedia/6b1e9f0a-3111-4b78-b7f8-9953900e693b/D16-183929-Library-and-Information-Services-2017-2021-final-adopted-Dec-2016\(2\).pdf.aspx](http://rockingham.wa.gov.au/getmedia/6b1e9f0a-3111-4b78-b7f8-9953900e693b/D16-183929-Library-and-Information-Services-2017-2021-final-adopted-Dec-2016(2).pdf.aspx)

²² Hong Kong Public Libraries website: <https://www.hkpl.gov.hk/en/about-us/intro/intro.html>

²³ Fribourg City Libraries website: <https://www.ville-fribourg.ch/bibliotheque>

²⁴ Australian Library and Information Association (2016), *Guidelines, Standards and Outcome Measures for Australian Public Libraries*,

https://www.alia.org.au/sites/default/files/20160714%20Guidelines%20Standards%20and%20Outcome%20Measures%20for%20Australian%20Public%20Libraries%20-%20MANUSCRIPT%20VERSION_0.pdf

²⁵ Adonis, Neville Charles (2008) *A Gateway to Knowledge: the Compliance of Wesfleur Public Library (Atlantis) with the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto of 1994*,

<https://books.google.ch/books?id=5v62YgEACAAJ&dq=A+gateway+to+knowledge:+The+c>

Conclusion

While, as highlighted at the beginning, this article makes no claim to being authoritative or comprehensive. However, it does shed light on the different ways in which the Manifesto is being used – as a source in planning for policy (or making recommendations on how policy should be made), as a reference within existing laws and strategies, and as a basis for defining indicator frameworks.

It also appears, from the examples given, that the impact of the Manifesto comes from three different angles. First of all, there is the substance – the individual principles and ideas set out in the document. Secondly, there is the language itself – the text is powerful, and provides highly valuable quotations which can be used to 'speak to the heart'.

Finally, the fact that this is a document which has received the approval of all UNESCO Member States makes it a particularly useful reference point in advocacy and lobbying efforts in favour of public libraries.

Further research, including interviews, would allow for a stronger understanding of the respective impact of this work, but it appears, at least, that this remains a high profile instrument that is providing real support to libraries around the world. Its continued promotion – as well as reflection on whether any amendments are necessary – are interesting potential lines of work for the Manifesto's 25th anniversary year.