

Libraries and the UN Sustainable Development Goals:

The Past, Present, and Future

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Abstract

This paper presents initial research from a broader project about the impact of libraries on the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In 2015, the UN launched the SDGs, a set of 17 goals for global development by the year 2030. Libraries helped shape the inclusion of access to information in these goals and are involved in furthering them through providing access to information. The OCLC Global Council has selected the SDGs as its area of focus for 2020, and is formulating a research program that will identify and advocate for the ways that libraries can help further the SDGs. This paper details the history of the SDGs and the role that libraries played in shaping them. It shows examples of ways that libraries have helped further them through providing access to information and information literacy skills. Finally, it offers suggestions for ways that libraries could structure their information activities around the SDGs, based on data from a survey of OCLC Global Council delegates.

Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations (UN) adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a group of 17 goals for the year 2030 related to “poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice” (United Nations, 2020). Libraries played a vital role in the creation of the SDGs, leading the charge to have access to information included in

them. In the time since their adoption, libraries have helped to further progress towards them in their communities through related initiatives, programs, and activities.

The Global Council at OCLC, a global library cooperative, selected libraries and the SDGs as its focus area for research and advocacy in 2020. This research project will include virtual focus group interviews and an online survey to identify how libraries currently are addressing the SDGs and how libraries can best impact the SDGs. The findings will be disseminated through a research report and a series of online webinars to help increase awareness of the SDGs and ways that libraries can incorporate them into their planning.

This paper presents some initial research on this project, framed around the past, present, and future. The section on the past discusses the history of the SDGs and the role of libraries shaping them. The section on the present includes examples of libraries furthering several other SDGs, including those related to education, enhanced scientific capabilities, and safe public spaces. The section on the future presents some initial findings of an OCLC Global Council delegate survey on the areas of the SDGs where libraries can have the greatest impact.

The Past

The Millennium Development Goals

The SDGs represent the second time that the UN has created a systematic list of goals and measures of progress. In 2000, they adopted the Millennium Development Goals (Sachs, 2012). These initial eight goals created targets for progress by the year 2015. The Brookings Institution attempted to measure the impact of the MDGs in 2017, and found that the MDGs were generally successful. For example, in their measures of public health indicators such as

child mortality, HIV diagnoses, and tuberculosis deaths, Brookings estimates that anywhere between 21 and 29 million lives were saved (McArthur & Rasmussen, 2017).

The Lyons Declaration

As the 2015 deadline of the MDGs neared, discussions began about the post-2015 development agenda. Instead of just selecting new targets, the UN decided to expand on the initial set of eight goals (Ban, 2013). This created a period of international advocacy as people worked to get their areas of interest included in the post-2015 agenda.

The Lyons Declaration on Access to Information and Development originally was drafted by IFLA in 2014 and signed by more than 600 libraries and library organizations. This document called for access to information to be included in the post-2015 development agenda. In this document, libraries emphasized the importance of information in allowing people to exercise their human rights, be active in the economy, be active citizens in their community, gain new skills, and express their cultural identity. The Lyons Declaration also emphasized that libraries play a major role in information literacy instruction (IFLA, 2014). This effort was ultimately successful, with access to information being included in Goal 16 of peace, justice, and strong institutions (United Nations, 2020).

The Present

The Connection Between Libraries and Sustainable Development

One of the most striking examples of the connection between libraries and sustainable development was profiled in the book *Syria's Secret Library* (Thomson, 2019). The Syrian city of Darayya city was caught in the middle of Syria's civil war, and remained under siege from

2012 to 2016. During this time, a group of young people started going through abandoned buildings in search of books for their secret underground library. They carefully marked where they retrieved, or, as they would say, rescued them, so that they could return them to their rightful owners after the war was over.

Establishing a secret library in the midst of a civil war is a dangerous undertaking. In a situation where many lacked security and basic necessities, these people were willing to risk their lives for a library. Why did they consider this library to be so valuable? Abdul Basit, one of the other librarians, provided an answer to this question:

“We believed that a place like this could store part of our heritage as well as the keys to our future. It would not only help us to continue our education but be there for anyone who loved reading” (Thomson, 2019, 47).

The striking part about this quote is that it is not focused on the war itself, but rather what takes place after the war. How will the country rebuild? This focus on development gets at the heart of what libraries can do for countries. They act as a key artery for economic, educational, political, and social engagement. The reach that libraries have to all parts of the community is virtually unparalleled. Libraries act as a central hub for education, information, internet connectivity, and community interaction. Through this reach, libraries have been involved in all 17 of the SDGs. The remainder of this section profiles just a few examples of specific sub-goals and ways that libraries have helped to further them.

SDG 4.5 – Eliminating Inequality in Access to Education

SDG 4.5 proposes to eliminate inequalities in access to education, particularly inequalities based on gender, disability, age, ethnicity, and for people in conflict-affected areas. Bibliothèques Sans Frontières, or Libraries Without Borders, provides an example of the work that libraries are doing for this goal. They work to address inequality of access to information by bringing it to the communities who tend to be most underserved. One way they do this is with their Ideas boxes. These pop up media centers and learning hubs can be easily brought to places that are underserved (Libraries Without Borders, 2020).

Ideas boxes played an important role during the Colombian Civil War. In 2016, after fifty years of conflict, there was a peace agreement. Libraries Without Borders set up twenty Ideas boxes in demobilized areas (Libraries Without Borders, 2019). This is an example of a case where libraries can have a dual impact. Not only do libraries connect people with information, they also act as community hubs to connect people with each other. In communities that have been impacted by five decades of war, and the lack of trust that can bring, Ideas boxes can help bring people together again and rebuild the sense of a community. This also can contribute to Goal 16.1 (reduce violence).

READ Global is another library organization that specifically has worked to improve education for women. They have created several training programs targeted towards women. These include vocational and literacy programs, legal programs, programs on human rights, and healthcare programs. Most importantly for Goal 4.5, READ Global provides leadership training to encourage political participation and help more women in these countries become community leaders. In India and Nepal, a survey administered by READ Global found that more than 60% of women surveyed who used a READ Center reported an increase in their decision-making

power, and one in five reported that they were leaders in their communities (READ Global, 2018).

As part of this project, we spoke with Rozita Petrinska Labudovikj, a former IFLA Fellow at OCLC who is now a librarian in North Macedonia. She works to promote equal access to education and culture, particularly for children with disabilities, through the organization Education For All. They have received support from organizations like the WHO and the EU, and she spoke on the impact that the SDGs played in support for her organization:

“I believe that the fact that equitable education is recognized as an international goal, especially as one of the UN SDGs, makes it much easier for us to make alliances with organizations from other countries. Collaboration is easier when the benefits of the activities are applicable in many countries.”

Goal 9.5 – Enhance Scientific Research and Capabilities

SDG 9.5 deals with enhancing scientific research and capabilities, especially in developing countries. Inequality in access to knowledge creates a barrier for scientific research. Much of the latest research is behind gated journals. The general public, lacking institutional affiliations, often lacks access to proprietary journals. This inequality in access is even greater in the developing world, where many institutions do not have the budget to subscribe to these journals.

Open Access is one possible solution to this problem, and libraries are leading the charge for this. Michigan State University Libraries, for example, just signed a transformative agreement with De Gruyter to allow MSU authors to publish in open access in all of their journals without paying an article processing charge (Morgan & Brauer, 2020). Libraries also

have been involved in the conversation around Plan S, which will mandate that all nationally-funded research from twelve European countries will be available in open journals (Van Noorden, 2020).

Goal 11.7 – Safe and Inclusive Public Spaces

SDG 11.7 calls for universal access to safe, inclusive, and accessible green and public spaces. This is measured by the share of open space for public use in cities. Libraries play a front and center role as a safe space for all community members. One of the most dramatic examples of this came back in 2016, at Pratt Free Library in Baltimore. Protests against a police shooting unfortunately turned violent in some parts of the city, and the CVS across the street from this library was burned.

Throughout all of this, the library chose to stay open. Carla Hayden, who was the library's CEO at the time, explained why she made this decision:

"I knew that the libraries are community resources. I knew that they are anchors in so many communities. In a lot of communities in Baltimore, especially challenged ones, we are the only resource. If we close, we're sending a signal that we're afraid or that we aren't going to be available when times are tough. We should be open especially when times are tough."

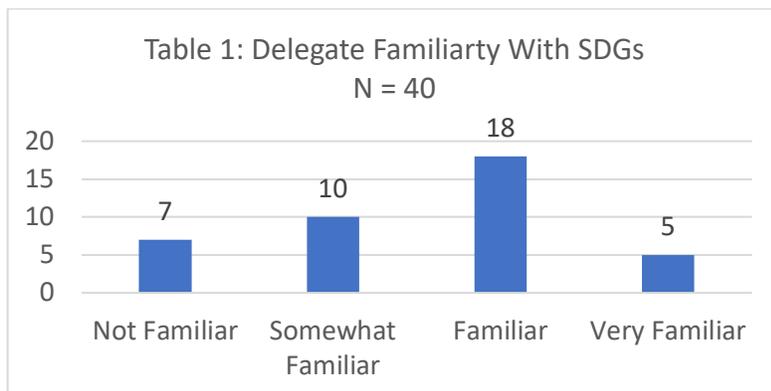
Libraries in Ferguson, MO had previously made a similar decision to stay open during a period of protest. Following the protests, the library made changes to adapt to community needs. According to library director Scott Bonner:

“We are far, far more programming-oriented. I knew when I took this job that I was going to try to make the library more responsive to the community. I didn’t know we would have to do it at lightning speed” (Ostman, 2015).

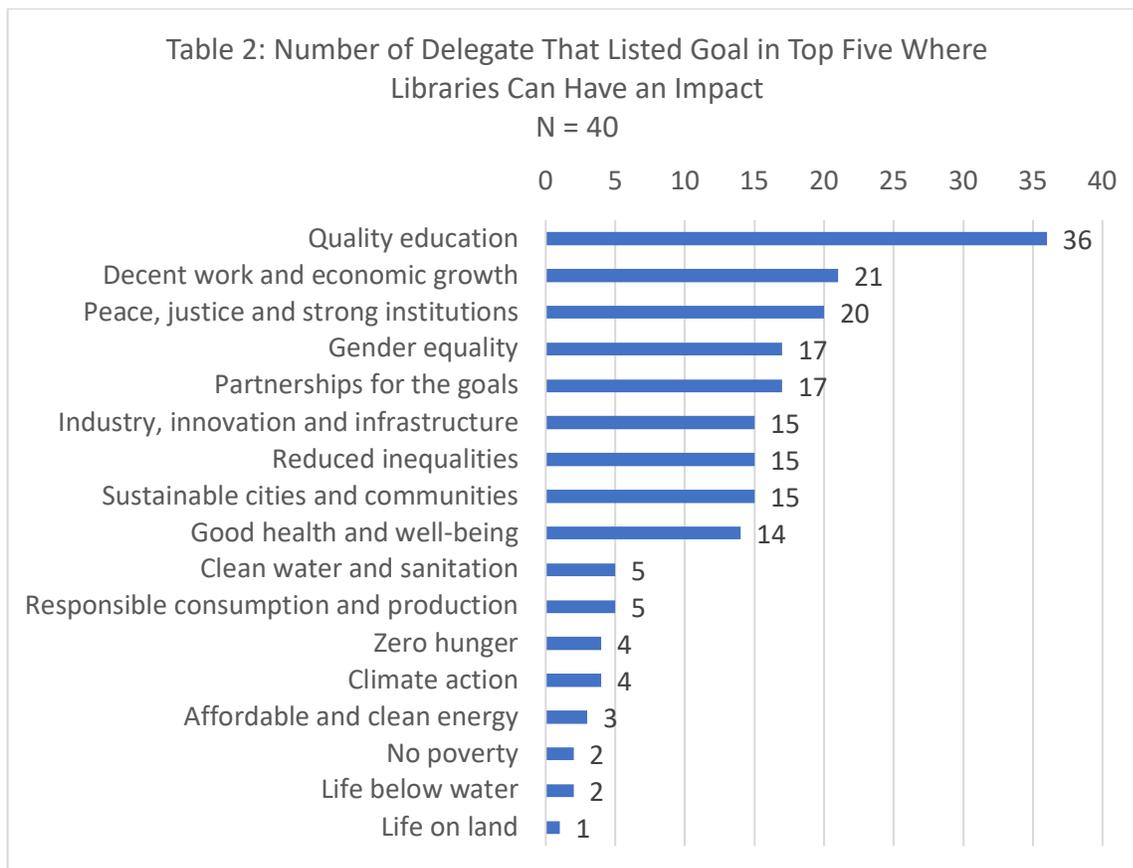
These quotes are especially interesting at the time of writing, given the present situation with COVID. The ALA has recommended that libraries close their physical facilities (Morales, 2020). Libraries are continuing to serve their communities by providing digital resources and online services. The general public is starting to learn more about what it means for libraries to be open, and that it is more than just the physical building, it also is an online space where individuals can find books, movies, links to unemployment resources, resume assistance, and community engagement. This is an emerging area for study.

The Future

OCLC’s Global Council selected the SDGs as its area of focus for the year 2020. This research is ongoing and will include an online survey of library administrators and staff. As part of an initial step towards structuring this research activity, OCLC surveyed the Global Council delegates on their familiarity with the SDGs and the goals where they believe that libraries can have an impact.



Delegates were asked how familiar they were with the SDGs. The results of this are shown in Table 1. The most common answer was “familiar”. Only 5 respondents identified as “very familiar”. This could indicate that librarians have an awareness of the SDGs, but the SDGs are not central to library planning. This supports the idea that libraries are furthering the SDGs because the goals are part of the libraries’ overall mission, and not as part of a deliberate effort based on the SDGs.



Respondents were asked to select the top 5 of the 17 SDGs where they believe that libraries can have the greatest impact. Table 2 shows the number of respondents that rated each goal in their top 5. Quality education was at the top goal where librarians see themselves as having an impact. This finding is not surprising, as libraries are firmly rooted in the education system and are the education system for many adults. Libraries can use the inclusion of quality

education in the SDGs to find new partnership and funding opportunities from local governing institutions and NGOs.

Economic growth, gender equality, and peace and justice are the next areas participants thought that libraries can have an impact. These speak to the broader societal impact that libraries can have, and they work to empower groups of people politically, economically, and socially.

Most of the goals where they see libraries as having less impact deal with climate issues. Even here, however, libraries can have an indirect impact through connecting people with research and information. One way that libraries can improve their impact is offering information literacy instruction. This can help people evaluate information. This especially is important with climate issues, where there is a large amount of misinformation on the internet.

The most surprising finding is that, while economic growth was near the top, no poverty was listed near the bottom. This could be an indication that, while libraries see themselves as contributing to their local economies, they do not see themselves as doing enough to help those at the bottom. Libraries can work to foster these connections through less traditional services. For example, in the United States, libraries have provided information and educational resources for community members directly affected by the opioid crisis (Allen et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Libraries have played an important role in the UN's SDGs. Through connecting people with information, libraries have helped their countries further these goals. Libraries can have a great impact, however, if they act strategically and specifically design initiatives around the SDGs. This can include both leaning into the areas where libraries can have the greatest impact

and finding ways to increase the libraries' role in areas where librarians do not currently see libraries as having an impact.

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