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priority Theme: Socially just transition towards sustainable
development: the role of digital technologies on social
development and well-being of all.

Statement submitted by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

Introduction

IFLA – the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions – welcomes the opportunity to submit a written statement in advance of the 59th Session of the Commission on Social Development. Our Federation represents libraries worldwide of all types, from major national institutions to the smallest school and village libraries. With members in over 150 countries, we work both to promote better library services for all, globally, and to advocate for our institutions as partners for development.

For IFLA, access to knowledge is a social development issue. It also represents an accepted right in international policy and law. Explicitly or implicitly, the Sustainable Development Goals recognise the importance of information – including access to it, and the skills to make use of it – in twenty different targets. The importance of access to information is also established in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as subsequent human rights documents.

Libraries help deliver on this right. Their core mission is to provide equitable access to information, to give every member of society the knowledge they need to take better decisions, seize opportunities, engage in research, communicate and collaborate with others, and access culture. Without libraries, these possibilities risk being limited only to the better-off.

As such, libraries globally have broadly strongly welcomed the emergence and spread of digital technologies, and indeed have participated actively in elements of their development. They offer exciting possibilities to bring more information to more people, in new formats, and to give previously excluded or unrepresented groups a voice, outside of traditional and often strictly controlled channels.

A particularly strong example here has been the emergence of the Open Access movement, which aimed to break away from a model of scientific publishing that limited access to research only to those who could pay rapidly rising subscription fees, while earning the largest publishing companies large profits. Similarly, people with disabilities in particular have benefitted from adaptive technologies which allow for a new degree of access, unimaginable in a world of physical formats only.

However, benefitting from Open Access or being able to use adaptive tools or other possibilities brought by digital technologies depends on having access in the first place, something that is still not the case for almost half of the world's population.

Clearly, however, there is also growing awareness of the darker side of digital. The risk of seeing real-world inequalities reproduced, or even exacerbated online, is real. The huge power of platforms, or the spread of malicious and harmful behaviours are justifiable concerns. Nonetheless, it is neither realistic or desirable to wish the internet away, or even to return to a situation where only a limited number of actors control channels for accessing or seeking information.

A balance is necessary. This statement therefore sets out some key goals to be pursued in ensuring that digital technologies can work as a driver of social development, with a focus on what can be done at the level of services to individuals to help them realise their potential.

Everyone Connected

A first goal, from our point of view, is to accelerate efforts to give everyone a meaningful possibility to get online. For all of the challenges that digital technologies bring, the COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the costs of being offline, with children excluded from education, adults from their work, patients from eHealth solutions, and people from their friends and families. In particular for libraries, either not benefitting from an adequate connection themselves, or having users who are offline, has made it far harder to carry out their social justice mission.

We would therefore strongly recommend that the Commission on Social Development joins its voice to others calling for a new approach to connectivity which accepts clearly that we cannot expect the market alone to close the digital divide. We recommend in particular that governments invest in public access solutions, such as through libraries or other community anchor institutions, in order to ensure that no-one should want for connectivity because of a lack of resources.

There is evidence that public access in libraries can close access gaps. For example, countries with more public libraries offering public access tend to have lower gaps in levels of use of the internet, for example between old and young, women and men, unemployed and employed, and poor and rich.

Even in countries where there is widespread home connectivity, there can be many different reasons why people prefer to connect using public solutions. A lack of relevant hardware, slow or limited connections, or simply a lack of confidence can make public access options interesting. Public access continues to matter there.

Everyone Enabled

A second goal is to ensure that everyone has the skills necessary to make effective use of the internet. Libraries have extensive experience of developing information literacy – the ability to find, evaluate and apply information effectively – something that is arguably now more important than ever. Evidence from the OECD's PISA and PIAAC surveys underline that there is significant variation in level of ability to make use of the internet to solve problems, which can lead to economic and social disadvantage.

Access to such skills can be particularly vital in communities which have been most recently connected to the internet, and so which may be more vulnerable to exploitation or manipulation. This is important both within formal education, but also in communities as part of a comprehensive

lifelong learning strategy. Libraries have a proven record of providing spaces for the development of such skills, through informal and non-formal means.

The development of skills is also a priority if we are to address many of the most disturbing tendencies on the internet. Savvy internet users are, for example, better placed to make conscious choices about what personal data they want to share, and to spot and avoid sharing misinformation. This provides a much more sustainable response to such phenomena than regulation (which can be clumsy and may even be used to discriminate against different groups), or technological solutions (which are often simplistic and again can serve to block diverse speech, and so shut out certain groups).

Furthermore, in the longer term, a serious focus on developing skills among a wider group of people can ensure that technology itself, in the future, better responds to the needs of all communities, rather than reflecting the preferences and needs of a more narrow category of the population.

Everyone Informed

A final goal is to ensure that the potential of the internet as a diverse and socially inclusive approach is realised by giving everyone access to content that is relevant to them.

A first area of work should be on schools, with every school given access to an online or offline library in order to support learning. Children have a right to relevant material under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the internet can help. However, too often, books are difficult to access, not available in local languages, do not reflect local experience, or come attached with software and terms which tracks performance and invades privacy. Promoting open educational content, and ensuring that copyright rules do not unjustifiably stand in the way of digital access are priorities here.

More broadly, there needs to be serious focus on supporting the development of content that ensures that all groups find something of value online. The digitisation of local heritage can be one way of doing this, as can work to encourage people to create their own materials. Again, libraries can be effective places for this work. Further steps can be the development of apps and other services focused on local communities.

Conclusion

As highlighted in the introduction, optimism about the potential of technology has become tempered by concerns about the problems that undeniably exist on the internet. Achieving social development will therefore require a smarter approach, focused on individual empowerment, and finding a way of retaining the benefits while managing the risks that technology brings.

The three areas for action – all focused on ensuring that everyone has the best possible chance of using technologies to realise their potential – draws heavily on the Call for Action released by the Partnership for Public Access. We believe that this represents an agenda for action that will promote equitable, inclusive development, and provide the most sustainable way to address the challenges we face.
