



The New Urban Agenda

Advocacy Opportunities for Libraries

- The New Urban Agenda, agreed in 2016, offers a form of 2030 Agenda for local governments in promoting strong, sustainable and equitable cities and human settlements.
- Compared to the UN's 2030 Agenda, it has a much stronger focus on culture and heritage, as well as on the importance of universal public services
- As such, it represents a useful reference point for libraries in advocacy on a wider range of issues, also including public spaces, access to information and communications technology, and skills provision

The [New Urban Agenda](#), agreed in October 2016 in Quito, Ecuador, could be described as a 2030 Agenda for cities and communities. It is the result of a highly inclusive discussion between national and local governments, civil society organisations, representatives of community and minority groups and others. The Agenda is available in all six UN Languages.

It sets out the key principles and practical steps needed to make for successful urbanisation, from the social, economic and environmental perspectives. In doing so, it gives a strong emphasis to the importance of culture, as well as other areas where libraries can contribute.

This briefing explores the thinking behind the New Urban Agenda, what it contains, key advocacy points for libraries, and how you can draw on it in your work.

Why a 'New' Urban Agenda?

While humans have lived in cities for thousands of years, we are currently living in an era of unprecedented urbanisation.

Historically, there has been a tendency to focus on the downsides of this – the concentration of poverty and social problems, congestion and pollution, and negative effects on rural areas. Urban policy was therefore simply about trying to reduce the 'negatives'.

However – and in particular in the light of the growing share of people living in towns and cities – calls have grown for a more positive approach, one that can, in the words of the Secretary General of the HABITAT III conference, make urbanisation a 'powerful tool for sustainable development for both developing and developed countries'.

The Quito Declaration and Culture (Paragraph 10)

The New Urban Agenda acknowledges that culture and cultural diversity are sources of enrichment for humankind and provide an important contribution to the sustainable development of cities, human settlements and citizens, empowering them to play an active and unique role in development initiatives. The New Urban Agenda further recognises that culture should be taken into account in the promotion and implementation of new sustainable consumption and production patterns that contribute to the responsible use of resources and address the adverse impact of climate change.



This was the logic that drove the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, also known as HABITAT III, held in Quito, Ecuador, in October 2016. This, in turn, produced the New Urban Agenda.

The Agenda builds on the United Nations 2030 Agenda (agreed the previous year), the Paris Agreement on climate change ([IFLA Brief](#)), the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction ([IFLA Brief](#)) and others, looking to bring these international commitments to the local level. It also draws on the concept of the 'Right to the City' ([IFLA blog](#)), which underlines the connection between 'place' and achievement of development goals.

What Does It Contain?

The New Urban Agenda is made up of a Declaration and an Implementation Plan. The Declaration sets out context, a shared vision, principles and commitments, and a call for action.

The Implementation Plan is organised into three sections – a more detailed set of commitments addressing the social, economic and environmental pillars of sustainable development, recommendations on means of implementation, and provisions on follow-up.

Given the wide range of responsibilities that many local governments have, the Agenda is a very rich document, mentioning work in many different areas. This underlines the strong connection between success in building sustainable cities and communities, and achieving other development objectives.

Alongside core traditional elements of local policies, such as housing and transport, there are therefore a number of others which relate strongly to the work of libraries.

Culture is a key one. From its second paragraph, the Agenda recognises the importance of cultural interactions, alongside economic and social ones, and in its fourth, it sets out cultural development as a goal.

Paragraph 10 (see inset box above) makes clear that culture is not only a beneficiary of successful development policies, but also a driver of it through promoting wellbeing, engaging and empowering individuals, and facilitating essential changes in the way we live.

Public Spaces (Paragraph 37)

'We commit ourselves to promoting safe, inclusive, accessible, green and quality public spaces [...] that are multifunctional areas for social interaction and inclusion, human health and wellbeing, economic exchange and cultural expression and dialogue among a wide diversity of people and cultures, and that are designed and managed to ensure human development and build peaceful, inclusive and participatory societies, as well as to promote living together, connectivity and social inclusion'

Far more than the 2030 Agenda, the New Urban Agenda highlights the importance of free cultural expression, cultural diversity, cultural infrastructures, heritage preservation, cultural inclusion and cultural factors in determining the acceptance – and so success – of new initiatives by communities.

The New Urban Agenda also focuses repeatedly on the importance of **safe, welcoming spaces** where people can feel



comfortable and interact with fellow members of their communities (see inset box). This closely mirrors SDG 11.7, which also focuses on open, welcoming public spaces as venues for interaction and development of social capital.

Linked to this is the stress on **universal access to social infrastructure** and basic public services, open to all, working to promote people-centred development (i.e. starting with the needs of the individual as a whole, rather than addressing different dimensions such as education, health or welfare separately).

Mitigating and adapting to **climate change** is also high on the agenda, both given the tendency for towns and cities to be at higher risk of disaster, but also the potential to work at the local level to change behaviours and explore new approaches and responses.

There is recognition of the importance of **access to information and communications technologies** as an enabler of economic and civic participation, as well as access to information in general. Similarly, the importance of **promoting creative industries** as drivers of growth, and of equitable and comprehensive **skills provision** is underlined.

Finally, the Agenda underlines the role of access to – and application of – **science, research and innovation**, the need for **transparency and accountability** of local government in its own decision-making, and the importance of effective **risk management and prevention planning**.

Connectivity (Paragraph 156)

‘We will promote the development of national information and communications technology policies and e-government strategies, as well as citizen-centric digital governance tools, tapping into technological innovations, including capacity-development programmes, in order to make information and communications technologies accessible to the public, including women and girls, children and youth, persons with disabilities, older persons and persons in vulnerable situations, to enable them to develop and exercise civic responsibility, broadening participation and fostering responsible governance, as well as increasing efficiency’

What Does it Mean for Libraries?

With many libraries – in particular public, school and community libraries – depending primarily on local and regional governments for support, there is a strong interest in being able to show alignment with their priorities.

Fortunately, at least on the basis of the areas for action set out in the New Urban Agenda, this need not be difficult. In particular, you may be able to make the following points in your advocacy, citing the Agenda:

- Libraries are a core part of the cultural infrastructure of any city, and often represent the single most popular cultural activity. With their focus on access for all, they are truly democratic, while also acting as guardians of heritage for future generations.
- With at least 430 public and community libraries worldwide, libraries are often the only indoor, non-commercial space in a community where people can come together, interact, and build bonds as a basis for social capital.



- Libraries have a mission to empower citizens through access to information and the skills to use it. A core principle of librarianship is to take the needs of the user as a starting point, in line with the people-centred model of development promoted by the Agenda.
- Libraries are potentially great showcases for sustainable practices, both in their building and operation. They can also act as venues for materials and awareness-raising activities around sustainable living.
- For millions of people, libraries are the entry-point to the internet. Yet even in highly connected societies, they continue to attract users needing to access the right hardware, advice, or simply wanting to go online in company.
- Libraries have excellent potential to help more people engage with government information – both official communications from councils and authorities, but also open data.
- Libraries need to be a part of risk management and prevention strategies, both in order to ensure that the heritage the safeguard is preserved, but also because they can represent key community centres in the aftermath of disaster and help communities ‘build back better’.

What Can You Do?

Given the strong focus in the New Urban Agenda on so many of the areas where libraries have a unique contribution to make, the document is potentially a very useful tool for advocacy.

In deciding how to use it, you may want to reflect on whether your local government engages much internationally. Where they do, you are likely to find it easy to connect around the Agenda. Where they don't, you may want to use events like World Cities Day (31 October) and World Habitat Day (1st Monday of October) to raise awareness.

In each case, you may want to contact the mayor or head of your council, or the person responsible for libraries, in order to build awareness of the role of libraries in delivering the New Urban Agenda. You could also try the local press.

Elsewhere, feel free to use references to the Agenda in other advocacy work – simply showing that your work relates to a major United Nations text should give your message more weight.

Good luck, and let us know how you get on!