UN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION FORUM 2018

Side-event on Smart, Sustainable Cities and the SDGs: Mobilising Research and Innovative Practices to Deliver Integrated and Inclusive Policies, 5 June 2018

Intervention by Donna Scheeder, IFLA President 2015-2017

[INTRODUCTION]

IFLA has engaged strongly in both the Internet Governance and Sustainable Development agendas with a simple message – that without libraries, there is no meaningful, inclusive access to information, and without meaningful, inclusive access to information, there is no development.

This is a belief – a commitment – shared globally by the library community, as recent consultations led by IFLA have shown. But it is one that really comes into its own in the level of cities and communities.

Just as digital technologies are opening up new possibilities for efficiency and effectiveness in local governance, they <u>can</u> also build more inclusive communities. In making Sustainable Cities and Communities a sustainable development goal, the UN and is members highlighted the importance of inclusion.

Many of the targets underline the need for all to benefit from housing, basic services and transport (11.1 and 11.2), while 11.5 (reducing the impact of disasters) focuses in particular on the needs of the most vulnerable. I would also particularly like to highlight 11.7, which talks about the need to offer public and green spaces which are inclusive and accessible.

And of course, there is the overall aim of leaving no-one behind, and a huge number of interlinkages with other SDGs.

We also know that cities can tend to concentrate poverty, and, without the right policies and infrastructures, can suffer from serious social problems. The concern is particularly acute in those places where cities are growing quickest.

Responding to this cannot just be about action from the top-down, however much this brings in terms of efficiency gains.

To achieve SDG 11 meaningfully, cities must find ways of ensuring that all their citizens are also 'smart' – that they are included, both in terms of their objective abilities, and their subjective attitudes.

Through offering skills – an issue highlighted frequently in the SDGs – and inclusive, accessible spaces – as underlined in target 11.7, libraries, I want to argue, must be at the heart of the infrastructure of a truly inclusive smart city.

Some examples.

Jeta Gardens is community in Bethania, a suburb of Adelaide in Southern Australia. It has a high proportion of Chinese Australians of retirement age, many of whom may remain more comfortable in Chinese than in English.

The city libraries sent their Outreach Librarian to work with the community, drawing on the resident's interest in fafamily history as a means of getting them used to using digital tools. Making sure to advertise the services in both Chinese and English, and combining the experience with a bus tour, enhancing engagement.

By targeting their support on users' needs, it was possible to teach the skills necessary for the residents to use digital tools to socialise, as well as to interact with the government, stay safe online, and organise events for Chinese New Year (see p13 of this). Instead of being isolated in the outskirts, the library's work make it possible for the residents to play an active role in the community.

France is updating its digital inclusion strategy, and is giving a key role to libraries. A nationwide consultation underlined the importance of libraries, given both their nature as a safe public space, and their understanding of local needs.

With it increasingly clear that not everyone will be able to make use of eGovernment services, or use digital tools to engage in civic life, without support, the report underlines that libraries can be crucial partners. Their non-commercial status can represent an added advantage in many situations. And as established, professional institutions, they can also be well suited to gathering the data necessary for monitoring and evaluating different initiatives.

Of course for this to happen, there may be a need to train personnel. Librarians have repeatedly proven themselves to be proactive and innovative in developing services. But libraries, crucially, can also act as a platform, matching demand from their users with supply of training from volunteers and others.

Chile, while a leader in its region in many ways, still has a relatively macho culture. Women can tend to take second place in their communities, confined to their homes, and often have fewer possibilities to use digital tools to realise their potential.

The Biblioredes project, funded by the Gates Foundation, worked through libraries to combat this. Again, it focused on providing safe spaces where women could come, receive support with childcare, and either individually or in groups develop their digital skills.

In a country where Internet café users are men, the reverse was true of the Biblioredes centres, which successfully enabled participants both to find work and create businesses, as well as simply to access basic services.

Medellín, like many cities in developing countries, has seen growing prosperity lead to more use of cars. Air pollution levels are rising with it, risking reversing progress made elsewhere. Yet cars are convenient, and air pollution is invisible. The temptation, in Medellín as elsewhere, has been to ignore the problem.

[A project launched through local libraries](#) aims to find a solution, while developing residents' skills. With air pollution sensors installed at libraries and other community hubs, a constant – and open – flow of data is being made available.

To make the most of this, libraries have also added data literacy to their programming, bringing together locals in order to understand the measurements produced. Through this, residents have not only developed their own skills, but picked up vital evidence to use in keeping the pressure on the city hall to clear up their air. The project has been so successful there are now efforts to roll it out more widely.

In conclusion, for cities to be smart, I want to argue that they need both a digital infrastructure – cables and masts – and the network of physical spaces, and skilled, dedicated personnel that libraries and other community centres can provide. The lessons from the French report mentioned, as well as the UK's digital strategy a couple of years ago, underline this point. I look forward to seeing the contribution of libraries to smart cities recognised – and maximised – in future.

For more information, contact Stephen.wyber@ifla.org