

From vision to action: librarians as change agents

Stephen Wyber (IFLA Headquarters Manager, Policy and Advocacy) interviewed by Sofia Axonidi, Carla Colombati and Valentina Gamboni

1. How does IFLA expect that the dialogue for change is enacted at a national level?

At a national level, we firstly have to talk about what happens inside and outside the library field.

Inside the library field, there is so much potential. Realising this is really the objective of the new International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Strategy, because this is not just a strategy for IFLA Headquarters and for IFLA's professional units, but it is there as a tool, as an offer to our members, to think about "what are you doing to strengthen your voice", "what are you doing to connect and inspire people", "what are you doing to enhance professional practice". It is really a way, just like the Sustainable Development Goals have been, of thinking through what we could do to be better on these points. Whenever you want have a discussion, it is always good to have a structure to work with and something to focus on.

In terms of where in society the dialogue for change is most necessary, librarians have to think what the best ways of contributing are. Firstly are the values, becoming aware that the abundance of information has helped underline that quantity alone is not the important thing. Rather, the values of libraries have come into their own: believing in quality information and in training people to use information effectively, while also upholding the importance of access to information and freedom of expression. This means that libraries have really a powerful set of values; they have a really powerful message to bring to the field and one that a lot of actors would agree on with.

Libraries also have space, and they can be fantastic civic spaces where people can come together and can discuss at a local or at a city level to work on how they want to change the societies, how we take these values which are valid as ever and how we make them operational today.

At a regional level, we hope that we can enact change within the library field through IFLA. One thing that we are looking to do is to strengthen the regional library field, so in the next year, we will be holding a regional workshop for Europe. We will be talking about the Strategy, what people can do at national level and thinking what it looks like regionally, where actions at a national level are aligned, where people do similar things and how the

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potential of bringing these actions together can be realised. And then, of course, we always have the work at a global level, the work of sections, bringing together people who are working on, for example, libraries promoting literacy and reading.

The point is to bring together all these great ideas and all these actions taking place at the national and regional level, and to come up with ideas and good practices that can be used globally.

2. How can librarians become agents of change? How can they be trained to achieve the capability to do that?

I think there is a need for librarians to feel that they have unique strengths, values, spaces and important civic contributions. Libraries do have a role. There are often issues that librarians tend to feel that no, “they are not getting listened to”, no, “they should be quiet”, no, “they are local government employees and so they should not be speaking out”. But through associations which are civil society organisations, it is possible to stand up! Librarians should feel like they should be heard, they have the right to be heard, because of the values that they uphold and because of the people that they serve, that they have a need to be heard. And I believe librarians can do this, if we make the right steps. This is one of the key challenges for the next couple of years.

I have found that the Sustainable Development Goals have been really effective for this. We have seen so many people stand up, become community leaders, become animators, engagers, facilitators of discussion and really get out to the community to make things happen. We are trying to take some lessons from this work, take some of the lessons on how we can try to mobilize people to become actors, facilitators and try to spread them more broadly and really make librarians the agents of change in society.

In this, we will be really relying on our members to let us know what works as we are conscious that institutional setups differ from country to country. What works in terms of activity also differs from country to country. What works in the USA may not work anywhere else in the world. We have to do things in a way that is most effective at each level, because each culture and structure is different.

This is a major project for the next few years. If you look at our new strategies, you will see that there is a desire to bring new talent forward to really offer new avenues, new possibilities, for the most promising people to engage in IFLA, to find out and meet with their colleagues here, because this conference [World Library and Information Congress (WLIC)] after all is a great opportunity to get that energy, to get that inspiration to go home and do a little bit more and to do better or to make things happen.

Our international leaders’ programme works very closely with similar programmes elsewhere, to work on expanding these efforts, to work out how we can we have more people as part of these programmes, going out acting as ambassadors. We also want to make sure that through this event and through the work of our sections and that of the headquarters team that we really take these great ideas and celebrate them. We will show that we support innovation, we support people who think innovatively and we will try to make that a norm. We want that everyone should have this growth mindset; the idea that tomorrow can be better than today if we only act. This is something that we will be doing as we define the actions that come from the strategy, and we will also encourage our sections to bring forwards great, new people and to encourage our associations to get the most enthusiastic people to help them, encourage them, support them and allow them to become the leaders of tomorrow.

3. What impact has been expected by the IFLA Strategy and tools “ideas store” and “library maps” so far?

I admit that I have colleagues who are the real experts on this subject, and, of course, given that the Ideas Store opened only a few days ago, it is a little soon to assess the impact. However, the fact that we have 8,500 ideas is in itself an impact, because there are more or less 8,500 people who are coming together to talk and discuss. People who have accepted that it is not just a case of continuing to do what they always do but rather to look at the ideas for change, what we can actually do to make things better and how we can make things better in the library field through these ideas. We have an amazing staff doing this and have already shown how much similarity there is in approaches, how much potential there is for sharing. There are ideas just as relevant in New Zealand as in Nova Scotia, just as relevant in Argentina as Armenia, and there is commonality across the fields. Therefore, in this mobilisation, in this evidence of potential, there is already an impact.

For the Library Map (IFLA, 2019f), which has already been going for longer, we are collecting lots of examples where the media has already drawn on it. This is not just the library media but also the media outside when they want to refer to the libraries around the world. The Library Map has become the place to find the key facts and events about our field.

The Sustainable Development Goals stories (IFLA, 2019g) have also proved very useful. In the chapter of the Development and Access to Information report that we prepared, we drew extensively from them. It is a really powerful way of showing what libraries can do when we can take these stories, roll them out, use them in our advocacy and, of course, see libraries elsewhere do the same.

The Global Vision does not aim to give a definition of what a library is and what it does. There are various schools of thought out there. Some, for instance, believe that a library should primarily be about books, reading and search. Others suggest that libraries should primarily be a social space that performs a very wide variety of functions. There are great examples of both, of libraries that are focussing on reading and promoting love of books, and those that have become multifunctional social centres. Indeed, they have broadened out so much that people did not really think of them as libraries because they saw it as where they went to use the maker space, or access health services or access other government services. They did not think of it as a library anymore. Which is fascinating: I do not know if that is a good or a bad thing of course. What matters, simply, is whether libraries are actually improving people’s lives, are making a difference, then that is fine.

The Strategy is designed in a way such that, firstly, it draws on the impact of all countries in the world. It draws on regional workshops in Latin America and Asia-Pacific. It is not just a developed or developing world thing, but rather it is designed in a way that allows every action at individual, institutional, association, national, regional or global level; even if it is small, it is to align and to contribute to its goals.

It is also of course just a starting point, because in any case, we are not about setting a particular standard – we are just about trying to raise people up. And we believe we can do it better when we share ideas between people.

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