Sustainable Cities and Communities

IFLA input to UN NGO Major Group 2018 Position Paper on SDG 11

IFLA is a member of the NGO Major Group at the UN. This group provides an important opportunity to work with other civil society organisations to make our case at the UN. Below is IFLA's contribution to the position paper that the Major Group will put together on Sustainable Development Goal 11 in time for this ýear's High Level Political Forum.

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How should governments implement this SDG and related targets?

As well as investment in bricks and mortar, steel and tarmac, success in delivering SDG 11 will also require support for the knowledge infrastructure of cities and communities. Smart cities can only be built with smart citizens, and for this, information is essential.

Governments at all levels therefore need to think about how everyone can be empowered, through meaningful access to information, to take a full role in society, democracy and the economy. For IFLA, this requires a range of steps:

- the promotion of Internet connectivity (for example through innovative measures such as community networks, public access in libraries),
- the right legal frameworks nationally (copyright, freedom of speech),
- locally sensitive, community-based services, and
- investment in promoting the skills necessary to use information effectively.

These requirements show through in the individual targets. The importance of reaching out to those who live in deprived conditions, as well as those on the margins. The need to provide a safe and welcoming space for all. And, importantly, the need to safeguard our cultural heritage so that it is there to be enjoyed both today and tomorrow.

For IFLA, libraries can make a unique contribution. They have strong local roots, and usually an explicit mandate to reach out to all members of their communities. This takes place not only through traditional activities such as developing collections, but also through additional engagement – organising or

hosting workshops on digital skills, reading time for children, or the celebration of local or minority cultures. Libraries can become platforms – especially in the common situation where they are the one public space available in the community.

What structural obstacles hinder the implementation of this SDG (at local, national, regional, and/or global levels)?

SDG 11 potentially poses some of the most significant governance challenges, with interventions necessary not only across sectors, but also across levels of government. The benefits of investment at one level – for example in community programmes in libraries – will only be felt in future years. A joined-up approach is needed, in order to avoid that opportunities are missed.

Connectivity remains an issue. Especially in smaller and or more remote towns and communities, access to the Internet remains poor. There needs to be acceptance that Internet provision can be seen as a public good, and supplied in a way that all can benefit.

Social and cultural norms still play a role, determining that certain groups are not able to enjoy public space on an equal footing with others. Laws too can discourage freedom of association or speech. There is a need for a truly public space where everyone can come together.

Finally, as mentioned above, digital skills are an issue, especially among deprived urban populations. Without them, the benefits of smart cities or eGovernment will remain out of reach for many. A lack of media and information literacy can lead either to distrust of the media, or ill-informed decision-making that divides societies rather than strengthening them.

What role can civil society play in achieving this SDG?

At the level of communities and cities, civil society both plays a role in making the case for new policies or programmes, and then in holding power to account. But they are also essential in delivering progress, for example in giving people living in slums new hope, in safeguarding heritage, or in ensuring that everyone can take part in the community.

Individual libraries are closely involved in the practical delivery of SDG11. Library associations both support and inform the work of individual institutions, and themselves promote the policy changes that will make for more sustainable communities.

Libraries have a particular role as platforms – a physical space where other civil society organisations can come together in order to make a difference for people. From digital literacy training in South Africa or Tunisia, to homework support classes in the Netherlands, libraries can also deliver through partnerships.

How does this SDG support or connect with other goals in the 2030 Agenda? With specific targets of other international frameworks?

Given the importance of local action in order to achieve all other SDGs, the focus on functioning cities and communities in SDG 11 means that there are many and deep interlinkages.

Action on transport – supported by greater public awareness and pressure for change – will reduce air pollution within cities and so impact SDG3 – libraries in Medellin in Colombia have already installed air pollution sensors and are educating users to draw on the data in calling for less pollution.

Better connections between cities and countryside can overcome economic deprivation, helping to achieve SDGs 2, 5 and 8. The National Library of Uganda is reaching out to local libraries and others in order to share knowledge that will help farmers – women in particular – to get a better price for their crops.

There is also strong cross-over between SDG 16.7 (transparency) and the achievement of SDG 11. The importance of access to public information is as great at local level as at national. Moreover, given the need for coordinated governance is also high, given that the effects of policy decisions at different levels come together in the local context. IFLA encourages governments to think in a holistic way about how they promote and support libraries, and so library users, in order to realise their potential.

Regarding the importance of safeguarding cultural heritage, we would underline the relevance of the whole of UNESCO's 2015 Recommendation on

Safeguarding Documentary Cultural Heritage, which offers guidance to Member States, and on which there is due to be a review in 2019.

Are there emerging issues related to this SDG that should be noted?

The rise of digital poses some significant questions regarding the achievement of SDG11 from IFLA's perspective. On the positive side, there are some very positive examples of how technology and community-building can work together, for example through the development of community-owned Internet infrastructure (community networks). In the US, there are examples of 'community archive' projects, using technology to help individuals, often from poorer backgrounds, write their own history.

There are some questions. SDG11.4 requires countries to safeguard cultural heritage, but there are major unresolved questions about how we safeguard our digital culture, without sufficient investment and renewal of copyright.

And there are potential negatives, when key services go 'digital only', potentially isolating community members who most need the help.

Additional Comments

The theme of HLPF 2018 as a whole resonates strongly with the library community. Libraries have long taken a capabilities-based approach to development, focusing on how they can help their individual users and communities live richer and better lives through information access. This access not only allows people to enjoy culture and ideas, but also to create and innovate, find work, live better, and pick themselves up after problems.

We therefore believe that any comprehensive look at how to build stronger and more resilient societies must look at whether people can express themselves freely and have access to information, and have the skills needed to use it.

Supporting documents

Development and Access to Information Report 2017: Da2i.ifla.org