Belgium

Belgium undertook its 1st Voluntary National Review in July 2017, with no date yet set for its second. Nonetheless, with all UN Member States committed to taking the steps necessary to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, Belgium will also need to show how it plans to act in order to accelerate progress. It is therefore a good moment to consider activities and tools which can unlock development for all, across the board.

Access to information – understood as the physical possibility and right for all to seek and find information, and the skills to use it – can make just such a contribution. This access can help at all levels. It supports individuals to take better decisions about how to farm, where to look for work or how to look after their own and their families' health. It gives governments the possibility to define better policies. It allows researchers to understand the world around us, establish new insights and innovate. Libraries are a key part of the infrastructure for ensuring that this is the case.

But where does Belgium stand today as concerns its libraries and access to information? This data sheet provides background based on data from the Development and Access to Information report produced by IFLA in partnership with the Technology and Social Change Group at the University of Washington, as well as IFLA's own Library Map of the World.

KEY CONCLUSIONS

- *Available figures suggest that that in comparison to other countries in the Western and Central Europe region, Belgium has relatively few public libraries, but relatively many public library workers. LIbraires are well-used, and relatively accessible, and so able to contribute to delivering the SDGs. Available data suggests that more investment in academic and research libraires may be welcome, given the connection between the availability of library support, and student competion and research performance.*
- *Under the Development and Access to Information framework, Belgium performs above average for developed countries on rights and most aspects of equality and connectivity. Nonetheless, mobile broadband access remains relatively low. This implies both that there may be value in more work to provide public WiFi access – for example through libraries – as well as help for those at risk of marginalisation to access*

education and work opportinities. This could help Belgium become more of a top-performer across the board.

LIBRARIES IN BELGIUM

According to data availbale on the Library Map of the World, Belgium has a total of 1244 libraries, inluding 140 academic libraries and 1103 public libraries, and one national library. Infomration on school libraries is not available. This represents a total of 9.65 public libraries per 100 000 people, higher than the global figure of 6.84, but lower than that for Western and Central Europe (14.59). There are 3627 full time equivalent public library workers – 31.75 per 100 000 people, above the figures both for the world (11.62) and Western and Central Europe (28.68). In short, Belgium has fewer, but better staffed libraries than other countries in the region.

Despite this, the average area served per public library is 26.67km^2, less than half the average for Western and Central Europe (58.72km^2), and only a little more than a 10th of that for the world as a whole (254km^2). Around 20% of the population holds a library card, and the average Belgian visits a library around 4 times a year. These figures indicate a reltively strong public library field, which tends to correlate with positive outcomes such as greater equality and social capital.

Meanwhile, Belgium's 140 academic libraires mean that there are 1.22 such libraries per 100 000 people, lower than the average for Western and Central Europe of 1.33, or the global figure of 1.32. Library Map of the World figures suggest that there are 502 academic library workers – 4.39 per 100 000 people, much lower than the figures for Western and Central Europe (15.02) or the world (10.63), although there may be undercounting.

Given the correlation between stronger academic library fields and higher student completion rates (especially for women) and innovation indicators (numbers of publications and patents per researcher), this may suggest an area for investment in future.

DEVELOPMENT AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN BELGIUM

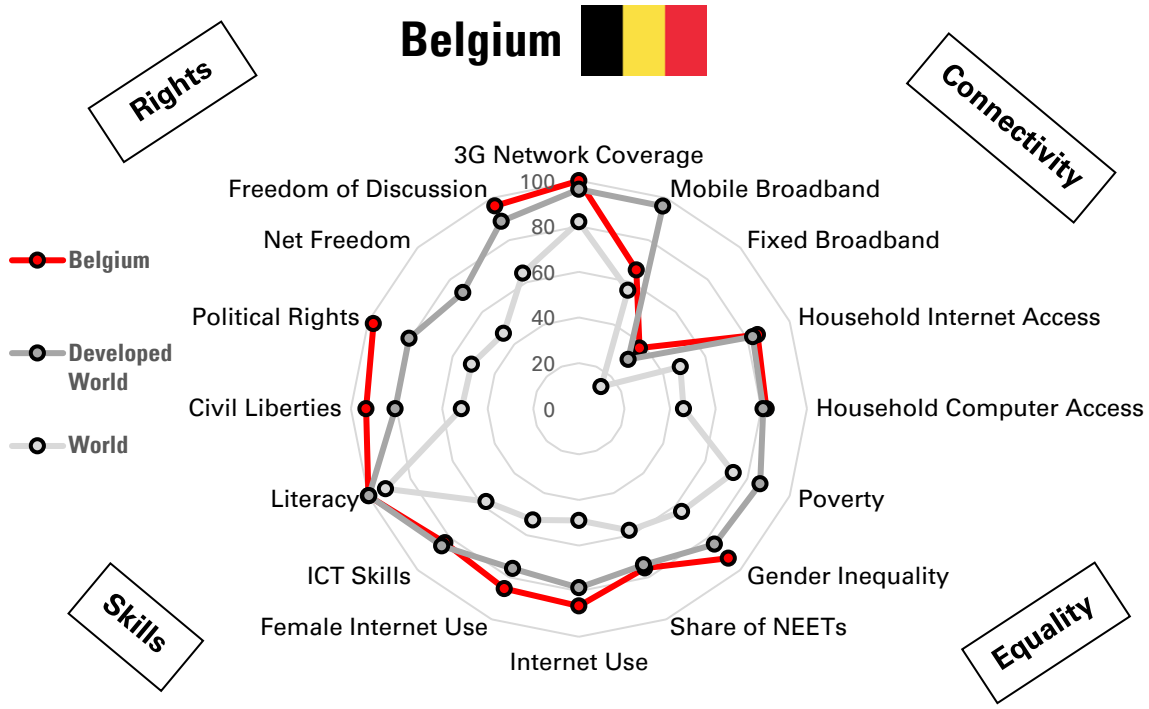
The Development and Access to Information report draws on a range of indicators highlighting where countries stand on four key pillars of access to information: connectivity, equality, skills and rights. For meaningful access to information to be a reality for all, performance needs to be strong across all of these categories.

Belgium enjoys relatively strong performance across the four pillars of the development and access to information, with some strengths as well as areas for improvement. Concerning **connectivity**, Belgium has universal coverage by 3G networks, as well as figures for fixed broadband subscriptions per 100 000 people, and levels of household internet and computer access that outperform averages for developed countries. However, despite this strong mobile coverage, the number of mobile broadband subscriptions is some way below that for the region, implying under-use of the possibility for internet access on the move.

The picture is also mainly positive on **equality**, where Belgium has higher levels of gender equality and lower numbers of young adults not in employment, education or training than the developed world as a whole. There is a small gender digital divide in favour of men, which represents one potential area for further work. On **skills**, Belgium has near-100% literacy among young adults, but scores slightly below the average for developed countries on the skills pillar of the ICT development index, suggesting that there may be scope to give more young people opportunities to continue studying for longer.

Belgium does score very well on **rights**, with figures well above global and regional averages on all indicators for which data is available.

Overall, the results from the DA2I framework suggest that there may be value in boosting mobile connectivity, for example through public WiFi from libraries. This – as well as the services that Belgium's relatively strong public library field can offer – can also help the country go further in improving equality, notably in helping groups at risk of marginalisation to identify and seize opportunities.



How to read the graph: this graph displays a range of indicators used within the DA2I framework, adjusted to fit on a scale of 0-100, where 100 is the most positive outcome in terms of access to information.

TABLE OF DATA

See below for explanations. * = or latest available year. Regional averages are based on available data.

PILLAR	INDICATOR	BELGIUM	Year	DEVELOPED COUNTRIES	Year	WORLD	Year
CONNECTIVITY	3G Network Coverage	100.00	2016	96.23	2016	81.92%	2016
	Mobile Broadband (Subscriptions per 100 People)	65.86	2016	96.15	2016	56.22	2016
	Fixed Broadband (Subscriptions per 100 People)	37.60	2016	30.55	2016	13.71	2016
	Household Internet Access	84.79	2016	82.49	2016	48.16%	2016
	Household Computer Access	82.20	2016	80.82	2016	45.88%	2016
EQUALITY	Poverty (Share of pop'n below national poverty line)			13.99	2015*	26.69%	2015*
	Gender Inequality (0 = More equal, 1 = Less equal)	0.07	2015	0.16	2015	0.36*	2015*
	Share of NEETs	12.18	2015	12.95	2015*	21.12%	2015*
	Internet Use	86.52	2016	78.50	2016*	49%	2016*
	Female Internet Use	85.40	2016	75.85	2016*	52.79%	2016*
SKILLS	ICT Skills	8.31	2017	8.51	2017	5.76	2017
	Literacy	99.90	2015	99.67	2015	91.75	2015
RIGHTS	Civil Liberties (0 = least free, 60 = most free)	56.00	2018	48.33	2018	30.9	2018
	Political Rights (0 = least free, 40 = most free)	39.00	2018	32.24	2018	20.37	2018
	Net Freedom (0 = most free, 100 = least free)			28.02	2016	53.29	2016
	Freedom of Discussion	0.96	2016	0.89	2016	0.64	2016

EXPLANATION OF INDICATORS

3G Network Coverage: this provides a measure of whether one part of the basic infrastructure for connectivity exists, although in itself is not enough to guarantee access (users need a device and a relevant subscription to be able to get online). Source: ITU

Mobile Broadband (Mobile Broadband Subscriptions per 100 people): this provides an idea of how many people can use mobile internet, opening up many – if not all – of the possibilities that internet access brings. One person may have more than one subscription. Source: ITU

Fixed Broadband (Fixed Broadband Subscriptions per 100 people): this provides an idea of how widespread home or business internet access is. Fixed access is often associated with the possibility to connect computers to make more advanced uses of the internet. Source: ITU

Household Internet Access (Share of Households with Internet Access): access to the internet at home allows for access to information at any time without having to go outside, but may be controlled by some members of the family. Source: ITU

Household Computer Access (Share of Households with a Computer): this focuses on access to computers. This is crucial for people to be able to carry out more advanced activities on the internet that might be impossible on a phone, such as writing resumes or analysing data. Source: ITU

Poverty: this indicator measures the number of people living below the national poverty line, which varies from country to country. It is a measure of economic inequality in a country. The indicator is inversed in the chart (i.e. the share of people not under the poverty line). Source: World Bank

Gender Inequality: this is calculated using the Gender Inequality Index. This index uses a basket of indicators in different areas of social development including: reproductive health, proportion of women in parliament, relative shares of men and women with at least some secondary education, and labour market participation in order to provide a broad idea of the extent of gender inequality in a country. The indicator runs from 0 (most equal) to 1 (least equal) and is inversed and adapted in the chart above. Source: UNDP

Share of NEETS (People aged 15-24 Not in Education, Employment or Training): this measures the share of young people cut off from education or the job market. Being 'NEET' can bring long-term scarring effects, and so reducing numbers is a key priority. The indicator is inversed and adapted in the chart (i.e. the share of young people who are not NEET). Source: ILO.

Internet Use (Share of People Using the Internet): looking beyond household access data (which will be affected by the structure of households in general), this gives a figure for the number of people using the internet. Source: ITU

Female Internet Use: this measure, in conjunction with the share of the overall population using the internet, allows us to understand to what extent there is a gender digital divide. Source: ITU

ICT Skills: there are relatively few global metrics of ICT skills, with those that exist only focusing on certain regions. The Skills Sub-Index of the ICT Development Index created by the ITU aims to work in this direction using levels of secondary and tertiary education enrolment, plus mean years of schooling, as proxies. Source: ITU

Literacy: this measures literacy among 15-24 year olds – i.e. people who have finished formal education. While there are online resources available for people with low literacy, being able to read, type, and understand information remains a fundamental skill. Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

Civil Liberties: this provides an indication of the degree to which citizens of a country enjoy fundamental civic rights, including freedom of expression and association, as well as the strength of the rule of law, based on expert judgements. Scores run from 0 (least free) to 60 (most free) and have been adapted to fit the graphic above. Source: Freedom House.

Political Rights: this provides a measure of the rights people have to participate in the political process, including fair and free elections, political pluralism, and the functioning of government in general. Scores run from 0 (least free) to 40 (most free) and have been adapted to fit the graphic above. Source: Freedom House.

Net Freedom: this metric assesses the level of restrictions on rights online by both public and private actors. It draws on assessments of obstacles to access (legal, economic and practical), limits on content, and violations of rights. Scores run from 100 (least free) to 0 (most free) and so are inverted in the graphic above. Source: Freedom House.

Freedom of Discussion: this indicator looks at whether people are able to hold private discussions without fear of repercussions either from the authorities or society in general due to cultural restrictions or norms. Scores run from 0 (least free) to 1 (most free), and so are adapted to fit int the graphic above. Source: V-Dem dataset codebook.