



# Engaging with Embassies

## An Opportunity for Libraries and Library Associations

- **Foreign embassies can be interesting potential partners for libraries and library associations**
- **Libraries can receive support in terms of resources, or help with events and exchanges**
- **This brief looks at experience from around the world, and suggests lessons for others**

Library associations and those institutions with a coordinating role have a key role to play in supporting the development of the library field at the national and regional level. Through offering a space to share and discuss, developing tailored materials and training, and providing a means of focusing advocacy work, they can make a real difference to library and information workers on the ground.

An additional role that associations can play is through building partnerships. Especially where individual libraries have little independence in decision-making, associations have more scope to explore possibilities to work with others, including businesses and other civil society organisations. One potential partner is the embassies of other countries.

This short report looks in more depth at the fundamental reasons why libraries would want to work with embassies, why embassies in turn would want to work with libraries, at practical examples of what libraries have achieved, and some key lessons.

### **Why Would Libraries Work with Embassies?**

Foreign embassies can seem very grand and official, focused only on high politics and state events. Often, they will have layers of security outside, and can seem unwelcoming, only open to VIPs and officials.

However, many countries have recognised the importance of ‘soft power’ – building up a positive image and reputation for their country among the general population. They are keen to find opportunities to do this, and run either ongoing programmes, sometimes ad hoc projects.

These provide an opening for libraries, where conditions permit. If nothing else, working with an embassy can provide a good reputational boost. However, they may also be able to support projects, or share resources. Some can provide speakers for events in order to strengthen the work programme of associations, for example by organising exchanges of skills and experience. This sort of cooperation can also boost the ability of libraries to reach audiences – existing and new – more effectively.



While of course much will depend on the context on the ground – library associations and libraries may hesitate to work with the embassy of a country which has difficult relations with their own – there is enough positive experience to suggest that this is an option worth exploring.

## **Why Would Embassies Work with Libraries?**

As set out in the previous section, many embassies are keen to – and may even have a mandate to – build a positive image and reputation of their country. They can do this both on an individual level, for example by engaging people in events or programmes, and more broadly through press releases and positive news stories.

Libraries can be particularly attractive as partners. First of all, they benefit from a general goodwill among many, and are seen as a symbol of inclusion, education and progress. This marks them out, for example, from sporting events or similar activities.

Secondly, they often already provide spaces where events or exhibitions can take place, meaning that interventions are more permanent than something temporary like a TV or radio appearance. Thirdly, as public spaces, they also provide a channel for engaging with citizens from a variety of backgrounds. Finally, they are reliable and respected partners.

As such, the United States for example has a specific programme – American Spaces – focused almost entirely on working with libraries around the world in order to provide not only books, but also other materials and equipment that can use. Other countries are also ready and willing to engage with libraries, as the next section will explore.

## **Experiences Around the World**

We asked libraries and library associations with experience of engaging with foreign embassies for information about what they had done, and what they had learned. We received responses from Chile, Malawi, Georgia, Croatia and Madagascar, underlining how broad this engagement can go.

A common theme was how positive the experience had been. All of the libraries and library associations involved had been able to expand their activities and services. Some – for example, the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia – had such a positive experience that they have sought to create links with a number of different countries.

In terms of starting points, all of the countries we asked started by working with the United States, which has a dedicated programme for working with libraries – American



Spaces. A team in Washington is available to support embassies around the world in efforts to engage with libraries, providing resources, ideas and connections.

American Corners were launched as a project in 1998, in order to create places providing information and literature to users related to the English language and American culture. The work they do is often focused on literature, music, history, education, ecology, and current social and political developments. The programme can provide materials and technology allowing the corners to be welcoming and engaging places.

There are currently over 400 active American corners in 140 countries, either placed within libraries or individually, and are aimed both at specialists and the general public. They have increased the capacity of libraries to address priority issues, for example health matters, politics and human rights in Eswatini, where there are two American corners in libraries run by the library service. They have proved effective because they make libraries more attractive for users, and receive regular support in order to keep up to date.

Such corners can provide a platform for events. For example in Croatia, they have been used to hold conferences, including with visiting speakers, while in Eswatini, they have provided a platform for promoting assistive technologies for the visually impaired, digital skills, and wider educational opportunities.

Looking beyond one-off events, American corners can also provide a way into broader cooperation initiatives. In Croatia, for example, the next step was to deepen cooperation with the Embassy by launching study visits and exchanges between Croatian and American librarians through the International Visitor Leader Programme.

They can also provide a platform for more focused collaboration, for example again in Croatia, where following the success of corners in public libraries, there is now an effort to draw on US expertise in creating business libraries in order to help local entrepreneurs.

Cooperation does not need only to happen through American corners however. The Chilean Librarians' Association successfully worked with the American embassy to bring expert speakers to its conference. This helped both build professional development in the Chilean library field, but also strengthen advocacy in favour of modern copyright reforms.

Similarly in Madagascar, the library association was able to work through the Embassy in order to promote exchanges of professional experience and practice in support of the library sector in general. In Georgia, cooperation has opened up possibilities to receive support from the US to renovate the reading hall at the National Parliamentary Library, as well as to provide English-language teaching and other learning opportunities.



Importantly, it is not just American embassies that can be useful partners. The German and French embassies in Georgia have proved ready to work with the National Parliamentary Library to open dedicated sections which are then open to the public. Others have been willing to provide support for exhibitions or contribute books, notably Japan, Turkey and China in the case of Georgia. The British embassy there has also been ready to work (alongside the American embassy) on a project to renovate and rejuvenate local libraries outside of the country. Meanwhile, the representation of Chinese Taipei supported digital skills

On an ad hoc basis, there may be interesting possibilities – for example to host collections temporary basis. Again taking Georgia as an example, the National Public Library was able to work with the Italian embassy to welcome books from a library elsewhere which was temporarily closed for renovation.

Finally, collaborations at home can also lead to possibilities abroad. The National Parliamentary Library of Georgia has been able to launch fifty Georgian book corners in libraries elsewhere in the world, and engaging with Georgian and Georgian-descent writers there, building on strong relations with Embassies elsewhere.

## Lessons Learned

As highlighted at the beginning, the overall lesson is that there are potentially useful opportunities for libraries and library associations in working with foreign embassies, where other circumstances permit.

A first lesson then is to **be ready to reach out**. Much of the time, it has been because libraries and library associations have made contact with embassies themselves that cooperation has begun. It may take a number of attempts to get through, so be patient.

A second lesson is to **draw on examples from elsewhere**. It can be powerful to be able to show what others are doing (for example using stories from this paper) both in order to make it clear what is possible, and potential to encourage a sense of competition! Don't forget to underline all that you can contribute.

A third lesson is to **take an organised and professional approach**. Embassies themselves are likely to need to follow rules on transparency and fulfil various administrative requirements, and it will be necessary to fulfil this. Take the time to understand what the Embassy expects and needs.

A fourth lesson is to **be flexible**. You may need to start small with your cooperation, before growing it, or to deal with changes in personnel at the Embassy. Embassy officials themselves may need to deal with changing priorities and emergencies also.



Linked to this, a **fifth lesson is to organise the library representation**. As with any project, it is important to have a strong core team, in order both to ensure coordination, and to divide up responsibilities so things don't become too much.

A **sixth lesson is to communicate regularly** – both with the Embassy team in order to advance the project, and publicly (where appropriate). The Embassy itself is likely to want to see good news stories, but of course it is also good for you to be able to talk about all the great things that are happening!

Good luck!

*IFLA is grateful to colleagues from Georgia, Malawi, Chile, Croatia and Madagascar for their contributions.*