



Barbara Lison:

The Relevance of National Libraries for Society

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Barbara Lison: The Role and Relevance of National Libraries in Society

Thank you very much for the floor, and for the invitation to speak with you today.

It's an honour for me to participate in this prestigious meeting with you. I have been looking forward for meeting with you and exchanging ideas for some time already since Frank had invited me to participate. I am expecting from our conversations ideas, innovations, surprises even, which give me new energy in my work as IFLA President.

I know that I am now talking to you as THE experts of national libraries – and I my knowledge about your field is not at all comparable to yours. And so I admit that when Frank asked to talk about the role of national libraries in society, I felt a little lost at first. But then I thought this is a challenge that I want to meet – because I want to meet with you in the first line.

And I more and more even liked the idea of talking about The Role and Relevance of National Libraries in Society.

I think it is close to my own theme as IFLA President 2021-23 – Libraries: building a sustainable future.

There are three aspects that unite my Presidential theme with the topic of my speech today:

- Firstly, a sustainable future for our own institutions – how can we ensure that we not only survive, but grow stronger.
- Secondly, a sustainable future for our Federation – how can we as IFLA continue to serve as a meeting place, as a catalyst.
- And thirdly, a sustainable future for our communities, our societies.

It is this last one that is most immediately relevant today and to which I will focus my speech.

My thesis is that a society is only sustainable when it is socially sustainable.

Governments, businesses, in fact everyone – we all need to ensure that we are – and continue to be – in a situation, in conditions and circumstances where people can live together, work together, create together.

Alongside economic, environmental and arguably cultural, social sustainability is one of the most important pillars of overall sustainability.

Equity and inclusion, the guarantee of everyone's rights to education, information, culture and science, resistance to the forces that drive people apart – all of those are essential if we want to continue to form a functioning and cohesive society, one that we want to be a part of.

However, this society is not something that we can take for granted. It is something that needs to be built, fed, nurtured and protected. Protected against polarisation, division, excessive individualism.

Having all these items in mind, I was a little worried which new aspects of the topic of my speech I could present to you.

Because every presentation here, every story or example of the work you are doing, is already perfect evidence of the role you as national libraries are playing in society.

You're the ones who are best placed to tell your own success stories. I do not feel competent enough take your words out of your mouths and duplicate your stories.

Instead, I'd like to try and identify some more general key themes to discuss them with you.

I want to talk with you about the ways in which – in my opinion - national libraries have a unique and special role in building, nurturing and protecting societies, and so are contributing to societal sustainability into the future.

I hope these aspects will resonate with you and they will provide a way of putting the excellent work you are doing into context, that will help structure the way we learn from each other.

I want to suggest three aspects

- national libraries as leaders,
- national libraries as anchors in society
- and national libraries as *cheerleaders*.

I will talk about each of these, and then at the end return to those other elements of my other presidential theme – the future of national libraries, and of IFLA itself.

1. **So the first way** in which national libraries contribute to society is through their role as **leaders**.

National libraries are, almost by default, visible, prominent, central. Key parts of the landscape of national institutions and very often also architectural icons in their environment.

You also, obviously, often have a key role within networks of libraries – public, academic and beyond.

Now of course, the position of leadership can often bring with it extensive legislative mandates.

There are tasks set out in legislation, duties to fulfil, which you need to do.

But on the positive side, there is also the opportunity to try new things out, to create innovations, to be entrepreneurial.

Of course, I understand that our politician masters may well be risk-averse. And are critically watching the new steps you might undertake.

No-one wants bad headlines. Failure continues to be seen as an unconditionally dirty word – wrongly of course. However, this should not completely shut down the possibility to try out new ways of making the most of the position that national libraries have to benefit society as a whole, through access to information, and the services that this enables.

From new ways of promoting reading to small business support, from protecting and celebrating indigenous groups to facilitating inclusive research, from enabling meaningful open government to taking leading roles in adult education policy development.

There are likely to be only a very few other libraries with the resources – financial, human, collections – to take initiatives, to set up programmes, to launch projects that bring social dividends at a national scale, with the same reach and potential impact.

Many of the other libraries will be too small, or simply will have a narrower mission, for example with a focus only on a student and researcher community.

My belief is that national libraries, by their nature, have the possibility to produce a national societal impact.

This is a privilege, but it is also a responsibility. If we have the power and hopefully the resources to make things better, we should do so.

Of course any library should, when we think to the future, be thinking about the difference we can make to societies, how we can make things better, and plan accordingly.

It's just that for national libraries you can – you should, I hope – be able to be all the more ambitious, knowing that when you succeed, you provide a proof of concept, you will provide an example that can inspire, that can trigger reform throughout library systems.

And in doing so, there are also benefits to the wider library field.

As said, it is not always the case that national libraries have a formal role in leading, in animating networks of public or school libraries, or in acting as support for academic libraries.

However, again, the potential to take initiatives, to be the ones that turn a new idea into a reality, this is something that can mark out national libraries on THEIR path into the future.

National libraries can lead the way in developing services and programmes that can then be taken up more broadly across the field, drawing on lessons learned, making us all more effective in promoting sustainable societies.

There will also be times, if they are not already here, where – enabled by digital technologies – national libraries can establish platforms, services, that are used by libraries across the country.

There can be a sound economic logic to this, too. Some things are clearly simply better done at scale, without taking away from the importance of local adaptation.

Pooling or centralising some major relevant activities – or even centrally leading negotiations – creates a natural role for national libraries. Done well, this gives public and other libraries across the country relief of their resources and also possibilities to do more to serve their communities.

The benefit of this could be that stronger, higher-performing, library networks are a clear societal good, opening up new possibilities for active access to information and engagement.

In short, through this leadership role – taking a chance on new ideas to serve societies directly, enabling the work of libraries across countries – national libraries can use their unique ability to be innovators, to take the risks that others cannot, and so advance the power of libraries to have a positive impact in really making a difference to the societies that they serve.

2. **My second key theme** is perhaps actually a continuation of the first, but I think it is one that is worth splitting out.

It's that of the role of national libraries – and their collections – as societal anchors.

At the heart of it, the richness of national library collections, and the unique nature of so many of the works they contain, remains a real specificity of national libraries.

This is clearly a huge part of your work – gathering, organising, safeguarding all of this work takes expertise, it takes money, it takes responsibility for the future.

But it is unquestionably worth it.

Because all your collections are the reflections, the mirrors of our societies.

Clearly, they are not perfectly mirroring neither our past nor our present time. We know that the mindsets, the biases of the past have shaped the way we have approached knowledge. And we have been learning to re-evaluate, to rectify this.

Still, your collections are of incomparable value:

Their expressions and their insights. From the poetic to the prosaic.

Records of the ideas that shaped the morals that shaped the decisions that have brought us to today.

Essential sources for researchers who are working to understand our past in order to understand our present. And perhaps to help us do better for the future.

And so we all are right to be proud of them, to treasure them, to ensure that they are there for the future.

But we shouldn't just be **thinking** about the future.

Because being guardians of the memory of the world for the generations of tomorrow does not need to come at the cost of celebrating it, of putting it to work even in order to strengthen society today.

It is not a question of either/or, but of both/and.

And once again, it is also a question of privilege and responsibility. Because if we have the possibility to make a positive difference in society, we should.

This is of course nothing new. National libraries have often been taking a leading role in the open culture movement, launching initiatives and leading thinking about how to find new ways to put people in contact with their heritage.

In particular, in the course of the pandemic, there have been great initiatives taken to put more and more content online so that everyone can access it – for education, for wellbeing, for research.

And it's not just been a case of making content available, but putting in the imagination, the effort, to ensure that it can be used, that it becomes meaningful for pupils, teachers, readers and everyone else.

This has doubtless made the last two and a bit years much more obvious than it would have been otherwise, with the stress on supporting resilience and continuity.

But on a more fundamental level, this work also has the potential to provide populations with key reference points – something that can be essential for building social capital.

It can also help in the drive to come to build a wider understanding of what makes our societies, what they are, what has brought us to where we are today.

It allows for a stronger sense of rootedness, of identity. A possibility to put ourselves in context, to feel a connection to our communities, our societies.

This can of course include efforts to come to terms with difficult times, controversies, to reduce the risk of otherwise causing ongoing tensions, divisions, resentment.

This isn't an easy task, but it is one that has to be done, in the face of polarisation, in the face of polemicisation.

It goes to the heart of what libraries are about – information – and access to it – as a means of resolving the challenges that we face as societies.

Finding innovative ways of enabling connections with our collections, of really putting them to work in the service of our societies, is a key way in which especially national libraries can make a difference.

And to return to my earlier point, this is expressively uniquely so for national libraries, given the strength, given the richness, given the comprehensiveness of your collections, because of those your institutions are recognised in your special status within societies.

Already, much of the work that you do is focused on building a stronger book sector in general. National bibliographies, legal deposit, allocation of ISBN numbers – in some cases at least – all do this, all give a greater organisation, a greater permanence to publishing.

This is coupled with everything else you do to support contemporary literature, in particular in celebrating and nurturing national languages. You are of course usually the biggest single public institution in the book sector!

And this in turn makes it easier for new voices, diverse voices to enter the scene, building inclusivity, creativity. Improving wellbeing, and simply making life more interesting.

There is so much that national libraries can do through your collections to build more sustainable societies.

3. Thirdly and Finally, there is the role of libraries as promoters of libraries, as cheerleaders.

Because in addition to the practical work of national libraries in providing leadership to the sector, they are also uniquely placed to raise understanding of what it is that our institutions do across government.

This isn't to be under-estimated as a role.

There is no such thing as a divine right of libraries. None of us can take our own futures for granted, including national libraries.

We need to be able not just to have an impact, but to show it also. To convince decision-makers, and those who influence them, that our libraries are indispensable, and that indeed investing in them brings serious social returns.

To say 'stop', the next time that a lazy politician claims that libraries are old-fashioned and not really needed any more.

And for this, all libraries need your voices as cheerleaders of advocacy.

Clearly, we're not talking about the sort of advocacy work that library associations can do. They are benefitting from their status as NGOs, as civil society organisations, independent of government.

Associations are able to speak more loudly, or at least more publicly, working with the media, influencers, parliamentarians, other sectors.

They can be more direct, blunter in what they do and say about what governments are doing and where they are going, and in particular going wrong.

But this is not the whole picture. The more public role of associations, and the role of national libraries can complement each other when it come to represent libraries as important societal factors.

Because national libraries are voices on the inside, with better access to the national executives at least.

You are the ones that understand best how decisions on a national level are made, when to get involved in governmental developments, how to influence those decisions in order to maximise benefits to libraries.

And you can do this not just with your own parent ministries, but also with others across government.

I want to spend a little time on this point – the importance of reaching beyond parent ministries.

Because it is vital for libraries that we broaden the coalition of stakeholders who support our institutions, our profession, our work.

Because while it's good for libraries to have the support of culture ministries, it's better to ensure that there is support in education, in research, in business, in environment, in social ministries. And of course, in finance ministries.

Through strong argumentation, through being able to point to relevant services and programming and to indicate what the impact of this has been, we can win support elsewhere.

We can show other ministries, other ministers, other bureaucrats that they will be far less able to achieve their goals if it weren't for libraries.

That it is in their interest to support our continued existence, to support investment.

So that when those calls for cuts emerge – or decisions about further investment need to be taken – the loudest group of voices, the biggest group of votes at the council of ministers, must be in favour of libraries.

As mentioned earlier, clearly the opportunities for public lobbying by national libraries are more limited, and will often be governed by codes of practice, by rules.

This requires a more private approach, one that uses internal tracks and consultation processes.

But these can be really powerful!

Putting the two types of advocacy together – the public work of library associations and the more behind the scenes work of national libraries – can be a really effective combination.

This can be put to work first and foremost to ensure that national libraries themselves can continue to carry out their missions in support of society.

That you can continue to carry out those core tasks in building, safeguarding and giving access to collections. But also so that you can innovate, developing activities and services that respond to policy goals across the board.

But there can also be opportunities to ensure that the needs and experiences of libraries more broadly are known and taken into account.

Because in most countries, there is at least one layer of governance between national governments and individual libraries, be it a local government, a host institution, or other. In other words, most other libraries do not have that explicit national role, those connections.

They can benefit from the support that national institutions can offer, building an understanding of what libraries do, what we're about, and crucially – how funding and support for libraries as a whole translates into a wide range of meaningful positive societal outcomes.

So I hope that you will be able to use – or most likely continue to use – your influencing government and central administration in your countries – and the opportunities open to you – to become voices for libraries in general from the earliest stages of decision-making.

So these are in my opinion the most important three ways in which national libraries have a relevant societal role.

Through providing leadership both within the sector and more broadly, triggering new ideas and initiatives that lead to positive social outcomes.

Through maximising possibilities for meaningful engagement with collections in support of societal goals, accompanied by skills development, resources and modern copyright laws.

Through making the case for the library sector as a whole within government, and so both protecting and promoting its ability to deliver for communities.

As said earlier on, I hope that these are themes that you see in your own work, in your own efforts. Areas where national libraries are uniquely placed to deliver.

You are key players in the building of sustainable societies.

There were those other two elements of my theme that I wanted to cover before I close – a sustainable future for our own institutions, and for our Federation.

Of course, I have touched on the first to a large extent. Because the key factors in ensuring that national libraries receive – and maybe even increase – support from government is by both doing a great job, and talking about it.

When any library can show that it is innovative, that it is responding to needs of the society and the politics, that it is making a difference, this provides arguments for ongoing public support. Because in the end, we are competing against other spending lines, other policy priorities, and we need to ensure that politicians understand that we are a great investment.

And of course, financing and laws are just two sides of the same coin. The most generous budgets are nothing if there is no real possibility to do anything with what you can buy. Obviously the effort to promote copyright reform is part of this, so that when a library does spend money on collections and their preservation, they can then give access, enable research and education.

So through our actions and our advocacy, we can give our institutions the best chance of a sustainable future.

And I would argue that IFLA itself has a key role to play in this, and so needs to be as strong, as effective as possible. A sustainable IFLA is in all of our interests.

Because it provides a platform, a space for spreading examples of leadership that can inspire others. A catalyst for generating new ideas and insights, a structure for developing standards that enable us to work together, a voice for libraries in international fora.

And what makes IFLA strong?

It's you, your contributions, and those of your staff. The beating heart of IFLA are our volunteer groups – professional, regional, and advisory. They only work if the people they bring together are committed, expert, and generous in sharing.

Experts in preservation, in cataloguing, in audiovisual collections, in indigenous matters, in supporting research in different disciplines, in statistics and evaluation, in copyright and beyond.

And so many of these crucial volunteers within IFLA are from national libraries, and not just of course in our National Libraries Section. They drive forwards so much of our work, produce so many great events, reports and other activities.

And this is a virtuous circle. The more of you who get involved, the more valuable it is for everyone.

Complementing the work of CENL at the European level, IFLA provides complementary opportunities to work with colleagues from around the world. It gives you opportunities to learn from the work of colleagues globally, and in turn allows them to benefit from your ideas, your experience.

It also means that in our advocacy work, we can draw on real world examples, make arguments that reflect the real needs of the field, today.

Next year, we will have new elections for the whole range of IFLA's volunteer groups, from the Governing Board to our special interest group committees. I hope that, if you have not already, you will all think about whether you or your colleagues are able to commit, to make IFLA stronger, for your own benefit, for the benefit of the global field.

My time is almost up, and so I wanted, once again to thank you for all that you do to build sustainable futures for the societies in which we live.

In taking a leadership role within your countries, within our field – using your status, your resources to take the initiatives that others will not, cannot, innovating in the service of societies.

In making full use of your collections to drive wellbeing, education, and social cohesion.

In deploying your connections, your knowledge of how decisions are made to advocate, behind the scenes or otherwise, for your own work and for that of the sector as a whole, so that we can continue to provide services that make for better societies.

And in helping IFLA to realise its potential as a place, as a space, where we can accelerate efforts globally to develop services and programming that have a real and positive social impact.

Through this work, you have a such an important role in societies. And I have no doubt that, with the energy, with the imagination, with the intellect here in this room, the national library sector in Europe and beyond will continue to do so, will expand this role.

It will be for the good.

Thank you.