



HE. Ms. Michelle Bachelet,
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
Palais des Nations
CH-1211 GENEVA 10,
Switzerland

Dear High Commissioner,

Please find below a submission from the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, Prins Willem-Alexanderhof 5, 2595 BE, The Hague, The Netherlands, www.ifla.org) for the third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review in Georgia.

IFLA is the global organisation for libraries and library associations, founded in 1927, at present with over 1500 members in more than 150 countries. IFLA works to represent the interests of library and information services and their users, and is committed to promoting the principles of universal and equitable access to information and freedom of expression as drivers of development and well-being.

Overview:

1. There are presently 796 public libraries in Georgia, of which 64 are central municipality libraries and 732 are located in villages. Their collections span 7 978 631 printed materials. Since 2006, there has been a concerted effort to revitalise the field of librarianship in the country, with a Library Studies Faculty reopened at the Ilia State University, and an initiative of the City Hall of Tbilisi to renew and modernise city libraries.
2. Libraries in Georgia are an important free source of information for the population. Their work helps deliver on the human rights to freedom of thought an opinion and access to information and ideas, codified in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Libraries also help realise people's right to cultural participation (Article 27) and help deliver on the right to education (Article 26) by offering free access to educational materials and learning opportunities. As such, their work helps deliver on such recommendations as *118.48*, *117.22* and *117.107*. The present report draws on the experiences and work of the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, the Georgian Library Association and the wider library sector to examine the work carried out in these areas.

Access to information, knowledge and culture for vulnerable groups

3. The key objective of libraries in Georgia is to offer free and equitable access to information and knowledge. Freedom to seek and receive information is codified in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as an integral part of freedom of opinion and expression. The work of libraries contributes to people's enjoyment of these rights, and the services they offer free of charge¹ can be especially valuable for people from vulnerable and marginalised backgrounds.

Rural residents and access to information

4. A prominent example of a concerted library effort to help meet the needs of a more vulnerable user group which might otherwise be underserved is the ongoing initiative *Equilibrium*. The project, implemented by the National Parliamentary Library in partnership with the Georgian Library Association and the Georgia Chapter of the Internet Society, aims to renovate libraries

in remote rural areas, renew their collections and/or equip them with computers. In some areas, new libraries have been set up. Since its launch in 2012, the project has renewed hundreds of libraries and information centers. A map marking the locations and libraries Equilibrium has worked with can be found at <https://www.nplg.gov.ge/equilibrium/>. The project also covers book donations to rural libraries and organising educational events.

5. The goals of the project are ensuring better **access to information for residents of remote and rural areas, supporting education and rural development**. The project has been acknowledged as an important contribution to education in the country, and there is demand for its continued implementation in more locations by the public.
6. As part of the Equilibrium initiative, the Georgian Government, the NGO Internet Society, the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia and the Georgian Library Association also collaborated on the "Internet to all village libraries in Georgia" project. The project saw 151 village libraries equipped with computers, internet connectivity and printers – and offered training to over 10.000 village librarians at the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia. Once the project has been implemented, library use in the areas has grown by up to 55%; and people were the internet facilities to access e-government services, digital skills training, medical information and more.² Index Mundi estimates that around 36% of the Georgian population did not use the internet (in a span of three months) in 2018,³ and such public access initiatives are key to supporting **digital inclusion** of more vulnerable communities and groups.
7. More recently, the National Library has joined the “Stories from the Mountains” initiative. This project initially set out to chronicle the lives of sole residents of mountain villages, and the Library has joined to help supply these residents with books and periodicals tailored to their interests.⁴

Supporting the rights of linguistic and cultural minorities

Recommendation:

118.48. Promote the inclusion on all fronts of cultural and religious minorities and guarantee their access to development;

8. To ensure access to culture and help preserve minority languages, the National Library website hosts Georgian-Abkhazian, Georgian-Ossetian, Georgian-Armenian and Georgian-Azerbaijani online dictionaries.⁵ The Library has also set up an Abkhazian Book Corner and collection to help deliver on the cultural rights of the Abkhazian minorities.

Other vulnerable or underserved groups

9. Libraries in Georgia are also working to offer better access to information to other potentially underserved groups. For example, the National Library is currently aiming to revitalise libraries in prisons.⁶ The National Library in partnership with several private companies has also established “Georgian Book Corners” in libraries and parochial spaces abroad. Since 2012, more than 30 book corners have been established worldwide, from the United States to Indonesia, Spain, South Africa and beyond. There are plans to open several more corners in the near future. This initiative aims to broaden access to information and cultural materials for Georgian migrants abroad (as well as offer access to Georgian culture for other countries’ nationals).
10. Such initiatives help deliver on the informational, cultural and educational rights of vulnerable and underserved communities and minorities. The free library services ensure their accessibility to all people, regardless of income and background. In addition, library services offer access to all newspapers printed in Georgia, supporting a pluralistic media environment and people’s access to print media.

11. As indicated above, some aspects of libraries' work to ensure access to information also help realise people's rights to information and participation in cultural life. The section below examines library activities dedicated to improving access to information and knowledge which contribute to public's right for education and human rights awareness.

RECOMMENDATION: In light of the positive public reception and further demand for such services, we encourage support for further adoption and implementation of library initiatives to ensure access to information and knowledge for remote and rural residents, as well as other vulnerable groups.

Human Rights Awareness

Recommendations:

117.22. *Observe all human rights principles and international conventions, and raise awareness among the population regarding human rights values;*

117.39. *Take all necessary measures to promote women's rights and fight domestic violence and forced marriages;*

117.71. *Implement policies for the effective combating of domestic violence, including information and awareness-raising programmes to prevent this scourge;*

12. Libraries in Georgia are actively working to raise awareness around human rights and ensure broader access to information on this subject for the public. One of the key initiatives in this area is the *Civic Education* project. The National Library compiled a large open source electronic database and collection with materials on international law and human rights, relevant periodicals, texts of conventions and other documents. The collection is regularly updated, often in collaboration with various partner organisations. This serves as an important free source of information on human rights and relevant issues for the public, such as domestic violence, human trafficking, and more.
13. The Library also works to develop and make available more digital resources on human rights; translate relevant international resources and make international databases available to the public:
- A project dedicated to digitising the archives and personal materials of Valery Chalidze, a prominent human rights activist and Soviet dissident, on human rights issues in the Soviet time period;
 - Setting up user access to international databases focusing on human rights: *Women and Social Movements* and the *Adam Mathew Digital* sources on human rights.
 - There is ongoing work to set up access to EBSCO databases on *Ecological Issues for health rights*. The Library is also working in collaboration with UC Berkley to translate and make available a course on *History and Practise of Human Rights* by prof. Thomas W. Laqueur.
 - The Library has collaborated with the American Library Association to translate and publish "Cultural Programming of Libraries"; and is now working to translate the "Intellectual Freedom Manual" for libraries. Both sources are intended to help Georgian libraries adopt best practices and strategies to deliver and help realise the cultural and intellectual freedom rights of their users.

Civic engagement and access to public information

14. One of the key aspects of the rights codified in Article 19 – as explained, for example, by a joint publication by OECD, Article 19, INAI and MEPI – is access to government information and information pertaining to the management of public affairs.⁷ National Library initiatives in this area include:

- publishing the texts of speeches delivered by heads of the Georgian parliament;
- digitising materials about the establishment of the first Georgian republic (1918-1921) and the first Georgian constitution;
- making civic encyclopedias, a civic education dictionary, and a dictionary of legislative terms available for the public.

According to the National Library's usage and reader statistics, there is substantial interest in accessing those sources: e.g. with 3.561.397 uses of libraries' civic resources in 2019.

15. Finally, the library sector works to raise awareness on human rights issues through dedicated events, lectures and other educational initiatives. The National Library, for instance, has hosted events focusing on preventing domestic violence and promoting women's rights. The Library has also published a free book "Women of Georgia", detailing the stories of women overcoming violence or harassment. The aim of the book is to illustrate and promote women's rights, including their rights to health, work, to education and free movement.

16. Another example of a dedicated awareness-raising campaign in an initiative launched in 2019 by the National Library, in partnership with the NGO PEN Georgia, the literary museum, the Georgian Book Seller Association and other stakeholders, to protest against the detention of a famous Georgian doctor Vaja Gaprindashvili in South Ossetia. The New Year's Book Festival served as a platform to raise public awareness; and the campaign was successful in facilitating the return of Dr. Gaprindashvili to Tbilisi.

RECOMMENDATION: We encourage efforts to draw on the library sector's experience in raising awareness surrounding human rights issues, and its capacity to ensure broader access to human rights resources, in forthcoming awareness-raising initiatives.

The Right to Education

Recommendations:

117.106. Consider improving and promoting education at all levels of public education;

117.107. Further improve the accessibility and quality of education, and increase the enrolment rate of vulnerable children, including girl children and children of ethnic minorities;

17. Recognising that the costs of school manuals and learning materials can often be a barrier for lower-income families, the National Library has launched a project to create a digital platform for school and vocational educational materials. At present, the main focus of the project is digitising works of literature included in the school curriculum – materials to teach Georgian literature and dictionaries. The collection will also be extended to cover other materials and literature useful for students and teachers.⁸ The collection is available for free in a digital format, helping people overcome barriers to education related to the costs of learning materials.

18. In addition, libraries in Georgia offer informal and non-formal learning opportunities. The National Library, for instance, offers English lessons – a service that has already been in place for three years. The lessons are free to ensure access to such learning opportunities for people from lower-income backgrounds.

RECOMMENDATION: We invite the report to examine the role of public library services in helping deliver on the right to education. We encourage further support for library initiatives aimed at overcoming cost barriers to education and learning opportunities.

¹ The National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, “Library Network”,
https://www.nplg.gov.ge/eng/Library_Network.

² Beyond Access, 2017, “How Public Internet Access is Transforming 3 Georgian Villages”,
<https://beyondaccess.net/2017/09/27/public-internet-georgian-villages/>.

³ Index Mundi, “Georgia - Internet penetration”, <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/georgia/internet-penetration>.

⁴ Caucasus Business Week, 2020, “Library for the Loners - Equilibrium Joins Stories from the Mountains Project”, <https://cbw.ge/georgia/library-for-the-loners-equilibrium-joins-stories-from-the-mountains-project>.

⁵ Council of Europe, 2016, “Minority Languages in Georgia: Expressions of Cultural Wealth”,
https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/minlang/AboutCharter/Minority%20languages%20in%20Georgia_EN.pdf.

⁶ Georgian Journal, 2017, “National Library opens Georgian book corners across the world”,
<https://www.georgianjournal.ge/society/33312-national-library-opens-georgian-book-corners-across-the-world.html>.

⁷ Article 19, INAI, OECD, Mepi, 2018, “Right to Access Information”,
<https://www.oecd.org/mena/governance/right-to-access-information-2018.pdf>.

⁸ The National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, 2019, “The National Library Launches a New Digital School Platform”, https://www.nplg.gov.ge/eng/news/The_National_Library_Launches_a_New_Digital_School_Platform/4126.