

IFLA STATEMENT ON LIBRARIES AND OPEN AND GOOD GOVERNANCE (2020)

In endorsing the United Nations 2030 Agenda, and in particular Sustainable Development Goal 16, governments recognised the fundamental role of stable, efficient and effective governance in progress. Without this, policy initiatives across the board are more likely to fail, either in their design, in their implementation or both.

In particular, SDG16 underlines the need for equal access to justice (SDG 16.3), reducing corruption (SDG 16.5), developing effective, accountable and transparent institutions (SDG 16.6), and ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels (SDG 16.7) and ensuring public access to information and protection of human rights (SDG 16.10).

Better Information for Better Decision-Making and Oversight

The ability of governments to take the best decisions rests in large part on the possibility they have to access the fullest possible knowledge and to apply it. Those who scrutinise governments, pass legislation and contribute to policy debates – parliamentarians, experts, journalists, active citizens - also need to be well-informed.

Yet while the internet has brought much more information to the finger-tips of decision-makers, the need for investment in the way information is selected, summarised, organised, maintained, kept up to date, and shared with busy decision-makers is as great as ever if not greater.

Informed Societies for Accountable Governments

Even with full information, governments may still not choose to do the appropriate things for citizens. To ensure that they do – or to hold them to account when they do not – transparency is essential. The act of making government information freely available (either proactively, or in response to freedom of information requests) to citizens and libraries is an essential first step.

However, work is also necessary both to ensure that this information is in an accessible form, and that users are aware of the possibility to access and use it. Otherwise, those who have the greatest interest in fair and effective government – marginalised groups, those who depend on public support – are least able to make this happen.

Access to Justice and Legal Information

Much remains to be done to ensure that legal systems around the world grant the same rights to everyone without unjustified discrimination.

Yet in many cases, even where laws exist, people are unable to enforce them to their advantage, due to a lack of knowledge of their rights, and how to use the legal system. Too often, those in this situation are the most vulnerable, and so the most in need of protection.

The Role of Libraries

Libraries of all types support better decision-making in government according to their specific missions.

Government libraries work to give officials and ministers the best possible knowledge base for serving citizens effectively. Parliamentary libraries and research services support members of parliament in their work deciding on legislation, holding the executive to account and ensuring that voters' interests are represented.

Public and community libraries equipped with internet access and computers are not only places to access government data and information, but can also help design portals and support users in making the most of what they find.

Law libraries, and those with government information collections play a vital role in preserving and giving access to legal information. This supports access to justice, predictability for citizens and business, and long-term accountability. Many libraries also hold archival collections documenting the actions and decisions of governments in the past, further supporting transparency.

Recommendations

These contributions help to make a reality of SDG16. Yet to provide this support, libraries rely on the support of decision-makers. IFLA therefore calls on decision-makers at all levels to:

- Recognise the role of, and provide support for, effective library and information services within government and parliaments as an essential input to good policy-making.
- Implement comprehensive management, retention, preservation and archival policies, notably taking account of the risks of technological obsolescence and the need for authentication of documents.
- Guarantee public access to public data and information (including standards incorporated into law) by default without financial, technical or legal restrictions. In particular, by placing government information and official publications in the public domain (i.e. not subject to restrictions linked to copyright) and commit to open government data.
- Implement meaningful and easy-to-use freedom of information laws, and work through libraries to raise awareness of the possibilities such laws create.
- Engage public and other libraries in open government policies from an early stage, in order to ensure that government information is accessible and used.
- Ensure that libraries have budgets for government collections in order to help them fulfil their roles regarding government information.
- Invest in access to legal information, as well as services in libraries and librarian education to ensure that everyone can enforce their rights.

Agreed by the IFLA Governing Board, 11 December 2020.

While this statement has benefitted from the input of expertise from across IFLA, IFLA's Sections on Government Libraries and on Library and Research Services for Parliaments should not be seen as providing formal endorsement, given the obligation on many of their members to avoid taking political positions.