

# IFLA TREND REPORT UPDATE 2023

*Realising libraries' potential as partners  
for development*

Based on the contributions of:

Mohd Ismail Abdin, Vivian Ampsonah, Evie Cordell,  
Bryan Boy Cortez, Zoë Dunlop, Lyudmila Dyadyk,  
Xiaofang Zhang

INSIGHTS FROM THE



TREND  
REPORT

# IFLA is the Global Voice of the Library and Information Profession

IFLA puts libraries on the global stage and helps them develop.

We are the global voice and the largest brains trust of the library and information profession, with an active network of more than 1,400 Members – leading institutions and players in the library field – in over 150 countries, and well-established relations with the UN and other international organisations.

Together with our Members we work to set the professional agenda and develop standards in library service provision, to improve access to information and cultural heritage resources, and to place this work at the heart of local, national and global policies.

## Contributors to the Original Trend Report:

Olivier Crepin-Leblond, Chairman Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) At-large Advisory Committee (ALAC)

Anriette Esterhuysen, CEO, Association for Progressive Communications (APC)

Divina Frau-Meigs, Professor, Université du Paris III: Sorbonne Nouvelle

Melissa Gregg, Principal Investigator, Intel Center for Social Computing

John Houghton, Professorial Fellow, Centre for Strategic Economic Studies, Victoria University

Deborah Jacobs, Director, Global Libraries, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Marième Jamme, CEO, Spot One Global Solutions

Janis Karklins, Assistant Director General for Communication and Information, UNESCO

Alejandro Pisanty, Professor, National Autonomous University of Mexico

Lee Rainie, Director, Internet & American Life Project, Pew Research Center\*

Kate Russell, Presenter, BBC Click Online

Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)

Suneet Singh Tuli, Founder and CEO, DataWind Ltd

Fred Stielow, VP/Dean of Libraries, American Public University System

Fred von Lohmann, Legal Director, Copyright, Google Inc.\*

Louis Zacharilla, Co-founder, Global Intelligent Community Forum

\*Commenting in a personal capacity

Trend Report updates are available for 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2021. All are available on the Trend Report website: <https://trends.ifla.org/>.



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For press enquiries and further information please contact: Stephen Wyber, IFLA Policy and Advocacy Manager ([stephen.wyber@ifla.org](mailto:stephen.wyber@ifla.org))

## WHAT IS THE IFLA TREND REPORT?

The original IFLA Trend Report is the result of a dialogue between the library field and experts from a range of disciplines.

By crossing experience and perspectives, it provided a new opportunity to explore and discuss the emerging trends that are shaping the world in which libraries work.

The first Report identified five high-level trends in the global information environment, spanning access to information, education, privacy, civic engagement and technological transformation. It did not seek to predict the future, but rather to explore the forces that will influence it.

Yet the Trend Report is not just a single static publication report, but a dynamic and evolving set of online resources for library and information professionals.

Alongside the original report, there is a range of data and information for libraries to use, share and build on, including a bibliography and literature review of existing trend reports, expert papers and discussion summaries.

Subsequent updates opened up new paths and questions for reflection, bringing in new voices from inside and outside of the library field.

These can all be found on the Trend Report website – [trends.ifla.org](https://trends.ifla.org).

Crucially, these are intended, collectively, as a starting point – a catalyst – for discussion both within the library field, and when talking with external partners. It is a support for thinking about what we need to do to be prepared for what is to come, so that libraries do not only survive, but thrive.

That is where you come in. The goals we set ourselves, and the actions we take to achieve them, will have a decisive influence on how big a role our institutions will play in the evolving information landscape.

We encourage you to use the IFLA Trend Report Update to organise and facilitate creative workshops with your community, network, colleagues or staff.

Join the conversation online using the tag #IFLATrendReport, stay tuned to news from IFLA at [ifla.org](https://ifla.org), and follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)!



## Foreword – Vicki McDonald

### *IFLA President 2023-2025*

Gamba daru\* colleagues

I am proud to share with you the IFLA Trend Report 2023, which brings together the insights and ideas shared by emerging leaders at our 2023 World Library and Information Congress.

This Report is all about impact – the positive impact that libraries do, can, and aspire to achieve for the communities they serve. And it's about the factors that shape how far we can realise this potential.

In my own work at the State Library of Queensland, as a former President of the Australian Library and Information Association, and now as President of IFLA, I am strongly focused on how we can ensure that we are making this difference.

My experience of this is what drove my choice of the theme 'Stronger Together' for my presidency. I'm excited to see this reflected in the ideas shared by our emerging leaders, who have highlighted both the value of stronger cooperation within our field, but also closer links with other stakeholders.

I hope that the trends identified here will help provide a structure for thinking through how we can maximise our contribution to sustainable development, and of course a reminder of the insight – and foresight – that our emerging leaders can bring to our work.

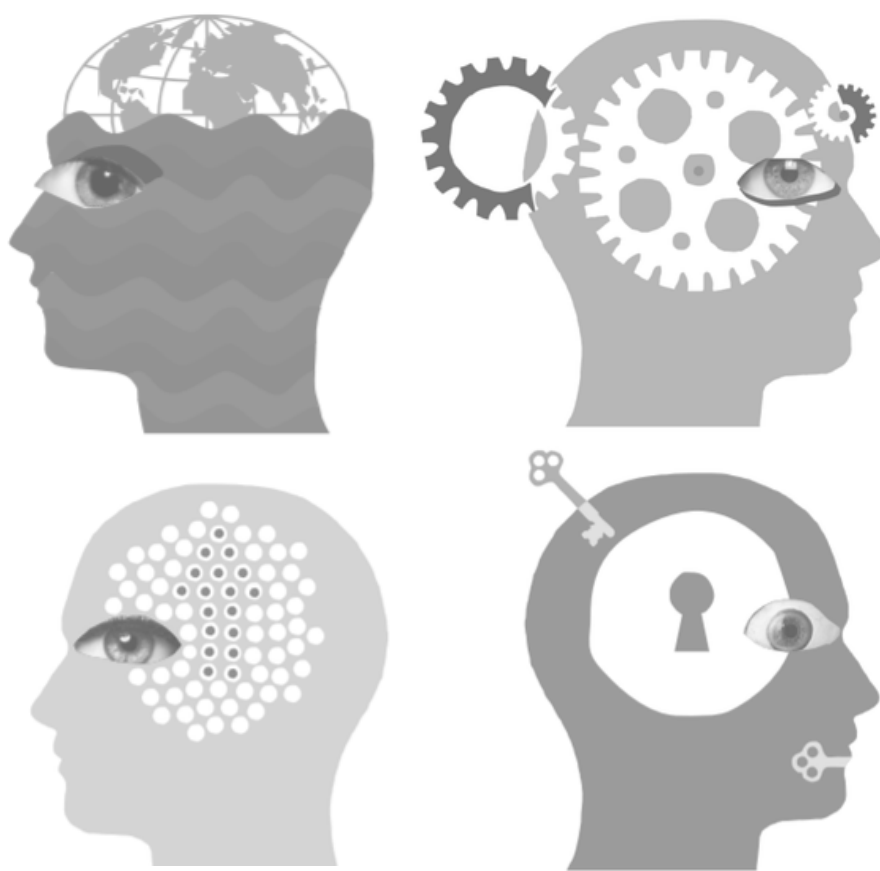
\* "Gamba daru" means "Good day" in the language of the Barunnggam people from the Darling Downs region of Dalby and Bunya Mountains – the community where I grew up in Queensland, Australia.

This is the first of two Trend Reports coming out this year, with the launch of our 2024 edition at the Information Futures Summit that I'm honoured to be hosting in my hometown, Brisbane, Australia in September and October.

Work is already well underway on the 2024 report, which will look at broader trends in the information and knowledge environment, and what these mean for libraries and the communities we serve.

I hope you are looking forward to it as much as I am!

Vicki McDonald



# Introduction

Libraries are at the vanguard of creating positive change worldwide, whether it is by promoting inclusivity in various communities, overcoming outdated perceptions, or managing the challenges of internet connectivity. Yet in light of the rapid evolution of technology as well as societal and global challenges, libraries are under pressure to (re)define their contribution to development.

Welcome to the latest edition of the IFLA Trend Report, focused on 12 trends that shape how libraries, in turn, shape development.

This edition of the IFLA Trend Report in some ways represents a continuation of the two previous ones. Like them, it is the result of the contributions of emerging leaders from around the world. Specifically, it brings together the contributions of applicants for emerging leaders' grants at the 2023 World Library and Information Congress, held in Rotterdam.

Yet there is also a difference. Rather than looking at trends in general terms, and how (also in general terms) we can respond, this edition looks specifically at the trends that influence libraries' ability to deliver on sustainable development.

This choice partially reflects the theme of the Congress - Let's Work Together, Let's Library - which emphasised libraries' roles in building more inclusive and durable societies. But it also draws on IFLA's long-standing engagement around the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, through which we advocate for the role of libraries as actors in driving development at all levels.

In this work, we underline the power of information - and welcoming spaces staffed by dedicated people with a proactive approach to helping others - as a key enabler of progress across the board, from supporting internet access to sharing public health information, from enabling innovation to safeguarding and giving access to heritage as a key cultural right.

Crucially, we argue in this context that there is much more that libraries can do, if their potential is recognised, and they are fully incorporated into planning and delivery processes.

So what is holding us back? What trends, both within libraries and outside, are limiting our capacity to deliver, and what can we do about it? That is the question that the emerging leaders at our Rotterdam Congress sought to answer.

The identified trends shed light on the dynamic environment that influences libraries' development contributions, highlighting the necessity of collaborations, strategic investments, and acknowledgement of changing responsibilities within the global knowledge ecosystem.

In each case, drawing on the insights and contributions of the emerging leaders, we explore the trend, before setting out specifically what impacts this might have on libraries' contribution to development. Each section then offers a few ideas about how libraries and others can respond. Through this, despite the admittedly negative framing of the report as being around challenges and limitations to libraries' ability to impact the world for the better, this report also offers positive ideas for how we can move forwards.

The fact that the report comes from emerging leaders is therefore particularly important.

We have a choice - between stagnation and activation, between fading into irrelevance and constantly exploring how the fundamental missions of libraries can apply today, between letting others (mis)define us and asserting our place as essential actors in any effort to build better societies and economies. Choosing responsiveness, reinvention and relevance also requires renewal, which in turn means working always to ensure that members of the profession with energy and ideas are able to realise their potential. IFLA is therefore grateful to the emerging leaders who came forward to share their energy and ideas in 2023.

This report is the last in the current series of 'smaller' updates to the Trend Report. Later in 2024, we are looking forward to releasing a new 'major' update, that will follow in the footsteps of the 2013 original. In the meanwhile, we are looking forward to new announcements and activities to support emerging leaders globally.

Happy reading!

## Trend Report Update 2023 Contributors

**Mohd Ismail Abdin, Malaysia**

**Vivian Ampsonah, Ghana**

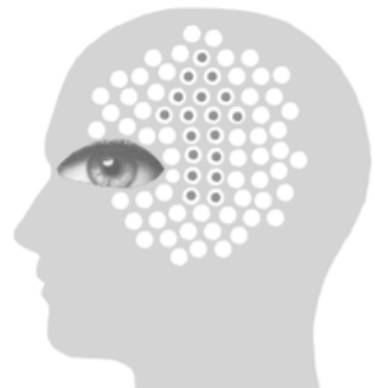
**Evie Cordell, United States**

**Bryan Boy Cortez, Philippines**

**Zoë Dunlop, Germany**

**Lyudmila Dyadyk, Ukraine**

**Xiaofang Zhang, China**



**#IFLATrendReport**



# The trends

- 1** Libraries are increasingly seen as irrelevant in a changing world
- 2** The world is going down a path that discounts the value of community-driven infrastructures, and of information for development
- 3** In many countries, public spending – and so scope for investment – is tightening
- 4** More diverse societies make delivering universal services and achieving equity more complicated
- 5** Regulation of digital spaces is accelerating, but without consideration of impacts on how libraries support development
- 6** An increasingly uncertain world intensifies challenges and complicates service-delivery
- 7** There are persistent and growing barriers to building partnerships for development
- 8** Persistent geographical inequalities are reinforced by unequal investment in public services
- 9** Library and information workers are seen as auxiliaries, rather than development actors in their own right
- 10** Globalisation continues, opening up new expectations for information access
- 11** Even as connectivity improves, the digital divide is persistent and getting more serious
- 12** We are too busy dealing with crises to think strategically



# 1. Libraries are increasingly seen as irrelevant in a changing world

The first trend is a broad one, and relates to the assumption held by some in our societies that libraries are essentially a legacy institution, serving a function that has either been taken over by technology, which is very narrow (for example, as one of the less glamorous parts of the wider culture field), or which is no longer necessary in general. Communities and other stakeholders risk, as a result, simply not thinking of libraries when they are considering which actors can be mobilised in order to deliver change, while libraries' own potential is limited by frozen or reduced funding.

Libraries of course do work to address these perceptions, and demonstrate both the continued importance of their core missions (in providing access to information and the skills to use it), as well as developing new activities which draw on their people, spaces and resources, but stereotypes are 'sticky', and persuading people to rethink is hard.

## **Development impact:**

when development policies are prepared (from SDG 1 to SDG 17), the risk is that those drafting them wrongly discount how libraries can contribute to making them a success. This can lead to lower policy effectiveness, with, for example, less productive outreach to parts of the population who may otherwise be out of reach.

Another potential outcome is that libraries end up taking on unfunded tasks, despite having been forgotten by those preparing policies. For example, they jobseekers find work, or citizens in general apply for benefits. Yet because they were neglected, they don't receive the support necessary to fulfil these roles. This places additional pressure on libraries, potentially reducing their ability to deliver on other work.

## **Response:**

on the side of decision-makers and other stakeholders, the change needed is simple – there is a need to take seriously the call in the 2030 Agenda to work with all stakeholders.



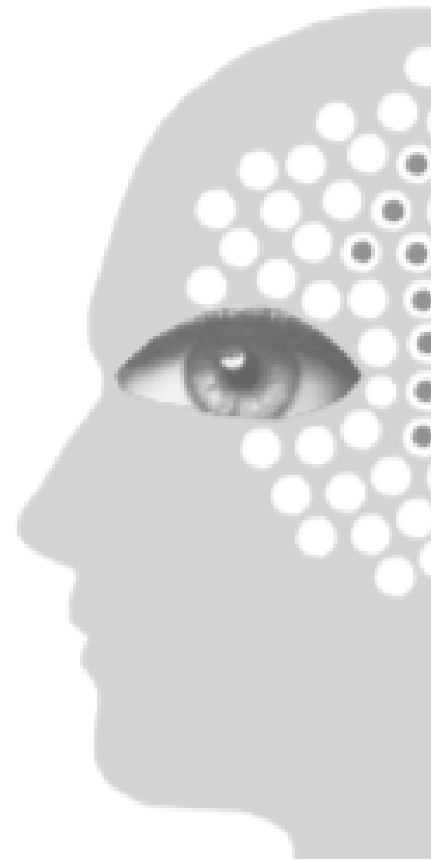
***Planning based on stereotypes that are not only old, but may not even have been accurate in the past, is a poor strategy.***

For libraries, we have to be realistic – perceptions will not change by themselves. We need to see advocacy as a key part of delivering for our communities, as without it, we can't. Importantly, we can support change here. Efforts must be made to ensure that policymakers and stakeholders recognise the transformative potential of modern libraries and integrate

them effectively into development strategies.

To do this, we must make sure that we are able to speak the language of decision-makers and other stakeholders, and avoid simply assuming that they will understand the value of what we do in our own terms. We should be innovative, and even surprising, in how we present ourselves, and be able to show how we are also able to reevaluate our strategies, services, policies and programming to remain relevant in the digital age.

Finally, we must take proactive steps to underscore our indispensable role, not only to government entities and stakeholders, but also to the wider community. We must view ourselves - and be viewed - as active participants with a legitimate voice and valuable contributions to offer. Our work is indispensable, and we deserve adequate funding to support it. We possess the expertise and ingenuity to effectively utilise resources and maximise impact. It's crucial to advocate for the recognition and support our institutions need to continue serving as essential pillars of knowledge, education, and enrichment within our communities.



## 2. We The world is going down a path that discounts the value of community-driven infrastructures, and of information for development

There appears, globally, to be a loss of trust in the value of community, and in particular community-driven infrastructures. People are encouraged to distrust institutions, and fall back on their own perceptions and experiences. This is visible in everything from conspiracy theories (not least about 'deep states') to much of the philosophy behind web 3.0 and the crypto boom, based on a sense that people need to free themselves from traditional institutions and networks. Of course, such an approach tends primarily to benefit those most able to exploit it.

Community led institutions can of course suffer from the fact that their impact (for example in building individual and collective wellbeing, and in delivering social capital) is difficult to measure in monetary terms, and so their role is underestimated. Working at a community level nonetheless requires give and take – people need to be able to cooperate and negotiate, while central governments need to be ready to leave decision-making power to others.

Linked to this is the trend towards the questioning of the role of information (including science and research). In parallel, there is both a shamelessness about lying by some in positions of power, and a sense that scientific knowledge is somehow part of a wider

institutional set-up that needs to be challenged. Clearly, some measure of criticism is healthy – neither governments nor scientists should overstate their own case – but gut feeling, political expediency and wishful thinking clearly pose threats to evidence-based decision-making.

### **Development impact:**

The undervaluation of community-driven infrastructure and information for development presents profound obstacles to library organisations, hindering their capacity to fulfil their mission and effectively cater to the needs of their communities. A weakening of community structures runs directly against SDG11 (which specifically focuses on strong communities) as well as SDG16 (which focuses on institutions). It takes away a whole set of tools for delivering on development, and in particular ones that have a strong understanding of community needs and cultures. It also threatens broader resilience and equality (SDG10) by leading to a situation where everyone is thrown back on their own (unequal) resources.

Meanwhile, challenges to the role and place of information undermine efforts to ensure that policy is based on the best possible evidence base. Through this, it increases the chance of mistakes, both wasting resources and leaving people and communities

in a worse position than they could have been otherwise. In addition to weakening decision-making, the risk is higher that people simply don't believe or act on what they are recommended or told to do, an obvious example being around low uptake of vaccines during the COVID-19 Pandemic in some countries.

**Response:**

for libraries, the immediate goal should be to ensure that we are fully realising the potential of our role within communities as spaces for accessing and generating knowledge and so empowerment. We cannot start to defend these things if we are not able to deliver. This requires a real openness and ability to listen and understand, as well as a readiness to change.

We then need to help communities build awareness of the value of what they have, and the readiness to defend it. Through supporting civic engagement, we help give more people the confidence and skills to advocate for and defend the importance of institutions such as ours.

Finally, we need to join efforts to uphold a healthy information environment in policy and law. This cannot only be a question of regulating the excesses of a few major internet platforms, but rather exploring how we – in partnership with others – can build, positively, a comprehensive agenda for information integrity. In particular, we need to find ways to help people build curiosity, and learn to be critical and confident when working with uncertainty, rather than leap to easy conclusions.



***By championing the value of community-driven initiatives, libraries can also strengthen their impact, amplify their relevance, and become indispensable agents of positive change in society.***



### 3. In many countries, public spending – and so scope for investment – is tightening

While the Pandemic years saw – at least in those countries with the possibility to do so – significant government spending in order to avoid or limit the risk of recession, we are now facing tougher times again, reminiscent of the years after the 2008 financial crisis. There are many reasons for this – difficulties in taxing some major companies, low tax revenues in general, inflation and high prices, and political agendas focused on cutting debt and deficits. Yet the result is too often the same – investment in all public services, not least libraries, is reduced.

Clearly, a greater or lower budget on its own is not the only possible determinant of how effective libraries can be in supporting sustainable development in their communities – this would be to discount the role of the energy and innovation of library staff. However, cuts to budgets are painful, and too often do simply lead to reduced output, and so impact. This translates into fewer (professional) staff, less modern and welcoming spaces, less relevant materials and tools, and too often as a result, fewer people through the doors.

#### **Development impact:**

when there is insufficient government funding, libraries are unable to provide essential resources and services crucial for holistic community development. In particular, while volunteers can play an important role, the loss of professional positions

within libraries removes a key factor supporting high-quality, user-focused services and programming.

This deprives individuals of the opportunity to cultivate fundamental skills (SDG 4, 8) and access vital services (SDGs 1, 10), such as basic information literacy and reliable internet connectivity (SDG 9, 17), or to support research (SDG 9) or safeguard heritage (SDG 11). Consequently, communities face barriers to acquiring knowledge, engaging in lifelong learning, and participating fully in the digital age. The lack of investment in libraries exacerbates existing inequalities and hampers societal progress.

#### **Response:**

Primarily, this is about protecting effective (public) spending. In this, we are likely to find allies in other sectors, such as education, health and social inclusion. Organisations here, for example, regularly support efforts to address tax avoidance and evasion, as well as to counter corruption. Libraries could well mobilise in this space, stressing the importance of properly-funded public services.

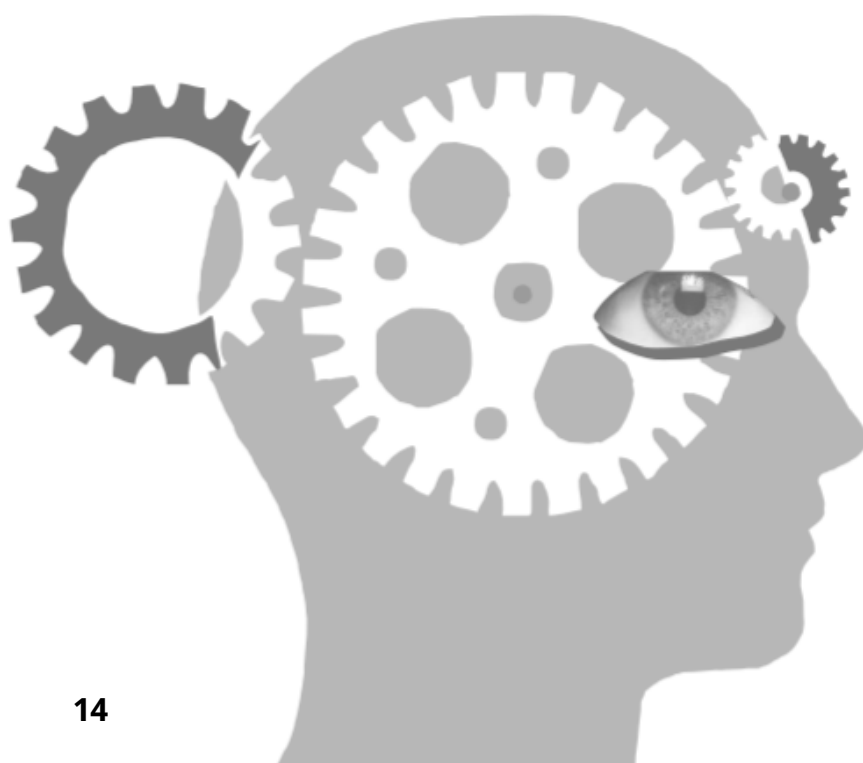
This also implies that we need to be clearer and more effective in defending our own corners. This is partly about ensuring that we can honestly tell funders that we are making the most effective use of the resources we receive, but then also being clear in our advocacy about

how spending on libraries is an investment not a cost. As highlighted above, we need to speak in terms that decision-makers will understand and respond to.



***More broadly, we must work collaboratively to overcome distrust in public services, advocating for equitable distribution of resources to support libraries in fulfilling their potential.***

Through collective action and advocacy, we can strengthen the sustainability of library services and contribute to the advancement of librarianship worldwide.



## 4. More diverse societies make delivering universal services and achieving equity more complicated

Societies around the world are evolving. Migration and other factors mean that many communities look very different to how they did a generation ago. Elsewhere, we are growing more and more aware of communities and vectors of diversity that always existed, but which were hidden or even suppressed due to old assumptions and beliefs, often at serious personal cost. Monochrome, monocultural, uniform groups are increasingly rare.

This report takes as a starting point that diversity is a strength, both for individuals and for communities as a whole, but it should not be taken for granted that this strength will be realised. Doing so can require a readiness to stop and reflect on how existing structures and approaches may affect different groups. Otherwise even the most universalistic service is at risk of becoming a driver of exclusion. It can also require positive efforts to build understanding and connection (linguistic, cultural and social), and to fight the instinct to stick with the familiar.



***[Realising the potential of diversity] can require a readiness to stop and reflect on how existing structures and approaches may affect different groups. Otherwise even the most universalistic service is at risk of becoming a driver of exclusion.***

Linked to this is the growing (and overdue) awareness of injustices done to indigenous peoples and communities, which have left (and continue to leave) deep scars. Libraries have a particular role to play here, given past practices around the way in which information has been gathered, categorised and valued or not.

### **Development impact:**

clearly, allowing diversity to translate into division runs directly counter to a number of SDGs, notably SDG1 (no poverty), SDG5 (gender equity), SDG10 (reduced inequalities), and SDG11 (sustainable cities and communities). Yet in line with the logic of leaving no-one behind, none of the SDGs can be attained if anyone is left out – for example, when a library user is not able to take part in eLearning because they don't have basic skills, or are not comfortable in the main language of the community, then SDGs 9 and 17 are also more difficult to achieve.

Clearly, finding a way to provide basic public services to everyone in a way that works for them is also a broader question of how to ensure that everyone is able to fulfil their human rights.



**Response:**

key elements of the response for libraries are already implicit in the above. We need to change the way we think and act to better serve everyone in our communities, especially those who are poor, speak a language other than English, or have trouble with technology. It is also necessary to think of new ways to provide services that make them available and welcoming to everyone, no matter what their situation is, and to evaluate what we do from the perspective of all community measures.

We can also help in this work by looking at the people we are supporting, and trying to work out who is missing, as well as advocating for the recognition and empowerment of marginalised groups in general. By being open to different ideas and experiences, we can better meet the needs and solve the problems that people from different situations face. We need to actively work to close the gaps and make libraries a place where everyone feels valued, empowered, and able to fully take advantage of the chances they offer.

Another key part of the solution will be around making sure that we have, within our own workforce, the greatest possible diversity. We need to attract and retain diverse talent within our profession to ensure that our workforce reflects the communities we serve. This means looking at our recruitment policies, and once again, recognising who is missing from our workforces, and how we can give fair opportunities to join and develop.

Finally, ongoing work to raise awareness of the needs of indigenous communities, as well as to reckon openly and honestly with past practices is as much a task for libraires as for any other institution. Building and sustaining respectful and meaningful links with communities is central to this.



## 5. Regulation of digital spaces is accelerating, but without consideration of impacts on how libraries support development

The last few years have seen a race to regulate digital spaces, at the national, regional and global levels. Faith in the idea of a bottom-up internet, based only on protocols and standards agreed by the community, has been shaken as concerns grow about the power of major platforms, and the net's potential not just to perpetuate, but also to intensify the harm caused by sadly all-too-familiar human behaviours such as criminality, discrimination and more.

The speed of efforts to regulate is driven, to some extent, by the desire of governments to get 'first-mover advantage' – to set out rules that are then more likely to be adopted as a kind of global standard. This is seen as a way of benefitting your own companies, as they will then have most experience of working within the parameters set out.

The problem is that speed in regulating – often based on very strongly held views about the virtue (or not) of different actors and fears about harms – does not necessarily allow for a full consideration of how to safeguard the potential of the internet as a space of free expression and access to information. It is hard to regulate for the sort of careful judgement that libraries need to make when assessing whether and how to acquire and provide access to materials, and too often, governments when regulating (or platforms looking

to avoid regulation, or punishment) risk tending to block first and ask questions later.



***It is hard to regulate for the sort of careful judgement that libraries need to make when assessing whether and how to acquire and provide access to materials***

A parallel concern is around what happens when governments introduce divergences in how they regulate the internet, or fail to advance work to ensure that there are the same basic copyright exceptions and limitations in all countries with the possibility to work across borders. This is a key driver of internet 'fragmentation', which plays out in blocked content and services, as well as uncertainty.

### **Development impacts:**

the most immediate impact of internet regulation that fails to take account of the value of access to information is that it becomes harder to deliver on SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions, which of course includes target 10 on public access to information). But when information flows are curtailed, we also see harm elsewhere – for example diasporas are cut off from homelands (SDG 10), cross-border research becomes harder (SDG 9 and 17), the implicit goal of providing for

access to the heritage of humanity is blocked (SDG 11), and the potential to develop new technologies and businesses and so earn a livelihood suffers (SDG 8).

**Response:**

for libraries, one key aspect is a readiness to get involved in discussions about how digital information flows are regulated. Libraries have a unique and legitimate voice in these discussions, given both their professional expertise in questions around information, and practically given their role in supporting internet access in communities. We should see ourselves – and be seen – as stakeholders in internet governance debates, and even explore how we can help our communities get more engaged, as ultimately it is they who will bear the consequences of reduced access to information and expression.

Through this, we need to emphasise the value of intellectual freedom and professional judgement, as well as of access to culture, research and education. We should also argue for a more positive approach, looking at how we can ensure that every individual has the access to the information and skills they need to thrive, rather than simply addressing problems when they arise in a more ad hoc way. We can also promote digital literacy initiatives that can empower users to navigate online spaces responsibly and advocate for policies that promote equitable access to information for all. And of course libraries approach these issues with an understanding of cultural factors

and integrity, and the ability to promote a culture of continuous learning.



***A key part of this is about making clear what the costs of interrupted information flows are. We cannot expect decision-makers to find out for themselves about research projects which have had to be restricted, or open access repositories which are facing major uncertainty***

No-one thought to make clear that they should be exempted from rules intended for multi-billion dollar platforms. Libraries are uniquely well placed to provide news from the front when it comes to the impacts of how information flows are – or are not – being regulated. But to do this, we need to engage with policymakers and stakeholders and highlight the importance of considering the impacts of regulations on equal access to information. Libraries should collaborate with others to balance innovation and regulations around various technologies while also creating and promoting ethical practices.

## 6. An increasingly uncertain world intensifies challenges and complicates service-delivery

While there are still those who noisily seek to deny it, the broad and science-based consensus is that climate change is real, and poses real threats to our way of life. It is already leading not only to more dramatic events – storms, flooding, fires and more – but also gentler but no less dangerous changes that threaten everything from agriculture to the preservation of materials in library collections. The trend is certainly towards these becoming more common, adding to existing challenges linked to natural disasters such as earthquakes and volcanoes.

Climate-related events are likely, through pressure on resources, to feed into conflict. Yet much older trends – greed, exclusive nationalism, and hate – continue to trigger instability, insecurity and war. These clearly impact libraries and their communities, at best through disruption, and at worse through direct damage to libraries and their collections, through negligence or by design.

Finally, and linking to a trend highlighted above, pressure on public spending risks limiting investment in wider safety and readiness. This is a dual problem – it not only means that institutions and communities are less able to respond to disasters and uncertainty, but that such disasters are more likely to happen, for example through poorly-maintained

infrastructures, not least library buildings.

### **Development impact:**

Inadequate protection of libraries and their resources poses a significant risk of irreparable loss to communities, jeopardizing the achievement of SDG 11. Moreover, disruptions to library operations call into question the accessibility of essential public services for all individuals, directly impacting SDG 1.

Yet even when libraries themselves are spared, growing uncertainty is likely to see them more frequently placed in a crisis response role, providing dry, warm (or cool) spaces, electricity and internet connections for those who no longer have access to these at home (SDGs 7 and 13). And as we saw during the Pandemic, many libraries stood up to fill the gap left by the closure of schools and other services. The need for such centres is not likely to diminish in years to come.



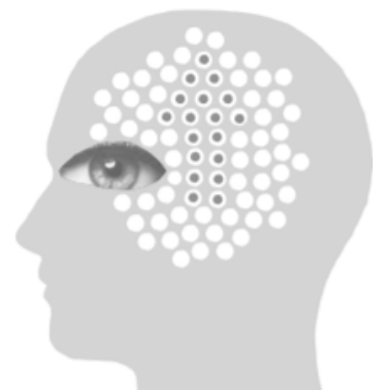
***Yet even when libraries themselves are spared, growing uncertainty is likely to see them more frequently placed in a crisis response role***

**Response:**

an immediate priority is to ensure the meaningful integration of libraries and their collections into wider disaster-risk management planning. This is partly about the preservation of library buildings, collections and staff at a higher level, although planning in individual libraries is paramount. Through this, we can safeguard invaluable collections and ensure uninterrupted access to critical information and services during crises. Planning is necessary to make libraries more resilient and improve their reaction systems, which will lessen the harmful effects of disasters.

However, it is also about how libraries of all sorts can be mobilised as factors of preparedness and recovery. From community centres to key nodes in networks for sharing information about risks, and from the holders of collections that can support research and build resilience to key interfaces between the scientific community and decision-makers, libraries can and should be in the picture.

We can leverage our expertise and resources to empower communities to navigate uncertainty and drive positive change, ensuring that libraries remain indispensable pillars of support in an increasingly uncertain world. Using frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals can help ensure a more holistic approach.



## 7. There are persistent and growing barriers to building partnerships for development

While libraries have a uniquely wide potential to contribute to development across the 2030 Agenda, they do not – and should not – need to do so alone. Crucially, they can often achieve more, and reach more people, when working in partnership with others, combining their spaces, collections and services with the knowledge and other resources that others can bring.



***While libraries have a uniquely wide potential to contribute to development across the 2030 Agenda, they do not – and should not – need to do so alone.***

However, at a time of pressure on public funding, and the ongoing ‘stickiness’ of old stereotypes about libraries, there is a risk that other stakeholders who might be able to work with libraries simply do not realise the potential, or are not ready to take on the transaction costs necessary to do so. A particular challenge is ongoing fragmentation in governance that, for example, can make it hard for library authorities to cooperate with education authorities.

Within the library field too – in a point also highlighted in last year’s Trend Report – there can be a tendency to try and do everything by ourselves. This can be due either to an excessive sense of the uniqueness of our institutions and our goals that risks

leading to incompatibilities with others, or once again, a sense that partnerships just take too much effort

### **Development impact:**

as with a number of other trends already highlighted here, the results of a continued resistance or difficulty in forming partnerships is less effective action in the areas of sustainable development where libraries can make a difference, that’s to say more or less all of them!

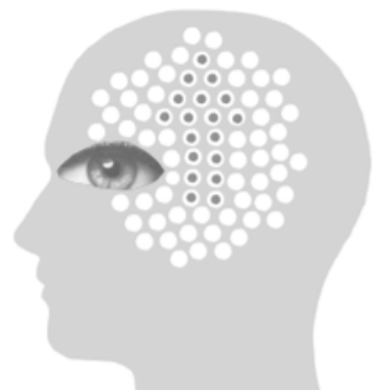
Of course, this trend also relates directly to SDG17 (Partnerships for the Goals), which serves to underline the message across the 2030 Agenda that success will be a collaborative effort, or it will not happen at all. SDG17 is, notably, one of the two ‘enabling goals’ (alongside SDG16) focused on creating the conditions for all of the other Goals to be achieved.

### **Response:**

Libraries ought to be empowered to forge collaborative partnerships with diverse stakeholders dedicated to advancing public interest objectives and addressing community needs. It is essential for libraries to cultivate confidence and readiness in establishing partnerships, understanding their unique contributions and potential impact. By fostering a culture of collaboration, libraries can leverage collective expertise and resources to effectively address societal challenges and enhance community well-being.

There are also practical tools that can be developed here, for example between peak organisations (library associations, national libraries, or library agencies and their counterparts) that make connections on the ground easier, such as model agreements, or simply good practices.

Yet we should also be ready to call out administrative and legal barriers that make it harder to work with others that it needs to be. Given that failing to address these leads to a potentially significant opportunity cost, it should be in the interests of the authorities (both executives and legislatures) to be aware of such situations, and be challenged to look for responses.





## 8. Persistent geographical inequalities are reinforced by unequal investment in public services

In another trend that is perhaps more of a lack of a trend, there is the persistence of unevenness in services – between rural and urban areas, between poorer and richer regions, and between more and less developed countries. This continues to mark the library field and its ability to support development. Rural, isolated or remote areas don't just pose additional challenges to anyone trying to provide a universal service, but those providing the service too often cannot call on the same depth of resources as can be possible in wealthier urban environments.

In other words, libraries can serve as essential services to underserved populations with limited access to formal schooling. They often provide access to various technology resources. However, these services can only be offered as equally as they are supported. While big central libraries in cities or larger universities can benefit from economies of scale and potentially take more risks, this is not so easy in the case of smaller, dispersed networks which may have one, or even no professional librarians in key roles. In turn, they can be called upon to serve communities marked with lower levels of literacy, poorer internet connectivity and more. Smaller libraries may also find it harder to engage in the sorts of projects that could allow additional revenue generation.



***In some countries, we still see library and information workers unsure about whether they will be paid at the end of the month, or even for how many hours they can count on electricity, while others do not even have to think about these, and can focus their efforts on other issues.***

### **Development impact:**

the chief impact of this ongoing unevenness is that depending on where someone is born, grows up, or subsequently lives, they may have dramatically different levels of support from libraries.

In turn, this affects how far they can enjoy access to education (SDG 4), how far they can participate in science and research (SDG 9), and of course whether they are able to access information (SDG 16). And following this, there is the risk of reinforcing divides by leaving those already in disadvantaged areas more disadvantaged still (SDG 11).

Yet the unevenness also represents a risk for the ability of libraries to work as a system. Within countries, stronger networks translate into a greater ability to deliver change at the national level, as well as creating wider opportunities for staff to develop. While having a few star institutions can help in driving innovation, the case for libraries in



general rests on them providing a great service for everyone.

**Response:**

while broader strategies for balanced regional development play a key role here (for example through investment in public services in general to address different aspects of inequality), there is a value in libraries themselves looking at how to deliver services in deprived areas.

Enhanced coordination and networking within countries can facilitate seamless collaboration among library services, bolstered by broader investments in redistribution. Leveraging technology, language accessibility, and system automation can further streamline these efforts, enabling efficient communication and resource sharing across libraries of varying sizes and locations. Harnessing the potential of the internet, especially in remote rural areas, presents unprecedented opportunities to expand access to a plethora of services, empowering even the smallest libraries to serve as vibrant hubs of knowledge and community engagement.

We also gain by prioritising professional development and initiatives tailored to enabling libraries to respond to the needs of rural communities. Similarly, developing types of (digital) central service provision can help make life at least a little easier for colleagues, and help ensure that just by living in a poor or remote area, you are not getting worse services.

Libraries can of course also partner with local governments, outreach programs, and other potential partners, libraries have the ability to build innovative programs that help advance and build communities.

Internationally, the argument is much the same. Engagement in international cooperation, for example through organisations like IFLA, offers a chance to draw on the ideas of others, and even to leapfrog stages of development, for example through smart use of digital tools. Through this, we can move towards the goal of everyone enjoying great library services.



## 9. Library and information workers are seen as auxiliaries, rather than development actors in their own right

Our ninth trend looks specifically at the status of librarians. As mentioned above, one consequence of tighter budgets has been a tendency to rely less on trained and dedicated staff, and to draw more on volunteers and others. While the commitment, energy and ideas of volunteers is not just welcome, but also essential for many aspects of how libraries work (for example public and community libraries), this is a complement, rather than a replacement for what a trained librarian can bring in terms of knowledge, skills and professional ethics.

And yet, we do see in many countries a trend towards weakening commitments to ensuring that libraries have librarians, and even to closing down training opportunities for future professionals. As it becomes more and more common to see non-specialists in these roles, it becomes more widely assumed that this can be done everywhere. What this doesn't show, of course, is how much else could have been achieved with trained personnel in place.

In parallel, and as highlighted in the title, there is the risk, for example in schools and universities, that librarians are seen as auxiliary staff, rather than having an essential and substantive role to play in the academic success of learners of all ages. Translated to a broader context, this approach in turn risks building the sense that librarians are simply

support personnel, rather than expert professionals in their own right, able to help the people and communities they serve fulfil their potential, as well as enjoy their rights. They do not necessarily enjoy the space and confidence to adapt to change, and be proactive in identifying how and where they can make the difference.

### **Development impact:**

in looking at the consequences of this change, there needs to be a particular focus on what librarians bring to libraries. Typically, this includes the ability to make spaces truly welcoming for all, as well as to provide services and support that go to the heart of what users really need. Librarians at their best can be community builders, guarantors of rights, and have key insights into the requirements of individuals and groups, as well as offering ever more vital insights into how to navigate the information environment.

In turn, deprofessionalisation therefore risks meaning less responsiveness to need, which is likely to harm efforts to address poverty (SDG1) and inequality (SDGs 5 and 10). It removes a key infrastructure for building communities and protecting heritage (SDG 11) as well as supporting research (SDG 9), and indeed for more broadly ensuring the effectiveness of policy interventions across the board (SDG 16).

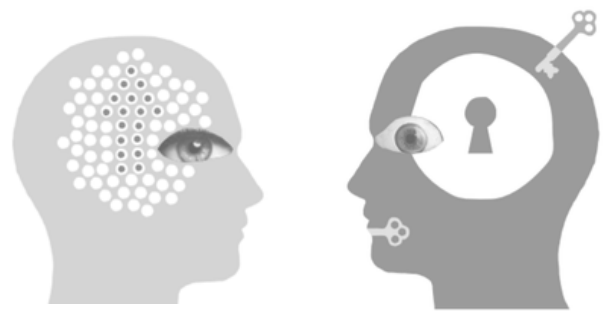
**Response:**

part of the picture here – as already mentioned a few times – is around ensuring that librarians are proactive and explain clearly, convincingly and persistently why they matter. We must combat fatalistic attitudes within our profession. Librarians should emphasise the importance of continuous learning and professional development, and receive the resource for this. This would ensure that we remain at the forefront of innovation, equipping us with the skills needed to address evolving challenges and effectively serve our communities.

But beyond this, there is a need for wider advocacy to build consensus around the need to defend professional librarianship. Through collective action and advocacy, we can elevate the status of library and information workers worldwide, fostering a culture of professionalism and agency within our profession. Additionally, we gain by resisting efforts to remove obligations to hire librarians for librarian roles, but also offer possibilities for non-librarian colleagues to build skills and help them fulfil their potential, rather than seeking to exclude them.

Library and information workers need also to be better equipped to work through periods of difficulty and transition. We would also benefit from creating robust diversity, equity, and inclusion policies that seek to empower colleagues and the communities that they serve,

In this, it will be important to build allies. Working with potential partners, such as teachers and researchers can potentially help here. So too can texts such as the UNESCO-IFLA Public Library Manifesto, which set out effectively, at the level of governments, why the work of librarians matters.



***Through collective action and advocacy, we can elevate the status of library and information workers worldwide, fostering a culture of professionalism and agency within our profession.***

## 10. Globalisation continues, opening up new expectations for information access

Globalisation has appeared in different trend reports, both inside and outside of the library field, for decades, and so it is perhaps not a surprise to see it here. The specific angle we are interested in is around possibilities for cross-border information access and sharing. For example, for more and more people, it is becoming usual to look beyond national borders when it comes to learning, networking, building careers, or developing research projects.

Much of this is down to technology. Improved bandwidth and cheaper devices make following courses or working closely with colleagues in other countries easier. Automatic translation is, at least in the case of some language pairings, removing barriers that used to exist. And work behind the scenes to develop linked data and the semantic web means that we can bring together very diverse sources in new ways.

These advances towards a truly global information and knowledge landscape are matched by user expectations. The generation that grew up with the internet are already in their mid-30s, at least in some countries, and have known little other than a world where information is available without necessarily knowing or even caring about where in the world it comes from, as long as it meets a need.

Yet libraries need to keep up with this. Having for so long been the gateway to the wider world, it is important to avoid becoming seen as a dead-end, maintaining increasingly small patches (in relative terms) of the wider information space. In particular when different library types do not work together, we also miss opportunities to get specialised knowledge into the hands of the people that want or need it.



***Having for so long been the gateway to the wider world, it is important to avoid becoming seen as a dead-end, maintaining increasingly small patches (in relative terms) of the wider information space.***

### **Development impact:**

the internationalisation of information, as already hinted at above, has a potentially powerful role to play in supporting the achievement of goals from education (SDG4) and



research (SDG9) to enabling better planning for risk and resilience (SDG11), not least in the context of health disasters (SDG3).

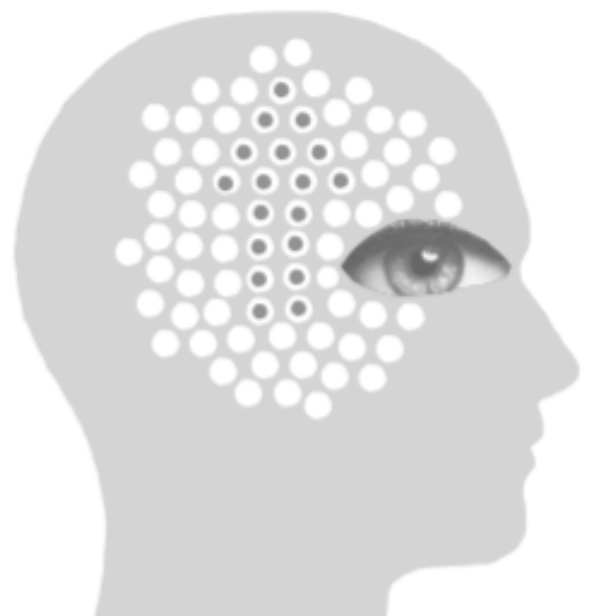
Clearly, this internationalisation is taking place with or without libraries. However, when libraries are not taking part in it, this risks being much less of a force for positive change. Beyond what libraries do in connecting people to this space (a point covered in the next trend), there is the fact that our collections, collectively, represent a wealth of information that does have value, for any of civil, research or cultural reasons. For vulnerable communities in particular, libraries can be key repositories of memory, and while of course any sharing of information needs to be done sensitively, there are important opportunities for ensuring a more diverse internet that reflects the wider world (SDG 10).

**Response:**

part of the answer here is legislative – there should be a positive agenda at the national and international levels to ensure that libraries have both the rights and confidence to act internationally, making collections available as far as possible, as well as helping their communities to access and use the information they need, wherever it is.

Beyond this, there is the value of working in a more networked way, being ready to build ‘collective collections’, and striving to build stronger and more effective connections. We can leverage the diversity and depth of the library field

to maximise reach and facilitate knowledge transfer, research promotion, and broader community engagement. Crucially, when we encounter challenges, we should look constructively at how we can address them, and through this, use the diversity and depth of skills and knowledge in our field to maximise reach.



## 11. Even as connectivity improves, the digital divide is persistent and getting more serious

A key point highlighted in IFLA's Development and Access to Information reports is that while there are positive trends when it comes to the high-level figures for internet connectivity, this does not automatically translate into digital inclusion. In particular, despite this progress, gender digital divides have remained, and in some cases broadened. Moreover, work to get more people online has not been matched by the skills or rights that would allow them to make meaningful use of the internet. The cost of devices represents a further potential factor of division.

A lack of meaningful internet access, devices, skills or content in turn can lead to a growing development divide, given that more and more aspects of life are moving online. For example, with global efforts to promote digital public infrastructures, the roll-out of eGovernment in all parts of the world moves closer. This offers great ways to serve more people, more effectively, than before, but of course also necessitates on-ramps. Otherwise, even the most urgently needed digital tools risk being out of reach.

The divide also exists between libraries, with too many remaining unconnected either because few if any in an area are, or because giving access to the internet through them is not seen as a priority, despite all the positive experience.

Finally, over and above the cost and practical barriers to access to and use of the internet, there is also distrust and fear (mirroring the trends driving accelerated efforts to regulate the net). If people see going online as dangerous and difficult, they are less likely to do so, either remaining offline or stuck within specific environments, such as those created (and promoted) by major platforms and app developers.

### **Development impact:**

there is no lack of work around development and ICTs, and indeed the importance of ensuring that connectivity supports positive change, from the global to the individual level, has been at the heart of work around internet governance for at least 20 years. The message from this is clear – that a lack of connectivity (SDGs 9 and 17) can represent a serious barrier to wider chances of fulfilling human rights and achieving sustainable development (all SDGs).

Focusing on libraries, the risks coming from both failing to mobilise libraries as part of wider digital inclusion strategies are much the same as in the cases mentioned above – the neglect of a key, tried and tested player in achieving policy effectiveness, and in particular, turning information into real world change. Given libraries' particular role in supporting people and communities facing wider challenges,

the non-incorporation of libraries into planning risks making efforts to promote inclusion harder.

**Response:**

the most obvious steps here lie with government, and in particular the need finally to fulfil commitments to connect all libraries and other community anchor institutions. This would represent a strong first step, with the next being to recognise the place of libraries as multi-functional actors in digital inclusion strategies. Libraries must also be actively involved in digital planning to bridge the gap and maximise their impact on development.

As for libraries ourselves,

***“we need a constructive, if critical approach to the internet, and perhaps a stronger sense of agency and even responsibility in helping users make the most of it.”***

This can come both through ensuring that we fully embrace digital technologies ourselves (without denying the ongoing importance of the physical), and learning amongst ourselves on what helps users make the leap into using the internet safely and confidently. We can use frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals to ensure that our work with technology is focused on delivering real-world benefits.

In particular, for example, libraries can develop workshops or public information, such as flyers or posters, that seek to address misinformation about the Internet while providing instruction on the ethical usage of online platforms.

They can also address the digital device divide by seeking funding for hotspots or other tools.



## 12. We are too busy dealing with crises to think strategically

Of all of the trends set out in this report, this final one is perhaps the most internal to the library field, even if it may find its roots in external factors. Indeed, it also brings together in some ways elements of other issues highlighted in this report. In short, with tighter funding environments, challenges in securing understanding and partnerships, and a more unstable world, it can indeed seem we are simply moving from one crisis to the next.

This can logically encourage the reflex of focusing just on core services, and how to preserve these, rather than setting aside the time to look to the future. Indeed, when we are worried and anxious, we are normally not well-placed to take the long view and plan for the future. Such exercises normally require the time and space to imagine, something that will feel scarce for many. There is also a strong focus on annual budgeting and planning, which discourages projects that will only pay off in the long-term, or indeed fuller assessments of community needs.

Strategic thinking itself, of course, is a skill, and one that needs to be nurtured throughout careers, and throughout life. Yet education within the field, in many counties, also remains focused on initial qualifications, and risks not doing enough to prepare for uncertainty, or to plan for the longer term.

### **Development impact:**

the UN's 2030 Agenda demands new ways of approaching policy implementation challenges (such as those taken on by libraries), but in turn, these require us to pivot in our thinking, plan for the future, and potentially take risks. Without this, major policy challenges where libraries could make a big contribution are neglected (all SDGs).

In particular, the logic of sustainability itself obliges a more strategic approach, making more time to think about, and to integrate, the future into the decisions we are making today. This is a long way from frantic reactions to threats. Yet if we do not act, we are less able to deal with threats in the future, and so more likely to see libraries' role in improving lives and communities restricted.

### **Response:**

the answer here lies more within the field, although it is certainly true that where governments and others have an influence, then they can also contribute (for example through obliging and paying for more regular training, or promoting multi-year budgeting).

Promoting life-long learning initiatives and expand educational offerings beyond formal settings (both for ourselves and our communities) enhances resilience and responsiveness. Collective efforts can cultivate a culture of strategic thinking



and ensure libraries remain resilient agents of positive change.

We also plan for the future by investing in talent development strategies that are designed to cultivate future leaders, and giving them chances to develop skills that complement those they gather in formal education. Associations can have a particular role here by offerings spaces to step outside of frantic everyday life, and developing tools that help librarians structure their thinking, and feel more empowered and confidence in responding to change.

Strategies in this space should be accompanied by comprehensive monitoring systems, which help libraries keep track of what is and is not working.





## TREND REPORT

**IFLA Headquarters**  
**Prins Willem-Alexanderhof 5,**  
**2595 BE The Hague**  
**The Netherlands**  
**+ 31-70-3140884**  
**[ifla@ifla.org](mailto:ifla@ifla.org)**  
**[www.ifla.org](http://www.ifla.org)**