

## **“Ask Your museum! Ask Your library!”**

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On 22-24 September 2021, museum professionals and librarians from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia had a great opportunity not only to improve their skills by listening to lectures, but also to have meaningful conversations in a virtual space. The National Library of Latvia, the Latvian Museum and Librarian Associations in cooperation with the Estonian and Lithuanian Museum Associations and the Latvian National Commission for UNESCO, organised the virtual conference *Localising the Sustainable Development Goals through Baltic museums and libraries*. In order to strengthen the role of cultural institutions in promoting sustainable development, librarians, museum professionals and archivists came together for a three-day interactive event. With the motto "Ask your librarian! Ask your museum!" the organisers wanted to highlight the potential and the need for memory institution staff to become sustainability experts and thought leaders.

On 22 September, the opening night of the conference, open roundtable discussions moderated by the Council of the Baltic Sea States took place, highlighting the main themes of the conference. Given that the 74th United Nations General Assembly has declared 2021 as the International Year of the Creative Economy for Sustainable Development, the participants analysed the vulnerability of the cultural sector and its scale in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Interestingly, and also quite unusually, the whole discussion took place on the *Estraad 3D* virtual platform. Each participant created his/her avatar and was able to move freely between the different ships belonging to the participating institutions, to talk to other participants, listen, network and make acquaintances for further projects. This created a realistic feel for the event, and the participants easily engaged in the discussion, highlighting in consensus the obvious mediating role of the cultural sector in contemporary society. The discussion revealed the potential of the cultural field to become a crucial medium for the sustainable development of individuals and communities, and even a catalyst of sorts. Participants noted that, through their everyday innovative creative activities, cultural sector institutions are already contributing to sustainable development, but also to a sustainable economy.

The first day of the conference, 23 September, attracted almost 150 participants and listeners. In the session entitled *Localising the SDGs*, the audience had the opportunity to hear six presentations on a virtual platform, where speakers aimed to provide a comprehensive description of the context of sustainable development in the Baltic States, both geographically and from the perspective of different cultural sectors. Highlighting the contribution of museums to the implementation of the United Nations' 17-point *Agenda 2030*, Henry McGhie stressed that even small steps in the immediate environment make a big difference. It is true that change must be achieved not by focusing on one aspect of an activity, but by embracing the whole of it. Stephen Wyber, meanwhile, reminded us that a very wide range of activities intended to bring about change can lead to lower quality of results. The most rational way to avoid this, he argued, is to seek inter-institutional cooperation. It is precisely partnerships that can make the activities of individual institutions more effective and have a significant impact on both local and global issues. By analysing the situation in Europe at large, as well as in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania individually, Uģis Zanders, Asta Mikalauskiene, Ilona Kiaušienė, Elina Vilkmāne and Elizabeth Rosenberg presented the challenges and success stories in the field of sustainable development. The speakers consistently and comprehensively discussed how libraries, museums and archives have fared in the context of the SDGs in Europe and the Baltic States, with a consensus that these institutions are crucial for communicating the SDGs to the general public.

The second part of the first day of the conference was dedicated to individual case studies. Six Baltic institutions, two from each country, presented their experiences and results in different communities in adopting the SDGs and the role of cultural institutions as experts. In their presentations, Auksė Petrulienė, Anneli Banner and Ilze Sirmā used real-life examples from their own museums to demonstrate the options for engaging different social groups and the possibilities of exchanging and disseminating information. In this way, the classical function of the museum as a preserver of memory and a communicator of content is extended, transforming the contemporary institution into a multifaceted and multidirectional place of communication about heritage, knowledge and experience. Meanwhile, library representatives presented their institutions as capable of integrating even the most demanding and vulnerable parts of society. Ieva Jēkabsone talked about how Latvian libraries make a significant contribution to the publication of books for the blind and to the improvement of information accessibility. Jolita Steponaitienė revealed the specificity and scope of the work of Lithuanian libraries, where inter-institutional cooperation enhances public awareness, expands the frontiers of knowledge, and promotes social inclusion and a sense of community by aggregating, creating and disseminating reliable information. Meanwhile, Margus Veimann shared the unique experience of the National Library of Estonia in developing

an intercultural programme for the education, motivation and integration of children from developing countries.

After discussing the methods used by cultural institutions and how to measure the results of projects, at the end of the first day of the conference, museum and library professionals took part in a series of hands-on workshops in the 3D virtual space. Divided into six thematic groups, professionals shared their experiences of working on the SDGs at the local level and exchanged ideas and insights.

The second day of the conference, on 24 September, started with the session *Planning, assessing and communicating work with the SDGs*. The six papers presented covered a wide range of issues. Barbara Lison, President of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), introduced the Federation, its goals and the 2019-2024 strategy based on four strands of activities, while highlighting the role of libraries as ambassadors for the SDGs. Giuseppe Vitiello, for his part, presented the situation of libraries in post-Covid-19 Europe and the opportunities for museums and libraries to benefit from the European Union's structural and investment funds. The presentation highlighted that the use of the funds opens up a wide range of opportunities to integrate the SDGs into the planning and implementation systems of cultural institutions. Mr McGhie's presentation sought to underline the need to properly develop plans for the integration of SDGs in museums and to systematically and purposefully achieve the goals. Drawing on the experience of libraries, Kristīne Pabērza-Ramiresa presented IFLA's methodology for communicating SDG stories based on a map of the world's libraries, and explained how institutions can help communities and individuals to communicate the stories they care about. Lenna Marsio and Antti Huntus also shared important insights and advice on how to go beyond words and work towards the SDGs. Emphasising the holistic importance of sustainability, the speakers illustrated the methodology of using the wheel chart, which has four key columns covering eight categories. The authors also presented their practical experience of working with different groups of people from more than 10 countries.

The last speaker, Caitlin Southwick, presented unique advice books for museum professionals - *The Ki Books*. In her speech, the author emphasised that, to achieve certain SDGs, we need to remember that the actions we take should not contradict other SDGs - building with one hand, we cannot tear down with the other. But how do we link theoretical knowledge to practical implementation? For many, this knowledge was and is lacking, and this is what prompted the creators of *The Ki Books* to put their years of experience together in advice books, creating a great tool for improving sustainability and working culture in museums. It is encouraging that

these books, *Waste & Materials*, *Social Sustainability* and *Energy*, have been translated into twelve languages, adapted to the respective regions, and are also freely available on the project website.

At the end of the session, participants once again ascended into the 3D virtual space and continued their hands-on training in seven thematic groups related to the topics of the day's presentations. Participants engaged in lively professional discussions and debated a wide range of issues. These discussions showed that all the topics covered in the session – investment, communication, responsibilities, dissemination of ideas, etc. – are timely and of particular relevance to professionals in cultural institutions.

The second session of the second day was a roundtable discussion with Uldis Zariņš, Agnese Vilde, Ieva Petkutė, Māra Jēkabsone and Mirjam Rääbis. Representatives of libraries and museums in the Baltic States discussed how the sectors could work together more effectively to achieve the SDGs. While museums and libraries are not the largest and most significant actors in the global sustainable development movement, they are also institutions that can have a non-immediate or long-term impact. Representatives from the public sector and government institutions discussed how knowledge and financial resources could be used to change the mindset and consumption of individual communities and society as a whole. The discussion highlighted that it is also important for institutions to understand the needs of communities in order to involve them in activities and promote the concept of sustainable development. Only by taking into account these needs and the more global interdisciplinary issues involved could cultural institutions fully pursue sustainable leadership. To sum up, participants agreed that national coordination and strong political support for museums, libraries and archives remains a major obstacle.

Reviewing the results of the interactive conference/training *Localising the Sustainable Development Goals through Baltic museums and libraries*, it is encouraging to note that during the three days more than 150 participants learned about the relevance and specificities of the SDGs in the field of culture and strengthened their skills. It is encouraging that the participants realise and emphasise that cultural institutions can and must take a leading role in communicating sustainable cultural, economic or policy solutions in their communities.

In order to strengthen the role of cultural institutions as key actors and experts in sustainable development, museums, librarians and archivists agreed to continue bringing culture into the SDGs spotlight by four action directions:

1. *Participants recognize that certain activities enhance the cultural dimension within the SDGs framework, however these actions are rather fragmented and efforts*

*should be taken to streamline them. Museum, library and archive professionals should enhance their skills and confidence in using the SDG framework through the provision of training, the establishment of networks, and the sharing of best practice. Such activities will increase local expertise, develop a common language, and ensure further development of initiative and projects to address Agenda 2030 in line with UNESCO priorities in the fields of education and culture, recognizing also the importance of issues related with media and information literacy.*

- 2. Conference participants unanimously supported the call for further incentives from decision makers at all levels to integrate sustainability principles in strategic and policy planning initiatives. In addition, the need for further guidance and planning, monitoring, evaluation and communication tools (such as handbooks, guidelines, frameworks and methodologies) was strongly expressed during discussions.*
- 3. Conference participants acknowledge the need for interinstitutional, cross-sectoral and subregional, regional and international cooperation in order to fully support the implementation of Agenda 2030 at all levels.*
- 4. Participants expressed their appreciation of the work done by Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian museum and librarians` associations in organizing the timely and relevant discussions at the conference and suggested that follow-up activities should be developed further and increased in scale by inviting other actors from the Baltic Sea region and beyond to join the efforts to accelerate and enhance the cultural sector`s contribution to sustainable development.*

You are also invited to take a look at the conference presentations:

Day one: <https://youtu.be/5udMSeQ54NU>

Day two: <https://youtu.be/X5o1my74MKc>