

The Sustainability vaccine. Available to all librarians

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In order to strengthen the role of museums and libraries in the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), an international conference – *Localising the Sustainable Development Goals through Baltic museums and libraries* – was held at the end of September, broadcast live from the National Library of Latvia and accessible online from any other location convenient to listeners. The conference motto was the rousing call-to-action: *Ask your library! Ask your museum!* The conference was organised by the Latvian Museum Association, the National Library of Latvia and the Latvian Librarians' Association, in partnership with the Estonian and Lithuanian Museum and Librarians' Associations and the Latvian National Commission for UNESCO.

The event was undeniably powerful, inspiring and professional, expressing and addressing global, local and practical solutions for the day-to-day running of libraries and museums. I call on anyone in the sector who was not present to watch the [recordings](#), which are freely available on the web, and to find inspiration for their work!

This publication is not intended to be an evaluation or presentation of the conference, but it will inevitably reflect the key findings of the conference lectures, presentations, seminars and discussions. I will not address the role of and issues concerning museums in this article, sector professionals will do that in other texts, but of course the aims and tasks of museums and libraries as memory institutions frequently overlap, and the issue of partnerships and cooperation between these two institutions in the pursuit of common goals is important and ever relevant.

Libraries as a sustainability phenomenon

The UN General Assembly adopted its resolution on sustainable development or Agenda 2030 in 2015. It sets out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which cover three dimensions: the economy, social aspects and the environment. The Latvian Librarians' Association, as a member of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), has been putting forward the role of libraries in achieving the SDGs since that same year, 2015; since 2017, in partnership with the Library Development Centre of

the National Library of Latvia, seminars, lectures, exchanges of experience between different libraries in Latvia and elsewhere have been organised, emphasising the importance of knowledge and understanding in implementing the goals.

At the opening of the conference, the three Baltic Ministers of Culture addressed participants with similar messages: museums and libraries cannot be left out of SDG implementation, as they are trusted by the public, and every act at the local level helps in the step-by-step resolution of global problems. However, the most relevant assertion was expressed by Lithuania's Minister Simonas Kairys: three cornerstones – values, creativity and critical thinking – are particularly important in SDG implementation, and libraries and museums play an important role in reinforcing them. For his part, Andris Vilks, Director of the National Library of Latvia (NLL), emphasised that we, cultural institutions, are still in the early stages of SDG implementation: there is still work to be done to deepen the understanding of the institutions and local authorities involved as to why the SDGs are important to each and every one of us.

Latvian libraries, like every library in the world, are sustainable by their nature and in terms of their mission. The library as a place for everyone, regardless of their social status, gender, beliefs. The library as a provider of reliable information, as a custodian of cultural heritage, the library as a repository, the library as a meeting place, the library as a place for lifelong learning, the library as a venue for change.

But what exactly does that mean? Libraries are important. That is a fact. Libraries do an enormous amount. And yet. Is it enough to be a value in yourself and continue to work admirably as you always have? But what if sustainability lies hiding in the ability to see new paths, new trials and new opportunities, in how else to help society, in becoming even more involved in the community? What if sustainability is not so much what we are already doing, but what can we achieve with what we have not yet begun? What if sustainability is the courage to bring to the fore issues that the public and the library are reluctant to think about, which they pretend not to notice, or are not yet ready to address?

Localise or “wander about aimlessly, grabbing what comes to hand”?¹

Libraries' scope of work of is extremely broad, but a librarian must not be a universal soldier, but a defender of community interests, aware of the power of

¹ “*aiziet tur – nezin kur, atnest to – nezin ko*” is the title of a classic Latvian folktale and a commonly used expression to convey an impulsive approach

partnership. During the conference, Uģis Zanders, a project expert at the Council of the Baltic Sea States, in discussing how to plan work in the context of the SDGs and what localisation really means, proposed: the SDGs and Agenda 2030 are not something directly applicable to every situation, but regional specifics must be taken into account. Stephen Wyber, representing IFLA, added to the understanding of SDG localisation through the following insights:

- when someone enters the library door, regardless of their needs, it will always be SDGs that help meet that user's needs;
- SDGs can help give meaning to every job we do on a daily basis, helping to plan library work strategically and sustainably.

Henry McGhie, museum specialist and author of [*Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals: a how-to guide for museums, galleries, the cultural sector and their partners*](#), put forward the following important tenets:

- localisation means the application of universal principles to an individual with the aim of improving their life;
- localisation means knowing what the goals of the SDGs actually are, learning from global examples and adapting them to specific situations;
- localisation means not just the easy and the usual, but, in particular, the most challenging;
- localisation means being aware of exactly what we can change, given our resources and capabilities;
- localisation means answering two fundamental questions: “Why?” and “How exactly?”;
- in the localisation process, any of our actions must have a specific “end date” – so that we are not just working toward some abstract goal – and have a real and measurable (quantifiable) outcome;
- localisation means teamwork and encouraging the local community to get involved in achieving the SDGs;
- libraries and museums do more than they realise, which is why we need a clear and in-depth understanding of how the SDGs relate to our day-to-day work. Such an understanding will help to set clear goals and formulate comprehensible criteria against which we will be able to measure what has been achieved.

Without understanding what SDG localisation really means, as Kristīne Deksnē, an expert in the library sector of the NLL's Library Development Centre, aptly put at the end of the conference, our work would be no more than elusive

meandering, just like in the Latvian folk tale “wander about aimlessly, grabbing what comes to hand”.

Information, handbooks, tools, support, examples of good practice? They exist! They are available!

When it comes to such important issues as sustainability and change, even in the context of libraries, it is often argued that informative and other support is needed: one must first know, understand and perceive the experience of others. We all want to be supported, and, in terms of the SDGs, right now there is no reason to complain about a lack of support. Extensive information, handbooks, examples of good practice are all available. Here are just a few of them:

- IFLA’s [Libraries and the Sustainable Development Goals – a storytelling manual](#), which, thanks to the Latvian Librarians’ Association, has also been translated into Latvian.
- [Library Map of the World](#). At the conference, IFLA President Barbara Lison emphasised that IFLA speaks with a global voice that belongs to every library, it belongs to libraries and their users, and that everyone has the opportunity not only to learn about it, but also to GET INVOLVED with their own story. Kristīne Pabērza-Ramires, IFLA’s Member Engagement Officer, keeps reminding us and reminded us again during the conference that the *Library Map of the World* is an opportunity to demonstrate the contribution of libraries through specific examples, to make a community’s story heard.
 - The European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations (EBLIDA), which has developed a [handbook](#) on how to use European Structural Funds to achieve SDGs in various library projects, is an important support base in the European context. Cultural institutions, both large and small, can benefit from EU structural funds, as they are specifically targeted to the local needs of regions. [The EBLIDA Matrix](#) is also available to everyone and will aid the implementation of any library project within the SDG framework.
 - [The Wheelchart of sustainability](#) – a tool developed in Finland to link intangible cultural heritage to sustainability.
 - [KiBooks](#) – an abundance of material to help step-by-step promotion of environmental and societal sustainability through specific daily activities in museums, libraries and other cultural institutions.

A whole host of methodological materials, handbooks, ideas and encouragement is available. We can learn from each other, and we have access to a diverse range of support at many different levels.

Sustainability not as a choice but a responsibility

If support is available to pursue the implementation of the SDGs through real work, why should we still talk about it at conferences, seminars, in articles and examples? Why isn't every Latvian library representing its daily work through the SDG framework? How do we come to a common, unified understanding that the SDGs are a way of thinking and a responsibility that applies to each of us and at the same time presents each of us with opportunities?

The years of the pandemic have highlighted an extremely important problem in our society: we are ready to fight for our individual freedom and individual choices, but we are not always ready to stand up for our individual responsibility to choose to be responsible to our fellow human beings. In the context of the SDGs, the story, like the pandemic, is about the 'scope of vaccination' and it does not start with government directives, wonderful declarations and clear guidelines. It begins with my responsibility and that of every member of society to sometimes accept a jab in the shoulder for the common good. Being aware that not only my own, but our common existence depends on it.

During the conference, the now canonical statement of Eleanor Roosevelt as far back as 1958 was repeatedly invoked: "Where do universal human rights begin? ... in small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person ..."

There are 1 505 libraries in Latvia, of which 762 are public libraries. Libraries that may not be marked on any world map (and why wouldn't they mark themselves on the *Library Map of the World?*), but they are closer to their community than is any other institution. The task of libraries is not only to inform, but to show by our example that every step we take in our daily lives affects the world in which we live.

There has been much discussion about the neutrality of libraries, and that is extremely important, but I will allow myself to say that when it comes to global issues, the SDGs and how individual responsibilities and actions affect our shared lives, libraries must not be neutral. Libraries have a duty to use the power delegated to them and never and under any circumstances suffer from

indifference. The sustainability vaccine can help prevent you from getting sick. It is available. It is free. But only we ourselves can roll up our sleeves.

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