

Estonian libraries and sustainable development goals: what could they have in common?

Mihkel Volt, *managing editor, National Library of Estonia*

Good afternoon! I am Mihkel, the editor of the magazine ‘Raamatukogu’ (Library) jointly published by the National Library of Estonia and the Estonian Librarians Association. On 23–24 September, the National Library of Latvia, the Library Association of Latvia, and ICOM Latvia organised the web conference ‘**Localising the sustainable development goals through Baltic museums and libraries**’ in collaboration with Latvian and Estonian museums and library associations. The event aimed to introduce the topic of sustainable development to Baltic memory institutions and encourage them to embrace it. I would like to thank the organisers of the conference and the Estonian Librarians Association for the opportunity to take part in the event and write about it in the blog.

The first question I want to ask myself is how library services in Estonia is and could be connected to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Could it be a case of ‘gigantism’ on our part to presume that something as large and global as the UN and something as small and local as Estonian libraries could be connected? In order to answer this question, I tried to understand (before, during and after the conference) what these sustainable development goals are, what is behind them, and what misconceptions about them I had in the past. As my knowledge had been rather limited, this speech here is like a quest for discovery, obtaining knowledge. I started from scratch.

Where, when and by whom were the relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set up? The UN General Assembly set them on 25 September 2015. This was also when the so-called Agenda 2030 was approved. The declaration ‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’, adopted by the heads of state and government of the world contains 17 global sustainable development goals. In fact, we should be talking about 18 goals though: another one for each country to decide upon was added to the original seventeen.

What is behind the Sustainable Development Goals? It must be noted that the main goal of the global agenda for sustainable development is noble but also seems somehow beautifully utopian: eradicating poverty everywhere and providing dignity and high living standards for all while taking the capacities of the natural environment into consideration. The goals within the agenda focus on improving the situation in three spheres: economic, social, and environmental. The goals apply to all the states and require the contribution of the governmental and non-governmental sectors alike. now I know that my major misconception was to think the SDGs only mean the green transition, but it is not even remotely so.

What do these 17 goals pursue then? Let us review them. **The first goal** is to end poverty in all its forms everywhere; the **second** is to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture; the **third** is to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages; the **fourth** is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all; the **fifth** is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls; the **sixth** is to ensure availability and sustainable management

of water and sanitation for all; the **seventh** is to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all; the **eighth** is to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all; the **ninth** is to build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation; the **tenth** is to reduce inequality within and among countries; the **eleventh** is to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable ; the **twelfth** is to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns; the thirteenth is to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts; the **fourteenth** is to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development; the **fifteenth** is to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss; the **sixteenth** is to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels; and the **seventeenth** is to strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

What is Estonia's 18th goal? The UN states can choose their eighteenth goal themselves. Estonia decided to set maintaining the **viability of the Estonian cultural space** as its 18th goal. This stems from the national strategy 'Sustainable Estonia 21'. Subgoals have been set to achieve the viability of cultural space in Estonia, which are (1) the 'Stabilisation of the demographic situation in Estonia'; (2) 'Development of a double identity as an Estonian and a European'; (3) 'Fear of extinction has disappeared'; (4) 'Virtual Estonianhood'; and (5) 'Contributing globalisation'.

With its 18th SDG, Estonia aims to achieve the situation where its permanent population has stabilised at 1.0–1.5 million; integration mechanisms are in place ensuring the integration of new settlers into the Estonian cultural space; Estonianhood is valued, and Estonia is the preferred living and working place for the younger generation; the living environment of Estonia is favourable for importing competence from the outside world; with Estonia's integration into Europe, but also due to persisting tension between Europe and some other large communities, people in Estonia are identifying themselves widely as Europeans alongside their ethnic self-identification and valuation; Estonians are accepted as Europeans both in their nature and actions; the adaptability of culture including its reproduction mechanisms and renewal capacity has reached a level that allows continuous supplementation of the cultural treasury and its transfer to new generations of culture carriers; Estonian culture has reached a dynamic balance and sustainability in its relations with world culture, and existential fears have been overcome; an essential part of the Estonian culture has 'moved to the virtual environment': Located in electronic archives, museums and libraries, it is internationally accessible and translatable into other languages thus being accessible and understandable to everyone locally and to all interested people worldwide; the Estonian experience in synthesising the national and global culture and in applying socio-technological know-how is spreading and is usable also outside the Baltic countries; the Estonian case has been reflected and employed in several smaller cultural spaces, and this is Estonia's recognised contribution to the preservation of the diversity of the globalising world. I learned that the global SDGs would be implemented in Estonia within the sector-specific

development plans and programmes prepared on the basis of the long-term strategy 'Estonia 2035'.

The main areas where Estonia still needs to be making more effort are achieving gender equality; reducing the risk of poverty for women and people with disabilities; improving the population's health indicators; ensuring efficient waste management and recycling; reducing greenhouse gas emissions and preserving biodiversity. According to Estonia's National Review 2020, the country's strengths are accessible education of high quality, effective healthcare organisation, a high employment rate with minimal long-term unemployment, and a high proportion of renewable energy in overall energy consumption.

'Libraries to improve life!' was the title of the 8th think tank event of Estonian libraries held in Pärnu Central Library on 10 June under the auspices of the Estonian Librarians Association. This year, it focused on sustainable development, the 'Estonia 2035' strategy and libraries in the context. Discussions were held on how libraries can contribute to increasing people's well-being while supporting the achievement of the goals of 'Estonia 2035' through a variety of activities and events. This must have been the first time Estonian librarians organised an event to discuss the SDGs. The summer school for the managers of county and town libraries as well as the seminar for memory institutions held in August and September focused on the Sustainable Development Goals. One practical example is the Estonian libraries encouraging people to do **digital detox** in September and October, which is a campaign to motivate readers and colleagues: for an hour before bed, read a paper book; reading is easier on your eyes, save electricity and has a beneficial effect on your quality of sleep. The idea was generated during the thinktank event held in Pärnu in June.

The web conference **'Localising the sustainable development goals through Baltic museums and libraries'** mainly aimed to show local libraries and museums in the role of key agents of sustainable development, and Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian museum and library employees in the role of the primary target group. This conference with its slogan **'Ask your library! Ask your museum!'** offered a good opportunity to see a broader picture of the topic. I recommend you watch the recordings of the conference speeches and the participants' presentations to get a concise overview of the SDGs as well as advice and tips on how to implement and streamline SDGs in the functioning of your organisation. For example, **Ugis Zanders** gives a good overview of using the sustainable development goals in the Baltic region. **Henry McGhie** gives advice on how to adapt the SDGs and create a framework for planning and implementation. **Caitlin Southwick's** presentation and workshop address the use of the SDGs in small-scale organisations as well as provide real-life examples. **Barbara Lison** and **Stephen Wyber** from IFLA highlight the connection between libraries and the SDGs and the importance of the role of libraries as advocates of SDGs in society. **Giuseppe Vitiello** from EBLIDA demonstrates how libraries could apply for financing from EU structural and investment funds when pursuing sustainable development goals. The presentation of **Ieva Jēkabsons** from the Latvian Library for the Blind and **Jolita Steponaitienė's** overview of the life-long learning experience of Lithuanian state libraries are both eye-opening. **Kristīne Pabērza-Ramiresa** from IFLA describes how SDGs can be explained through storytelling. **Asta Mikalauskiene's** and **Ilona Kiausiene's**

presentation focuses on how the values created by culture affect the achievement of the SDGs, comparing Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian indicators. The presentations of the conference were streamed on the YouTube Channel of the Latvian National Library and on the Facebook pages of the participating associations.

I believe **the point of the conference organised by our Latvian counterparts** was in using educational examples in the speakers' presentations and workshops to demonstrate how the sustainable development goals can be implemented in small rural libraries and small museums. There is, in fact, nothing too complicated about it: every organisation needs to review its strategy once a year and adapt it to how its environment has changed or is changing. The sustainable development goals and their subgoals are a great tool for dealing with a changing situation: the development of the organisation's strategy needs to be viewed through the lens of the SDGs. The SDGs need to be used as a *filter* of sorts for asking questions and finding answers about what is set forth in the organisation's strategy or short-term plan of action. SDGs are rather a set of *supporting questions*, a *toolbox* for creating a strategy and a better long-term plan for the organisation. I could even say that the institution I am working for, the National Library of Estonia, has already been using the SDGs in preparing its strategies, albeit a bit... subconsciously so far. We have included one or two SDGs in establishing our library's goals without fully realising they are a part of the SDG set. So far, the so-called full set of the SDGs has not been used in the inclusive planning of the National Library's activities. If you ask me how it is possible for to have been using SDGs in planning our operation in a way, the answer is that the value space of a memory institution and the sustainable development goals have a lot in common, and our values and attitudes obviously overlap.