Libraries and Sustainable Development: challenges of inequality in a digital world

Tim Unwin

IFLA President’s Meeting
2019, Buenos Aires
1970s: Cambridge University Geography Department Library

“You must wear shoes. You are not allowed in unless you are wearing shoes”
British Library in 1980s: research and writing
Outline

• The Sustainable Development Goals
  – Focus on SDG10 and inequalities
  – The role of digital technologies

• Knowledge and Content

• Digital Libraries
  – But not the main focus

• The use of libraries to reduce inequalities
  – Communal interests

• The will to make a difference

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For those who think the SDGs are valuable...

Just some questions...

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Questions in 2019, four years into the SDGs

• How many countries have yet agreed on their national targets?
• How many targets can actually be measured reliably?
• How many people can remember all the 17 SDGs, the 169 targets and the 232 unique indicators?
• How many countries have accurate baseline data for 2015 from which “success” in 2030 can be measured?
• Who benefits most from the SDGs?
  – Could the money spent on the “industry” around the SDGs have been better spent in other ways?
  – Are they mainly a means to justify the existence of UN agencies?
• Do the SDGs really serve the interests of the poorest and most marginalized?
• Is SDG10 in tension with the other SDGs?
Problems with data for the SDGs

“The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) 2017 Statistical Yearbook points to the large number of data gaps in critical areas such as poverty, climate change, environment, gender, inequality, and governance. Overall only 50 of the 169 SDG targets are ready for progress assessment. Over half of the 230 indicators lack agreed measurement criteria (68) or sufficient data coverage (66) for regular monitoring or reporting or both”.

Adams and Judd (2018)
Global Policy Watch

SDG 10 on inequality

• A goal on inequality is an important change from MDGs
  – Which largely focused on growth

• 10 targets for SDG10
  – But only 3 really directly address inequality (10.1, 10.3, 10.4)

• In tension with other SDGs that focus mainly on growth
  – Economic growth has been associated with increased inequalities

• Receives rather little attention
  – Especially in context of ICTs

https://sdg-tracker.org/inequality
Top 10% income shares across the world


In 2016, 55% of national income was received by the Top 10% earners in India, against 31% in 1980.


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Digital technologies *can* be used to empower the poor and marginalised. But the reality is that they have been one of the main drivers of increasing inequalities.
ICTs have been used to increase inequalities

Chart 1.16: Active mobile-broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, by level of development, 2007–2018*

Note: * ITU estimate.
Source: ITU.

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Broadband affordability 2016

Cost of Fixed Broadband Subscription as Percentage of Average Income (2016)

- < 1
- 1 – 2.4
- 2.5 – 9
- 10 – 24
- 25 – 49
- 50 – 99
- ≥ 100
- No Data

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The visualization uses data from the ITU ICT Prices 2017 Report and from Natural Earth.

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Broadband speeds, 2014

https://www.vox.com/a/internet-maps

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Knowledge and content

Some reflections on private and public knowledges and content

http://www.ancientpages.com/2014/12/30/chinese-invention-worlds-first-known-movable-type-printing/
Knowledge and content

• Knowledge as power
  – Those who have access to knowledge tend to perpetuate inequalities in their favour

• Need to distinguish between formal and informal knowledges
  – The powerful tend to formalise knowledge for individual gain

• Content and information alone do not reinforce power
  – People must know how to use it to become empowered

Martin Behaim’s Erdapfel, 1491-3
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Martin_Behaim_.jpg
Private and public knowledges

- The power of the written word in literate societies
  - Private libraries
- Oral societies
  - The more accessible spoken word
  - Cannot easily be privatised
- Public library movements only from 19\(^{th}\) century
- Parallels in the digital world between private and public knowledges

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Proprietary and open content

• Different ways of conceiving the world
  – Difficult to find common ground

• Digital technologies offer the opportunity for vastly increased “free” (to end user) knowledge sharing
  – That can contribute to “development”
  – Open Educational Resource movements

• But only if everyone can access them
  – Otherwise they continue to increase inequality
  – 44% of the world’s population doesn’t have access to the Internet (April 2019)

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# Poverty, Libraries and Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept of poverty</th>
<th>Solutions for poverty reduction</th>
<th>Libraries</th>
<th>Society Type</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Software</th>
<th>Direction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absolute</td>
<td>Individual (economic growth)</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Mainly literate</td>
<td>Proprietary content</td>
<td>Closed/Proprietary</td>
<td>Mainly top-down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative</td>
<td>Communal (reducing inequality)</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Mainly oral</td>
<td>Open access (especially, OER)</td>
<td>Free and Open Source (FOSS)</td>
<td>Encourages bottom-up</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Libraries

Digital and as communal places
Digitising libraries...
All Children Reading

GLOBAL DIGITAL LIBRARY

Free digital and print-ready books in more than 15 languages

NOW AVAILABLE

https://allchildrenreading.org/digital-libraries/ April 2018

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Digital Libraries

• Much attention has been paid to these
  – So, not the main focus here
• They can provide content
  – But not necessarily “knowledge”
• They generally privilege literary traditions over oral ones
• Without universal accessibility they will increase inequalities
So how can libraries contribute to reducing inequalities in a digital age?

As communal public places that empower the marginalised
Micro-libraries

England

Açores

Switzerland
Sonoma County Library – lending WiFi hotspots to users

Because more than a quarter of U.S. households don’t have a computer with an internet connection.

Libraries as communal resource centres

• Telecentres widely criticised
  – Unsustainable business models
  – A transitional stage in shift to fully literate mobile Internet access

• Community Knowledge centres
  – Access to relevant content
  – Training in digital use
  – Affordable (free)
  – Empowering voices of the poor
  – Multiple uses

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Libraries as diverse open places in a digital world

• Digital social media
  – Algorithms reinforce own opinions
  – Reinforce minorities across the world
  – Often hidden (Dark Web)
  – Individualistic

• Physical libraries
  – Encourage sharing
  – Places of diversity and consensus
  – Open
  – Communal

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We just need the will to make a difference

It’s not about the money

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The will to make a difference

• A focus on reducing inequalities not just on achieving economic growth
  – In the interests of all

• Affordable universal access to high quality digital connectivity
  – So the poor can access relevant content

• Libraries serving the poorest and most marginalised
  – Working together to enable the poor to empower themselves

• We can get on and do these
  – Without necessarily worrying too much about the SDGs

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Reims: Bibliothèque Carnegie, 1928

(Images from May 2019)

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Andrew Carnegie

“A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people”

Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919)

As a boy, Carnegie's education and passion for reading was given a boost by Colonel James Anderson, who opened his personal library of 400 volumes to working boys each Saturday night.