

IGF 2017: DYNAMIC COALITION ON PUBLIC ACCESS IN LIBRARIES

The session of the Dynamic Coalition on Public Access in Libraries both discussed the promise of public access in libraries as a means of getting the next billions online, and the policy settings needed to realise this promise. With an audience made up of people from the library field, government and civil society, it brought the results both of practical experience and academic research to bear.

KEY POINTS

- *Internet access couldn't just be thought of as an economic or technical issue, but one linked to education, social cohesion, human rights and development.*
- *Public Access in Libraries is as important as ever in bringing the next billions online, both in terms of raw connectivity, and in terms of the support libraries can offer to people in getting the most out of the Internet.*
- *Libraries could – and should – tailor their efforts to help everyone benefit, but in turn needed continued investment and support.*
- *Governments, for example, could set up and use Universal Service Funds, make access to information an explicit part of development plans, protect copyright exceptions, and promote free speech.*
- *The Dynamic Coalition will work over the coming months on a policy toolkit for public access in libraries, building on these discussions.*

The IGF Dynamic Coalition on Public Access in Libraries organised a session at 12:30pm on Tuesday 19 December 2017. Esmeralda Moscatelli, Policy and Research Officer at the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) moderated.

A first presentation by Maria Garrido, Senior Researcher at the Technology and Social Change Group (TASCHA) at the University of Washington, focused on the evidence in favour of public access. She took the rights-based approach to development – i.e. that everyone has a right to development and so policy interventions should be built around empowering individuals. Public access provided a valuable way of doing this, with libraries playing a particular important role for marginalised groups.

She drew on the lessons of the Development and Access to Information report, produced by IFLA and TASCHA, which showed not only the gap in connectivity, between countries, between genders and between income groups, but also the different uses that people made of the Internet. Once again, the importance of a safe, staffed place to help people make best use of the Internet became apparent. Libraries – more so than telecentres or Internet cafés – could provide this.

Janet Sawaya reminded the audience that the Dynamic Coalition had been built on the idea that libraries are a vehicle for public access to knowledge and information. She reiterated that libraries had a unique role as free and open institutions, as well as trusted places. Moreover, even where phone connectivity was high, this wasn't enough – people needed fuller access to both hardware and skills. Here too, libraries offered an answer.

She focused on the potential of Universal Service Funds as a tool to support creativity. These had been tried and tested, at least in some countries, and worked well. We also needed to make the jump from a general recognition that access to information could help drive development – not least in Sustainable Development Goal 16 – to explicit reference to this, and practical inclusion of public access initiatives in development programmes.

Winston Roberts noted that ever since the first WSIS Principles, there had been awareness of how important public access, including in libraries, was. He underlined the need to ensure that when thinking about the Internet, educational, cultural and scientific goals – and not just technical or economic ones – should be taken into account. This is why UNESCO was given a role back in 2005 in promoting these areas of progress.

David Ramirez-Ordonez told the story of Colombia, where the recent peace accord offered an opportunity to end decades of war. Libraries are playing a significant role as a network, with presence both in communities, and in the capital alongside policy-makers. They bring a strong record of giving people access to information, but faced a significant challenge in regions where people had no connectivity, no technology, no skills and often no money.

The Libraries for Peace initiative worked to bridge these divides by bringing libraries into the most remote areas, and the staff who could help the people turn information into knowledge. This was a genuine public service, aiming to help those that the market would not.

The following debate looked in particular at the role that libraries played in delivering access to information to people with disabilities. Much depended on whether they were able to get hold of accessible format works in the first place, but for example in Cameroon, the Papillon Plan was doing just this in the case of people with albinism.

The issue of ensuring that information is available for people online also came up. The increasing use of filters online, as well as application of other copyright restrictions, risked making access to the Internet in itself less valuable for people. Similarly, free speech was essential, with a large share of people with access to the Internet still risking prosecution (or persecution) for speaking freely.

The moderator closed, encouraging all to take a look at the [Development and Access to Information report](#), which contained extensive data about the reality of access to information around the world.