

Sustainable Development Goals in libraries of the German-speaking countries

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Abstract

“How did the release of the Agenda 2030 with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) affect libraries in German-speaking regions?” was the leading research question in my bachelor thesis. To analyse the situation, I did a case study, based on a literature review.

Findings are that the SDG publication influenced particularly the library associations in Germany and Switzerland. Most actual libraries, though, are probably not familiar yet with the SDGs. Nevertheless, there exists in Austria an outstanding model in (library-)cooperation and SDG platform Bildung 2030. As there are hardly any articles about medical libraries contributing to the SDG discussion, there is unused potential for medical and health libraries to contribute. High potential lies within cooperation between public libraries and medical and health libraries, to spread health literacy to the public.

Key words: sustainable development; libraries; libraries, medical.

Introduction

In 2015 the United Nations released the Agenda 2030, containing 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). How did these affect libraries in German-speaking regions? This was the leading research question in my bachelor thesis.

Methodology

To analyse the situation, I did a case study, based on a literature review. To limit any bias as far as possible, I used Triangulation, i.e. I chose three different kinds of sources for the literature review. I relied on standard bibliographical databases (Proquest's Library and Information Science Abstracts; EBSCO's Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts), selected social media (Facebook, Twitter), and the relevant library associations (IFLA, Bibliosuisse, dbv). To guarantee a certain degree of transparency, all literature retrieved is documented in an open Zotero library (1).

Findings

Library associations influencing the SDG spread in libraries

The first literature analysis showed that IFLA impacted

greatly on how German-speaking libraries reacted to the release of the Sustainable Development Goals. This is due to the fact that IFLA published a toolkit alongside the SDGs themselves. The toolkit contains suggestions on how libraries should act concerning the implementation of SDGs in libraries. Librarians were mentioned only on the very last page of this document (2). According to the toolkit the main responsibility to spread the SDGs lies with the library associations and with the libraries with a national role (i.e. national libraries or other influential libraries).

German and Swiss library associations followed the IFLA recommendation. Today, the Deutsche Bibliotheksverband (dbv, German library association) refers to the SDGs as one of their most important topics. In their critique of Germany's national SDG action plan, dbv complained that libraries had been overlooked. Bibliosuisse, the Swiss library association, set up a working group named Biblio2030, which met with politicians to get involved to the national plan for implementing the SDGs. Unfortunately, neither in Germany nor in Switzerland did the library associations achieve that.

Nevertheless, both organisations collected material and examples through both individual and joint efforts.

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They published those on their websites. dbv launched the internet platform biblio2030.de (3), where they publish materials and information related to the SDGs, but which is primarily a collection of best practice examples of library activities connected to the SDGs. All libraries in the German-speaking countries are invited to contribute to this idea pool. In doing so they communicated clearly that the platform served primarily as a marketing tool. Until now there are very few contributions in relation to the number of existing libraries. In summer 2020 only 34 of 12,239 libraries in the German speaking countries submitted an SDG activity example to either the IFLA's library map of the world or biblio2030.

This leads to the assumption that the majority of libraries in the German speaking countries have not yet realised how important the SDGs are, or that they have not yet recognised the need for action, or simply do not know the SDGs. Both press and literature review confirmed that assumption, as there are few articles about SDGs from German speaking authors found and those few repeatedly from the same few authors.

One possible reason why libraries obviously still seem to be unfamiliar with the SDGs could lie in the fact that IFLA and the other library associations have kept most of the responsibility and the lead for the next steps at the association level. Actually, libraries might be holding back, expecting some kind of directives from their respective national organisations.

During the past few years, library associations have, indeed, called on libraries to set their daily work into the SDG context, acknowledging that libraries contributed already to achieving the SDGs through the delivery of their core library services. By encouraging libraries to use the SDG context to market their existing services library associations, on the one hand, triggered a number of examples that would help them lobby for the inclusion of libraries in national SDG strategies. The downside of this strategy has been that by allowing libraries to pass existing activities off as part of national SDG strategies, they discouraged libraries from developing new activities in the realms of sustainability.

Trailblazer Austria

Interestingly the situation in Austria is different from that in Germany and Switzerland. The ministry of

Education named libraries as partners in conveying the sustainability message, so the IFLA goal to get into the political focus seems to have been met by Austrian libraries.

Five organisations (BAOBAB, FORUM Umweltbildung, KommEnt, Südwind and Welthaus Graz) are leading the project Bildung 2030 (education 2030) and its collaborative web platform (4), which is funded by the federal government (Figure 1). The platform is aimed at anybody with an interest in SDGs but primarily at education professionals. One can find information about the SDGs, didactic materials, classroom materials, activity ideas and further training courses or resources for teachers. Libraries are present in different sections of the platform. Their services such as access to resources via a catalogue and reference services in libraries across the country are integrated as tools. This is an amazing and convincing method to show that libraries can have a supporting, maybe even a key role in education for sustainable development.

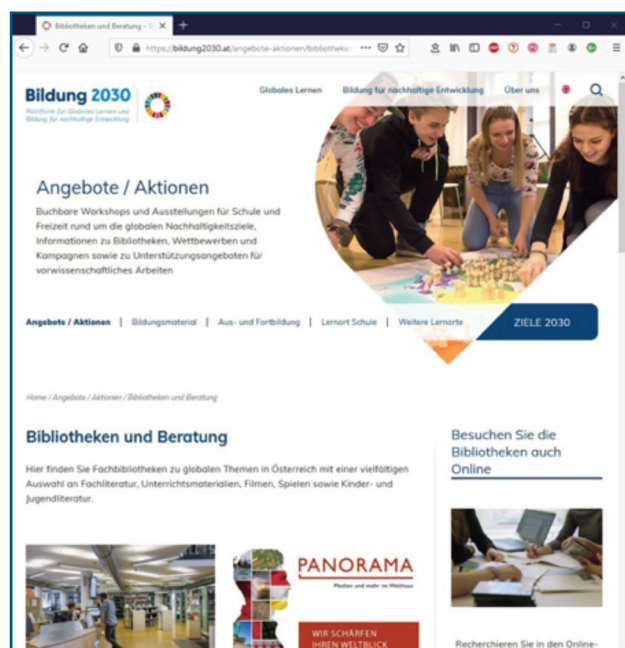


Fig. 1. Bildung2030 website.

Most impressive is the fact that this success of Austrian libraries is built on libraries' core values services, and not on any of the buzzwords often used to make libraries appear more "modern". There is not a word about digitisation, 3rd place, or any other trendy

service. They had also no need to show how they contribute to achieving the SDGs. All they did is that they were present in the right place at the right time, and they connected with other like-minded organisations. And for sure, they had to take the initiative to get there, they had to take action.

Nevertheless, one has to say that the general situation in Austria was hard to assess, because there were hardly any publications about the SDGs on the website of the Austrian library associations. Regarding libraries in Austria overall, one must conclude that the SDGs subject has not yet reached the majority of them. Apart from the special libraries (Südwind and C3) which contributed to Bildung 2030 there are, in essence, not more individual libraries active than in Switzerland or Germany. But on a national account they did a remarkably great job in conveying the SDGs to the public, especially to schools. The platform is worthy of praise for being an excellent example of cooperation in the sense of the SDGs themselves and especially SDG 17 partnership for the goals.

Conclusions

The SDG publication influenced particularly the library associations in Germany and Switzerland. On that level subjects such as networking, marketing and lobbying received a high significance.

Most libraries are, however, probably not familiar yet with the SDGs. Only a few participated in the platforms and only a fistful of them did grapple with the SDGs in a remarkable way. It may be the same for most Austrian libraries. But in Austria there exists an outstanding model in cooperation and platform Bildung 2030. The platform consolidated libraries' sustainability activities and the SDGs themselves for the educational community.

Even if I do not know how Austria arrived at this cooperation, it does confirm my own experiences in librarianship. If we dare to ask potential partners to work together with us, they usually agree immediately and take the lead, if asked, voluntarily. At the same time, I have often witnessed that libraries do underestimate their own popularity and are scared to take the first step towards a cooperation. Library associations are working hard to raise governments' faith in libraries, but maybe they ought to start to raise libraries' faith in themselves.

The hidden potential in medical and health libraries

When I subsequently focused the literature review on medical and health libraries, I hardly found any article about how medical libraries contribute to the SDG discussion. Considering the findings of the aforementioned study, this is not astonishing at all. There is ample potential for medical and health libraries to contribute.

Medical and health libraries have a huge trove of special knowledge. SDG 3 "Health and Wellbeing" belongs to the most important of the SDGs and is crosslinked with many other SDGs, such as access to sanitation (SDG 6) or ending hunger (SDG 2). On the IFLA library map of the world (5), there are 9 stories concerning SDG 3 (Figure 2). They are all about public libraries giving access to health information. As public libraries are closer to the public, it makes sense that they are the primary institutions to spread quality knowledge. But medical and health libraries could provide public libraries with quality information. This may be a very high aim. But a closer look at the current corona crisis shows, how much health and medical libraries can contribute, or already do. For example, the World Health Organization Library and Digital Information Networks (6) publishes several documents concerning the COVID-19 Pandemic, some of them especially designed for the general public. Librarians, also the ones working in special libraries, are usually aware of public libraries around. As, in my experience, researchers tend to forget their own faculty library, they probably are even less likely to consider public libraries



Fig.2. IFLA library map of the world with nine examples about SDG 3 "Health and Wellbeing" (04.11.2020).

potential partners. But just as IFLA tries to raise politicians' awareness of libraries and their potential, the librarians in medical and health libraries may be the link between special knowledge and the users of public libraries. Where material already exists, it is sufficient to inform public libraries about the material through well-established communication tools, e.g., a mailing list. Or, where such materials do not exist yet, they could pull the strings and bring together the right people and the right ideas. Through cooperation costs and effort are kept to a minimum, and there may be follow-up projects, initiated from various institutions: the beginning of a partnership between specialist and public libraries.

In a wider, long-term perspective, medical libraries could open up to the public. Biliamin Popoola showed that health information services from medical libraries improves patient information services (7).

In a service like this lies the potential to unite information and health literacy, the capacity to understand technical terms and to describe them in an easier and more accessible way. Especially in poor countries an additional, free hub of health information could contribute to achieving SDG 3.

Information and health literacy are becoming even more important in times of fake news and restricted access to information.

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