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Innovation and Interconnectivity for Social Development

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Thank you for inviting me to address the topic of Innovation and Interconnectivity for local development. My message today is simple. There is no truly sustainable development without access to information, and no meaningful, inclusive access to information without libraries.

IFLA is proud to have represented the world's libraries in the 2030 Agenda negotiations, and to have brought a viewpoint which UN Member States have recognised: that access to information supports development. 19 SDG targets talk about the need to access information.

To begin that advocacy campaign IFLA launched the *'Lyon Declaration on Access to Information and Development'* at the annual World Library and Information Congress (WLIC) in Lyon. Over 570 organisations and institutions from across the library, development and technology sectors signed it, and supported us in our work at the UN. The Lyon Declaration sets out the principles behind access to information and development. These bedrock principles state that access to information empowers people to:

Exercise their civil, political, economic and social rights

Learn and apply new skills

Make decisions and participate in an active and engaged civil society

Create community based solutions to development challenges

Ensure accountability, transparency, good governance and empowerment

Measure progress on public and private commitments on sustainable development

In the main body of the declaration we lay out how we see the entire relationship between access and development. First we recognize the multidimensional nature of poverty which is at the core of the efforts at the United Nations.   There is of course an aspect of poverty that we as librarians are very concerned about and that is information poverty which is not talked about enough. According to the World Economic Forum, "more than 4 billion people, mostly in developing countries, still don't have access to the internet. This means that over half of the world's population is missing out on the life-changing benefits of connectivity, from financial services to health and education." There is a gender gap in internet access as well as mobile phone ownership and digital skills. The internet access gap is growing worldwide and is highest in Africa.

If we ignore the need to bridge the information poverty gap we get caught in a negative downward spiral. Efforts to promote connectivity stall, and even where there is the option; there is little interest in an Internet dominated by content from a few corners of the world. The law cracks down on free speech; copyright limits fair uses of works. Education and training fails to ready students for the information society, and there are no options for them to have a second chance as adults. The digital divide – between rich and poor, men and women, urban and rural, high and low-skilled – becomes an information and knowledge divide.

This becomes a development divide, with large segments of our communities unable to benefit from the latest innovations, participate in cultural life, or ensure the wellbeing of themselves and their families. Decisions are guided at best by ignorance, at worst by misinformation and lies.

Development happens for some, but not for everyone. We fail to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

We need to act to avoid this. Inaction is not an option.

 Action will result in a positive outcome. Not only do growing numbers of people enjoy the possibility of Internet access, but there is enough locally relevant content for them to want to connect.

When they get online, they become confident users, able to get the best of the Internet, and disregard the worst. From being confined to their homes or villages, people can enjoy all the knowledge that the world can offer, and use their skills to make it applicable to their own situations. They can create their own information and knowledge, which they share with their families, communities and countries. There is a virtuous circle.

They use this to improve wellbeing, not only fulfilling traditional roles more effectively, but creating new activities.

Information travels across borders, enabling research collaborations that make new headway in tackling the grand challenges of our days, as well as the rare diseases previously seen as untreatable. This positive scenario is also a scenario that an effective library system can help deliver.

Libraries have unique attributes. As public institutions, they are dedicated to serving their communities, without commercial motivation. They are often the only public space in the community where all can come together. As such, they can be a space for civic engagement, for example in Colombia where library programs have helped bring communities back together.

Public Internet access in libraries is also key for those who cannot afford, or do not see the value in, their own connection. But even when there are other options, libraries still have value.

Compared to other environments, such as Internet cafés, they offer a safe space for women and for looking for often sensitive information, such as about health.

Some argue that as home internet use grows, that in libraries will decline. But the evidence suggests that they go hand in hand, with countries like Finland and Denmark showing high use of both home connections and library ones.

With a strong focus on responding to the needs of their users, they know how to make information useful and relevant at the local level. They work with partners to develop programs, and develop new services that can deliver everything from literacy classes to agricultural markets information to citizens.

Libraries are staffed also with dedicated professionals who regularly go from organizing coding clubs to simply offering the answers and encouragement necessary to help a user feel confident online. Libraries do everything from turning complicated datasets into easy to use guides, to establishing maker spaces. They help make access meaningful to people.

Libraries are an essential part of the information ecosystem and they bridge the digital divide. With their mandate to acquire, preserve and give access to information they are essential to innovation. To quote the 2017 Development and Access to Information Report, "access to information is not an end in itself but rather a driver of progress across the board. It empowers people and communities, laying the foundation for equity, sustainability and prosperity." As I stated at the beginning of this talk, there is no truly sustainable development without access to information, and no meaningful, inclusive access to information without libraries.