



Provider, Partner, Promotor

Evidence from the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning's LitBase on the Role of Libraries in Supporting Literacy around the World

IFLA Headquarters, 8 September 2021

This year's International Literacy Day focuses on the subject of 'literacy for a human-centred recovery: narrowing the digital divide'.

This emphasis on the importance of literacy both as an individual right, and as a driver of personal development is one that will be familiar to libraries. Libraries have long appreciated the importance of the ability to read – and pleasure in doing so – not just in driving wellbeing, but also in enabling the fulfilment of potential in other ways.

Yet with 773 million non-literate children and adults around the world¹, we are a long way from the universal literacy aimed for in the UN 2030 Agenda². Many of those in this situation are concentrated in poorer countries, giving rise to the Global Alliance for Literacy within the framework of lifelong learning (GAL)³.

However, people who are functionally illiterate can be found in every country. Furthermore, even among those who meet basic literacy standards may still struggle in some circumstances, while we know that reading skills, if left unused, can decline⁴, even as having high literacy skills may be becoming more necessary to take on the jobs of the future.

This is also not just a need for the long-term. As the OECD's Skills Outlook highlighted earlier this year, the need to be able to apply literacy skills as a precondition for making full use of the internet risks meaning that those without are even more excluded at a time of COVID, and in the recovery⁵.

¹ International Literacy Day webpage: <https://en.unesco.org/commemorations/literacyday>

² UN SDG4 webpage : <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>

³ UNESCO Institute for Lifelong learning, Global Alliance for Literacy in the context of lifelong learning webpage: <https://uil.unesco.org/literacy/global-alliance>

⁴ IFLA (2020), *Where there are more public and community libraries, the gender skills gap among adults is lower*, <https://blogs.ifla.org/lpa/2020/06/04/library-stat-of-the-week-21-where-there-are-more-public-and-community-librarians-the-gender-skills-gap-among-adults-is-lower/>

⁵ IFLA (2021), *Essential yet unequal: lessons for libraries from the OECD Skills Outlook 2021*, <https://blogs.ifla.org/lpa/2021/07/26/essential-yet-unequal-lessons-for-libraries-from-the-oecd-skills-outlook-2021/>

As such, there is a value in all governments acting to ensure that everyone enjoys high levels of literacy, drawing on good practices from around the world. A great source of this is LitBase, run by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning⁶. LitBase is a collection of 232 evaluated examples of good practice in promoting literacy around the world, with most examples coming from developing countries, including the GAL 29 countries.

The examples provide a wide range of programmes, from the local to the national levels, with as a common thread a focus on adult literacy (often alongside child literacy). They are intended to allow for research into the factors that can drive effective literacy strategies, and to inspire national literacy and reading actions around the world.

There are currently 232 examples on the UNESCO UIL website, of which 75 include one or more references to libraries. In this paper, we have reviewed each of these case studies, in order to build up an idea of the different ways in which libraries feature. This should provide those looking to advocate for libraries to be included in plans and projects around literacy plenty of evidence to use.

This paper presents the results of this review. It looks first at the different groups who have benefitted from activities run by or involving libraries, then at the ways in which libraries contribute, before looking at the unique characteristics of libraries that make them such important parts of efforts to boost literacy and the support libraries may need to fulfil this potential.

Throughout, references are made to individual case studies that feature in the database.

A Broad Range of Beneficiaries

Low levels of literacy often go hand-in-hand with other characteristics or factors which are associated with disadvantage or marginalisation. Causality can work in both directions. In many cases, exclusion can lead to less access to education, and so fewer opportunities to gain literacy skills. At the same time, low literacy skills can in turn reinforce deprivation by restricting people to low paid work or no work at all.

⁶ UNESCO UIL LitBase : <https://uil.unesco.org/literacy/practices-database/about-database>

A large share of the examples of interventions in LitBase therefore focus on efforts to address the needs of marginalised groups, including those case studies which refer to libraries.

First of all, such case studies concern **learners at all stages of life**, all the way from early years, through school-age children and youth, working-age adults, and to older people. Interestingly, many examples focus strongly on reaching groups collectively, with many instances of family literacy programmes run through or with libraries⁷, and even intergenerational work uniting elders with children⁸.

There is specific attention in many of the examples to **people who have not been able to benefit from a good formal education**, due either to under-investment in public schools, an obligation to leave early (for example to take up work to support family incomes), or personal circumstances that have led to dropping out⁹. In each case, there's a strong sense of literacy activities offering a second chance.

A number of cases focus on the specific situation of **prisoners**, aiming to promote rehabilitation and reintegration into society, recognising that skills development can help facilitate this process¹⁰. Others work with low-skilled workers, helping them to develop personally and potentially seek better paid work later¹¹.

Women feature as a key target group in many interventions, given that they can too often receive too little formal education, or be left in situations which do not favour the development of literacy skills¹². A further factor justifying the focus in many examples on them is their role in helping children develop skills¹³.

⁷ Among the many examples, see Family Literacy Programme (Mexico) ([link](#))

⁸ See My Grandparents' Stories, My Pictures (Nepal) ([link](#)), Letters for Life (Portugal) ([link](#))

⁹ For example, Education Model for Life and Work (Mexico) ([link](#)), Early Literacy Project (India) ([link](#)), National Education Programme for Illiterate Youth and Adults through Information and Communication Technologies (Senegal) ([link](#)), and El Trabajo en Red Como Proyecto Educativo (Spain) ([link](#))

¹⁰ See Bibliobus Bertold Brecht and the German-Nicaraguan Library (Nicaragua) ([link](#)), Münster Prison Library (Germany) ([link](#)), Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop (USA) ([link](#)), Radio Escolar CAJ – FM de Adentro 94.3 (Argentina) ([link](#)), and Reading and Writing in Unit 33: Mothers, Children and Educational Institutions (Argentina) ([link](#))

¹¹ See for example Educational and Social Development of Garment Factory Workers (Cambodia) ([link](#)), Zé Peão School Project (Brazil) ([link](#))

¹² See the Adult Female Functional Literacy Programme (Pakistan) ([link](#)), which used rickshaw libraries to reach women in rural areas, Literacy in Local Language, a Springboard for Gender Equality (Mozambique) ([link](#)), Saakshar Bharat Mission (India) ([link](#))

¹³ See Mother and Child Education Programme (Nigeria) ([link](#))

People in **rural communities** are also a regular area of focus, given generally higher rates of poverty and illiteracy there, coupled with generally weaker public services¹⁴. Efforts here can look just at the wellbeing of individuals, but also at that of communities as a whole¹⁵.

Others who can be the primary beneficiaries of programmes are **further groups which are subject to discrimination or face additional challenges**, such as ethnic minorities (particularly those speaking other languages)¹⁶, immigrants¹⁷, and first nation communities¹⁸. Others at risk of discrimination include people facing HIV¹⁹, or living in areas which are insecure²⁰.

In short, across the age range, and across the many different groups who too often have inadequate access to education, there are good practices for building literacy with libraries at their heart.

A Comprehensive Contribution: Libraries within Literacy Interventions

The 75 case studies referencing libraries go from those which are entirely focused on developing or reinforcing libraries to others where our institutions play a more supporting role. They illustrate, also the wide range of ways in which libraries can favour literacy development and retention, across the community.

A first, and likely the most traditional role is as a **source of materials which can help learners develop their own skills**, drawing either on pre-existing materials²¹, or on those developed specifically within the context of an intervention²².

¹⁴ See Ganokendra Model of Community Learning Centres (Bangladesh) ([link](#))

¹⁵ Among the many examples, we can cite Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) Education Programme (Bangladesh) ([link](#)), which develops libraries as community centres.

¹⁶ See Village Learning Centres in Uttarakhand (India) ([link](#)), also The Parkari Literacy Project (Pakistan) ([link](#))

¹⁷ See for example Parents as Literacy Supporters in Immigrant Communities (Canada) ([link](#))

¹⁸ See The Family and Child Education Programme (FACE) (US) ([link](#))

¹⁹ One example is Innovative Library Services for Vulnerable Children and Youth (Zambia) ([link](#))

²⁰ See for example ESPERE: Schools of Forgiveness and Reconciliation (Colombia) ([link](#)) and The Parkari Literacy Project (Pakistan) ([link](#))

²¹ For example, duly adapted to allow for accessibility, as is the case with Township Community Learning Centre Service for People with Disabilities (China) ([link](#))

²² For example, Learning Neighbourhood (Saudi Arabia) ([link](#)) highlights the potential of opening up school libraries to adult learners to complement activities elsewhere

The books, magazines, newspapers and other materials that libraries contain – as well as the internet content to which they permit access – offers a means, through the application of literacy skills of discovering the wider world²³. A good library, with appropriate materials, can open new horizons for users, and inspire creativity – including creative writing as a means of practicing skills²⁴. Access to the internet and digital tools can add an extra dimension to this²⁵.

Examples from prison libraries in particular highlight the importance of good libraries for giving inmates new perspectives for a better life post-release. Through this, literacy skills are not only built, but there is an incentive for learners to develop them further²⁶.

The **importance of curation of materials** and ensuring that these are well adapted to the needs and interests of the community comes through clearly, with many examples focusing on replenishing existing libraries with new and targeted collections, both as concerns the themes covered, and often in fact the language used²⁷. As highlighted above, groups with a first language other than the dominant language in a country are often at a disadvantage – providing materials that value their own mother tongues can help²⁸.

In some projects profiled, librarians themselves indeed have an important role in helping to prioritise and create materials, drawing on their own experience of working with communities²⁹. A number of projects even focus on using library spaces in order to create works, for example through recording oral histories and stories³⁰.

A number of projects highlight the value of actions to ensure that people feel comfortable using these collections. Many projects include visits to libraries and training on how to make use of them as part of efforts to promote ongoing learning³¹.

²³ See Vanuatu Literacy Education Programme (Vanuatu) ([link](#))

²⁴ See Fight against Illiteracy (France) ([link](#)).

²⁵ See Township Community Learning Centre Service for People with Disabilities (China) ([link](#))

²⁶ See the Bibliobus Bertold Brecht and the German-Nicaraguan Library (Nicaragua) ([link](#))

²⁷ For example, Vanuatu Literacy Education Programme (Vanuatu) ([link](#))

²⁸ For example, Riecken libraries in Central America (Changing Lives in Central America through Access to Information and Literacy (Honduras) ([link](#))) include collections in Mayan, while the Bilingual Education Programme (Thailand) ([link](#)) ensured access to materials in Pwo Karen, and The Parkari Literacy Project (Pakistan) ([link](#)).

²⁹ This is the case with the eBooks and Family Literacy Programme (Ethiopia) ([link](#))

³⁰ For example, My Grandparents' Stories, My Pictures (Nepal) ([link](#))

³¹ For example, Reading and Writing in Unit 33: Mothers, Children and Educational Institutions (Argentina) ([link](#))

Beyond materials, as a number of examples highlight, **libraries can also be either providers of, or partners in organising individual and collective activities targeted at building skills**. Libraries can also be at the heart of initiatives to complement learning in schools through providing additional learning activities that encourage engagement with books and other materials³², promote other literacies (such as information literacy)³³, or help develop skills needed for employment or entrepreneurship³⁴. This can involve workshops in libraries or outside, structured engagement with books and other texts, and the encouragement of discussion between participants³⁵.

Many projects focus on family literacy, with libraries either managing or supporting efforts to engage families (and in particular mothers) in developing skills in their children. This can also serve, of course, to help mothers improve their own literacy, especially when they were denied this opportunity when young. For example, libraries can not only deliver storytimes, but also help parents learn how best to read to their own children³⁶.

Connected to this is the importance of libraries as **a place for relaxation and reading for pleasure**³⁷. The lack of a habit of reading is highlighted in many examples as a challenge to overcome³⁸. A number of case studies therefore highlight how important this can be in developing the habit of reading. This works as much in the case of permanent libraries hosted within buildings as it does for mobile libraries. Through activities using libraries in this way, it is possible to develop the use of literacy skills as a reflex³⁹.

The role of libraries as a place to relax (and so for wellbeing) also comes through in the case studies which highlight how the institutions can become a broader cultural centre, hosting other artistic activities⁴⁰. These complement

³² See Family Literacy Programme (Mexico) ([link](#)), Joint Programme: Supporting the Promotion of Education for All (Madagascar) ([link](#))

³³ See Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking (Kazakhstan) ([link](#))

³⁴ This is highlighted in the example of We Love Reading (Jordan) ([link](#))

³⁵ For example, Universal Education Programme (Bangladesh) ([link](#))

³⁶ For example, Tell Me a Story (Switzerland) ([link](#))

³⁷ See StadtLesen (Austria) ([link](#))

³⁸ See Reading and Writing for Pleasure (South Africa) ([link](#))

³⁹ See in particular Parent Empowerment for Family Literacy Project (Romania) ([link](#)), Parents as Literacy Supporters in Immigrant Communities (Canada) ([link](#))

⁴⁰ For example, Isirawa Language Revitalisation Programme (Indonesia) ([link](#)) highlights how libraries can act as a public service that nonetheless supports community identity, helping community members see wider public services in a more positive light.

literacy activities, offering new applications for literacy, as well as making reading into a community activity⁴¹.

A couple of very interesting examples focus on work between generations, with children writing down of the stories told by older generations. This not only supports children's literacy, but also engages community elders, and helps preserve heritage at risk of loss⁴². Developing libraries can also help support minority languages in general by building pride and engagement, especially among younger people⁴³.

Linked to the examples above is the sense in many projects that **a well-resourced and well-used library system is both evidence for and a driver of literate environments**⁴⁴, where people continue to use and develop their skills⁴⁵. Some case studies refer to the idea of 'post-literacy', with users encouraged to keep returning to the library, borrowing books and engaging in activities⁴⁶.

As highlighted above, achieving this can be supported by programmes to help people become familiar and confident library users, in particular breaking through any stereotypes or insecurities that might hold them back. It also can depend on librarians themselves having the necessary skills and confidence.

Finally, there is the **possibility for libraries themselves to manage programmes, as well as provide advice**⁴⁷. In some situations, there are well established networks of libraries, or coordinating libraries, which can bring together programme management experience with deep knowledge about literacy. In these cases, libraries can be ideal providers of literacy activities outside of formal education.

⁴¹ For example, Community Development Programme (Mali) ([link](#)) highlights how libraries can provide spaces for learning together, not just for literacy but also the application of literacy to civic participation and beyond

⁴² See My Grandparents' Stories, My Pictures (Nepal) ([link](#)), Letters for Life (Portugal) ([link](#))

⁴³ See The Parkari Literacy Project (Pakistan) ([link](#))

⁴⁴ See Literacy Alberni Society (Canada) ([link](#)), Run Home to Read (South Africa) ([link](#))

⁴⁵ For example, Empowerment of Women Living in Extreme Poverty (Burkina Faso) ([link](#)), National Literacy Programme (Namibia) ([link](#)), National Literacy Programme (Pakistan) ([link](#))

⁴⁶ See Tata Consultancy Services' Adult Literacy Programme : Computer-Based Functional Literacy (India) ([link](#)). A similar theme appears in Folk Development Colleges (Tanzania) ([link](#))

⁴⁷ In the case of VoorleesExpress (Netherlands) ([link](#)), libraries are involved throughout in programme design and the development of tips and materials, while in Bookstart (UK) ([link](#)) and Help My Kid Learn (Ireland) ([link](#)) librarians helped guide the programme as a whole.

Elsewhere, they are vital partners, sharing contacts, knowledge and insights of what works at the planning stage, and helping to ensure success by promoting activities, identifying beneficiaries, and building bridges between different stakeholders⁴⁸.

What Makes Libraries Special, and What Do They Need to Fulfil their Potential?

The previous section highlights the wide range of ways in which libraries contribute to the success of literacy initiatives. But what is it that makes them particularly strong partners for this? And what conclusions can we draw about what they need to make more of a difference.

Clearly, where libraries do already exist, they represent a valuable and recognised infrastructure for promoting literacy throughout the community⁴⁹, as well as a source of materials to meet demand for reading⁵⁰. This is of course strongest when there is a relevant and up-to-date collection, and staff who are properly trained and recognised for their work. When managed well, libraries have the potential to be welcoming spaces, where people actively choose to spend time, both alone and with others.

As such, one key recommendation at a basic level is to **ensure that existing libraries are attractive and welcoming places, with relevant and up-to-date collections**. Similarly, it is important to **guarantee that library staff have the training and support needed to be able to make a contribution to a literate environment**, either simply through institution and collection management, or running training sessions and other programming⁵¹.

Clearly, libraries do not exist everywhere. Indeed, this very lack is the problem that some of the projects highlighted on LitBase seek to solve through the creation of community libraries, or visits by mobile libraries.

⁴⁸ Examples include Adult Literacy Tutors Association (Trinidad and Tobago) ([link](#)), Clare Family Learning (Ireland) ([link](#)), Family Literacy Programmes, Training, and Services (Canada) ([link](#)), as well as Reading Together (Australia) ([link](#))

⁴⁹ For example, the Adult Basic Education Programme (Botswana) ([link](#)) drew heavily on collaboration with the national library service to support delivery.

⁵⁰ See Supporting Maternal and Child Health Improvement and Building Literate Environment (Cambodia) ([link](#))

⁵¹ For one example, Village Learning Centres in Uttarakhand (India) ([link](#)) took over existing libraries and enhanced them to ensure that they could contribute fully to literacy objectives.

Just like existing libraries, these also depend both on having an **engaging collection**⁵² and **committed and trained staff** who can get users interested and excited about reading, as well as delivering training⁵³. Achieving this can rely, in particular, on close relations with community leaders, and other steps to ensure that users are familiar with libraries and what they can bring⁵⁴.

A further strong point is the **knowledge that libraries can bring about the needs and interests of communities**⁵⁵. Whether through trained librarians who have a professional mission to understand the requirements and characteristics of the communities they serve, or volunteers with at least a basic education in library management, our institutions usually have a strong ability to determine what materials – and what activities – will suit users best. This can also be associated with a sense of trust that make libraries valuable partners⁵⁶.

This strength comes across not only in the delivery of projects, but also in identifying and reaching out to people who could benefit most⁵⁷. Of course, to do this, it is important to ensure that librarians and library workers do have the skills to assess need, and that in some cases at least, efforts are made to break down fears some may have about using libraries, as highlighted above.

Another unique strength is **the nature of the library as a place open to all**. Unlike formal education institutions or other public services, public and community libraries are intended to be there for all. In some case studies, libraries originally focused on a specific group of project beneficiaries indeed ended up serving others, and so supporting wider literacy⁵⁸. As such, they can also represent a space apart from daily life, allowing for a sense of escape or creativity which can open minds to learning and discovery. In some cases,

⁵² For example,

⁵³ In the case of Community Library and Resource Centres (Nepal) ([link](#)), library management committees are recruited locally and trained, alongside facilitators and librarians, in order to deliver services.

⁵⁴ For example, Briya Family Literacy Programme (US) ([link](#)) included library familiarisation programmes, as does Family Literacy Project (Germany) ([link](#)), I am learning your tongue, you are learning my tongue, we are understanding each other, tomorrow belongs to us (Côte d'Ivoire) ([link](#))

⁵⁵ This is highlighted in Cell-Ed: Innovative Education through Cell Phones (US) ([link](#)), a project which otherwise focuses on mobile learning, as well as in Room to Read: Local Language Publishing Programme (Cambodia) ([link](#))

⁵⁶ See for example Students and Parents in Cooperative Education Family Literacy Programme (US) ([link](#))

⁵⁷ For example, Adult Literacy Tutors Association (Trinidad and Tobago) ([link](#)), Clare Family Learning (Ireland) ([link](#)), Family Literacy Programmes, Training, and Services (Canada) ([link](#))

⁵⁸ This is highlighted in Community Learning Centres (Uzbekistan) ([link](#)), Community Learning Centres (Kazakhstan) ([link](#)), Economic Empowerment and Functional Adult Literacy Programme (Kenya) ([link](#)), Teaching the Nomads in the Wild (India) ([link](#))

creating spaces specifically for women, for example, can help in achieving this goal⁵⁹.

Again, as above, a sense of community ownership is important here. In some cases, efforts have been deliberately made to reach out to and engage elders in order to ensure this sense of connection⁶⁰. Similarly, library spaces need to be welcoming for all, and up to the task of serving all members of the community.

There is **the role that libraries can play as a network, both between themselves and with other partners**. Examples given highlight not only how libraries work with institutions and individuals focused on literacy, but also with artists and creators⁶¹, indigenous groups⁶², schools and local authorities⁶³, allowing for new collaborations and synergies⁶⁴. In the case of prison libraries in particular, there are possibilities to use links between them and public libraries outside to facilitate the transition from incarceration to freedom⁶⁵.

For this, again, training and support is important for libraries to be able to put time and effort into building connections⁶⁶. Without this, libraries risk being left out, and so potential left unrealised. Laws in particular can help when they enable these sorts of partnerships to be created, as can the development of library systems.

Finally, there is the **value of advocacy with governments**. This can underpin success in all of the areas set out above by security the policies and resources needed for libraries to fulfil their potential. As highlighted in a number of case studies, the long-term sustainability of projects can depend on governments

⁵⁹ See for example ACKU Library Box Extension (Afghanistan) ([link](#))

⁶⁰ Books for Rural Areas of Viet Nam (Viet Nam) ([link](#)) focuses on developing libraries in ways that fit in with local habits, for example in clan chiefs' houses

⁶¹ See the example of Riecken libraries in Central America - Changing Lives in Central America through Access to Information and Literacy (Honduras) ([link](#))

⁶² See The Family and Child Education Programme (FACE) (US) ([link](#))

⁶³ See Reading Together (Australia) ([link](#))

⁶⁴ For example, the Bibliobus Bertold Brecht and the German-Nicaraguan Library (Nicaragua) ([link](#)) used strong links with prison authorities to provide a wider and better adapted range of services to prisoners. Meanwhile, in Innovative Library Services for Vulnerable Children and Youth (Zambia) ([link](#)), it is noted that libraries are set up in partnership with local organisations

⁶⁵ See in particular Münster Prison Library (Germany) ([link](#)) and Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop (USA) ([link](#))

⁶⁶ Successful engagement in advocacy is highlighted as an achievement in the Books for Rural Areas of Viet Nam (Viet Nam) ([link](#)) project for example. Similarly in Bangladesh, good work with communities can lead to these communities taking on the costs of the library (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) Education Programme (Bangladesh) ([link](#))).

taking on responsibility, at least for salaries and the upkeep of library buildings and equipment⁶⁷.

Conclusion

Through the collection of evaluated examples it offers, UIL's LitBase offers an important overview of initiatives that have worked in advancing towards the goal of universal literacy, in particular in those countries with the biggest needs.

With nearly a third of the case studies presented involving libraries in some way, it is clear that our institutions can make both an important and diverse contribution to success, even in reaching the most marginalised groups. They do this as providers of materials and literacy activities, partners, hosts or sources of advice for initiatives led by others, or more broadly as promoters of literacy in wider society.

As the examples make clear, to achieve this, it is important to empower libraries properly – with collections that are relevant to communities and their needs, with staff who are skilled and motivated to support literacy for all, with facilities that allow them to welcome everyone, and with laws that permit them to build relationships and partnerships.

In summary, there is a strong recognition that well-resourced, well-used library systems are synonymous both with ensuring the realisation of everyone's right to literacy, as well as with the development of literate societies. With both of these essential for a strong, inclusive and human-centred recovery, it is a priority that government around the world learn from the examples highlighted here and beyond, and realise the potential of libraries.

⁶⁷ This has been the case with Riecken libraries in Central America - Changing Lives in Central America through Access to Information and Literacy (Honduras) ([link](#)), where core government support provides a basis on which volunteers can be found and other resources brought in.