Our Common Agenda

What the UN Secretary-General's plan for the future means for libraries

When planning began for the United Nations' 75th anniversary, the intention was already to make it as much about planning how to do better in the future as about celebrating the past. The coming of the COVID-19 pandemic has only reinforced the sense that now is the time to think through, in depth, how peoples and countries work together to solve global challenges.

A key result of the anniversary celebrations in 2020 was therefore a declaration by Member States, which set out broad commitments. Based on this, over the past year, the UN has worked with its members and other stakeholders to develop a set of proposed actions. These are set out in 'Our Common Agenda', presented by the UN Secretary General last September, and officially welcomed by Member States in a Resolution in November.

What does Our Common Agenda mean for the library field? How does it relate to existing areas of focus such as the SDGs, and where might the actions it includes provide an opportunity to demonstrate the value of libraries' work? This briefing sets out some answers.

An agenda for implementation

The United Nations clearly already has a comprehensive agenda for sustainable development, in the form of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Our Common Agenda makes it clear that this continues to represent the primary roadmap for the UN's work in this area.

Our Common Agenda is rather more about the 'how' than the 'what' of the SDGs. It builds strongly on the acknowledgement that progress has not been fast enough, and that with COVID, there is a risk even of going backwards.

12 Commitments from the Declaration for the UN's 75th Anniversary

1. *Leave no-one behind*
2. *Protect our planet*
3. *Promote peace and prevent conflicts*
4. *Abide by international law and ensure justice*
5. *Place women and girls at the centre*
6. *Build trust*
7. *Improve digital cooperation*
8. *Upgrade the United Nations*
9. *Ensure sustainable financing*
10. *Boost partnerships*
11. *Listen to and work with youth*
12. *Be prepared*

Indeed, there is a strong emphasis on the costs of business as usual, and the urgency of action, with powerful sections setting out positive and negative scenarios of the future depending on the choices made.

As such, a lot of the ideas in the report are about how to strengthen the structures and underlying conditions that make it possible to deliver policy change effectively, as well as to ensure a stronger focus on the future.

Clearly, in doing this, the report does focus more strongly on some areas of the SDGs than others, in particular health and climate change, but there is also a lot about how we can build more equal societies and mobilise resources for development.

A new social contract

A key theme that appears in the report is that of creating a new social contract – an idea that appears also in the Futures of Education Report recently released by UNESCO.

In this context, the social contract refers to the shared values and rules that allow people to live together in societies, and governments to operate effectively. Solidarity between people is a key element of this, with the report arguing that this needs, urgently, to be felt at a global level.

For example, it includes the recognition and protection of human rights, the provision of public goods and basic services such as education, health, and connectivity, and the sort of trust that means that people have confidence in what their governments say, and in each other.

Crucially, as part of this, there is an emphasis on inclusion – both in terms of ensuring that no member of our societies is left out or left behind in terms of the opportunities they have and services their receive, and in terms of being included in the process of developing and defining policy itself.

Key immediate priorities include accelerating a global vaccination programme, as well as meaningful action to combat climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. Decent housing for all, social protection and peace also feature as key things that a new social contract should help deliver.

The concept of a new social contract, as set out in the report, includes a number of key points for libraries:

"[A new social contract] should also include updated governance arrangements to deliver better public goods and usher in a new era of universal social protection, health coverage, education, skills, decent work and housing, as well as universal access to the Internet by 2030 as a basic human right. I invite all countries to conduct inclusive and meaningful national listening consultations so all citizens have a say in envisioning their countries' futures"

Combatting misinformation: Our Common Agenda makes tackling the 'infodemic' one of its key priorities. This is not just needed as a way of ensuring the effectiveness of actions to limit the spread and harm done by the pandemic, but also for wider policy effectiveness and trust.

The report places a lot of pressure for action on governments themselves, underlining their responsibility to provide trustworthy information, offering a reality check for societies. It calls for a global code of conduct that promotes integrity in public information, and implicitly strongly criticises those politicians who have spread lies and pseudoscience.

> *"While vigorously defending the right to freedom of expression everywhere, we must equally encourage societies to develop a common, empirically backed consensus on the public good of facts, science and knowledge. We must make lying wrong again. [...] I urge acceleration of our efforts to produce and disseminate reliable and verified information"*

Yet it also implies that there needs to be a broader effort to develop common, empirically backed consensus on the public goods of facts, science and knowledge, and a greater readiness to call out and condemn those who lie. It sees a particular role for institutions in countering misinformation and discrimination.

Digital inclusion: following on from the work of the [High Level Panel on Digital Cooperation](#) a couple of years ago, getting everyone connected remains high on the agenda. It is a necessary precondition for online government services being able to achieve their goals, given the risk of overlap between those who most need help, and those who aren't online.

Ensuring that everyone gets online can create new possibilities for participation in policy-formation and decision-making, access to justice, education and other opportunities, and more. In particular, the report highlights efforts to get every school connected to the internet, in order to support education.

At the same time, the report is clear that there are many challenges to be overcome in the online world – see below for more.

Reaffirming human rights: Our Common Agenda underlines that human rights, along with security and sustainable development, are one of the three key goals of the United Nations, and central to the proposed new social contract.

The SDGs already provide a strong reminder of the importance of protecting human rights, a point that the Agenda repeats. It sets out that human rights should be seen as a 'problem solving' instrument – something that, if guaranteed, can be a means of avoiding conflicts in the first place.

This applies both to freedoms – of expression, opinion, and access to information – and rights – for example to culture, education, health and beyond.

Connected to this is the drive to consider more than economic growth as a measure of success, and rather find ways of measuring whether we are managing to ensure that everyone is realising their rights and potential.

"Underpinning the social contract is an unequivocal commitment to human rights. In my Call to Action for Human Rights, I set out seven domains in need of particular attention, which are reflected across Our Common Agenda. Implementation of the full spectrum of human rights is at the heart of our capacity to recover from the pandemic, renew the social contract and more. Civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights are mutually reinforcing, indivisible and universal, not ordinary services with a market-set price tag but essential factors in building more inclusive societies. Promoting and protecting civic space makes societies stronger and more resilient, building on the right to participate and freedom of expression, association and assembly."

A focus on the future

The next big area of focus in Our Common Agenda is the understanding that more needs to be done to take account of the future in the actions we take today. This is of course an idea at the heart of the notion of sustainability – that we should not compromise the future through what we do in the present.

The need for solidarity between generations, and proper investment in youth, is therefore central, with offering opportunities for voice and participation, quality education, and sustainable jobs high on the agenda. By engaging young people more effectively, the hope is, they will also feel readier themselves to act and get involved in efforts to achieve sustainable development.

For libraries, the emphasis on the need to rethink education is particularly relevant, with the report pointing out the worryingly high number of young people who are still functionally illiterate, and linked to this, limited provision of early childhood education and learning.

The Agenda also sets out the need to provide more effective lifelong learning opportunities, including in order to help young people to complement what they have picked up at school, especially in order to develop the skills needed for employment and entrepreneurship.

In parallel with this, the Secretary General sets out a strong interest in futures thinking, proposing both the creation of a Futures Laboratory at the UN, and promoting relevant reflections at the national and local levels.

A renewal of global governance

"The United Nations, Governments, the private sector and civil society could come together as a multi-stakeholder digital technology track in preparation for a Summit of the Future to agree on a Global Digital Compact. This would outline shared principles for an open, free and secure digital future for all. Complex digital issues that could be addressed may include: reaffirming the fundamental commitment to connecting the unconnected; avoiding fragmentation of the Internet; providing people with options as to how their data is used; application of human rights online; and promoting a trustworthy Internet by introducing accountability criteria for discrimination and misleading content. More broadly, the Compact could also promote regulation of artificial intelligence to ensure that this is aligned with shared global values."

Our Common Agenda is clear that one of the key barriers to success in addressing global challenges is the weakness of global governance. This, in turn, leads to an under-supply of global public goods – things that we all benefit from, but risk not being delivered without coordination. Crucially, it implies a step away from a situation where countries act unilaterally, rather than after considering others, given that this often leads to a worse result for everyone.

This applies most obviously in the case of health and the fight against the pandemic, and climate change. There is a need both for better coordinated action between countries, for example to ensure that everyone has access to vaccines, and also to support institutions such as the World Health Organisation or the

UNFCCC which provide a space and support for decision-making.

For libraries, Our Common Agenda's focus on the governance of the internet as a global public good is particularly interesting. It argues that more needs to be done to realise the positives, and tackle the negatives of the internet, and even worries that otherwise, these downsides will overshadow the benefits. The report therefore calls for a Global Digital Compact that could address issues such as universal connectivity, protecting rights online, promoting accountability for misleading content and avoiding fragmentation (here understood as the phenomenon of 'echo chambers', although it could also refer to concerns about 'balkanisation' - i.e. a series of national internets, not a global one).

A further interesting angle is the focus on what steps are needed globally in order to promote innovation and resilience in developing countries, and developing a global commons (arguably including knowledge and information), for example through reforming intellectual property rights to make them more flexible. The importance of allowing for the transfer of technologies, and the promotion of research capacity within developing countries is made clear – an area where libraries certainly have a role to play.

Next steps at the United Nations

Our Common Agenda recommends a wide range of actions which could help deliver on its ambitions. The UN's Member States have encouraged the Secretary General to develop these ideas further, and so we can expect to see new events and processes emerging over the coming year. Ones of particular interest to libraries are likely to be:

Global Digital Compact: as highlighted above, this would focus on universal connectivity, including all schools, avoiding internet fragmentation, protecting data and human rights, regulating artificial intelligence, stronger accountability for discrimination and misleading content, and promoting the idea of digital commons as a public good.

World Social Summit: planned for 2025, this would take stock of progress towards providing universal social protection and basic services to all, including health, education and housing. It would provide an opportunity to update the Copenhagen Declaration of 1995, which provides a basis for the work of the UN Commission on Social Development.

Transforming Education Summit: already planned for September 2022, this will draw on the lessons from the Futures of Education report prepared by UNESCO, which makes a number of recommendations that could mean a stronger recognition of libraries and library services in education policies and strategies.

Futures Laboratory: this would bring together capacity within the UN to carry out future impact assessments, conduct foresight, and build wider capacity to assess futures and risks. Libraries could play a key role here, not just as a source of information for such studies, but also as a venue for holding such reflections at the local level.

UN Office for Youth: building on the role of the existing UN Envoy for Youth, this would help ensure a stronger focus on the needs and priorities of younger people across the UN's work. This would be an interesting potential area of focus for libraries, especially those working to support youth skills and opportunity.

A Code of Conduct on Integrity in Public Information: as highlighted above, this is a recommendation from the Secretary General, who suggests that this is something that could be explored together with States, media outlets and regulatory bodies. There is a strong potential role for libraries here, both in highlighting library concerns, and as part of the implementation infrastructure.

Consultation with Local and Regional Government: as part of a more inclusive multilateralism, Our Common Agenda suggests establishing an Advisory Group on Local and Regional Governments. This is interesting for libraries, given that sub-national governments are often better aware of the contribution that libraries, and culture more broadly, can make to development.

In each of these areas, there will be opportunities both to promote the inclusion of the experiences and insights of libraries, and to work to ensure that there is stronger recognition of the importance of access to information and library services.

IFLA will follow these processes, and work with our Members to highlight opportunities to engage and shape UN work in these areas. In the meanwhile, library associations and libraries could do the following:

- Take a look at the <u>full report</u> (which is available in all official UN languages), and in particular the summary infographics. Discuss which of the issues and actions highlighted seem most important for your country

- Draw on the priority given to actions such as combatting the infodemic or promoting digital inclusion in your own advocacy in favour of libraries

- If you are in touch with your local UN office, talk with them about how libraries can help achieve the goals set out by the UN Secretary-General