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Sustainability as a Tool for Political Advocacy in Libraries

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Abstract:

The work of libraries is per se sustainable within the meaning of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): by providing open and accessible public spaces to everyone, by lending out books and other media, and by engaging in literacy education – to name just a few – they contribute to environmental, social and economic sustainability. What is sometimes less discussed however, is that the SDGs can also be a great tool for political advocacy. The reason is the following: While the SDGs are a global joint declaration of intent, their implementation takes place at the lower political levels: at European, national/ federal, and local levels. The SDGs are therefore a theme that almost every political person will have stumbled upon at some point during his/her political career. Thus, libraries engaging with the SDGs and making it visible – through their website or social media, but also through exchanges with local politicians – show that they can talk the “language” of politics, that they play a crucial societal role and that they engage in ongoing political debate. In this paper the author will look at examples of how libraries can showcase their societal relevance through the SDGs and how they can approach politicians at every political level. It will also look at political sustainability/ education for sustainable development strategies in Germany at national, federal states (“Länderebene”) and local level and analyse to which extent libraries have been recognised as valuable partners on the political level and where this is still lacking.

Keywords: Sustainability, Libraries, Political Advocacy

1. Introduction

Sustainability is a topic that is being widely discussed on a worldwide scale – be it in relation to climate change, construction, food, education or culture. And while not everyone knows what exactly the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) stand for, the worldwide discussion on this issue is good news for libraries! Libraries intrinsically, by their very mission,

make an invaluable contribution to the SDGs and – through political advocacy - can hence showcase this at every political level. This can, in turn, help them to integrate more firmly into political networks and hence receive recognition as invaluable institutions. This article will describe how the SDGs are implemented at different political levels in Germany and showcase how libraries can use this as a tool for political advocacy at each of these levels.

2. How SDGs are implemented at different levels in Germany

The SDGs were adopted by all United Nations (UN) Member States in 2015 as “a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future” (UN, n.d., “Do you know”). They are not a legally binding document, but an “urgent call for action”: countries are “expected to take ownership and establish a national framework for achieving” them (UN, n.d., “The Sustainable Development Agenda”). The SDGs thus offer a framework with a “common language for multilevel action” (OECD, n.d., “The multilevel governance”). This “multilevel approach” (ibid) means that the SDGs are implemented at every political level – from national, to regional, to local, and individual or institutional level. In the case of Germany, due to the federal system, cities, towns and regions, the 16 Federal States and the Federal Government have different competences – and hence different, yet mutually reinforcing roles to play, with regard to the SDGs. This section will outline these different competences and give a brief overview of the activities regarding the SDGs at each of these levels.

a. The local level: The role of cities, towns and municipalities

Cities, towns and municipalities play an important role in working towards achieving the SDGs. According to the OECD, “most people live and work in cities, and urbanisation continues to grow all over the world, with 70% of the global population expected to live in cities by 2050” (n.d., “Achieving the SDGs”). In Germany, the “Kommunen” (standing comprehensively for cities, towns and municipalities), by constitutional law, have the right to local self-government (FES, n.d.). They are responsible for a range of basic public service tasks, including construction and maintenance of schools, swimming pools, parks, retirement homes, kindergartens and cemeteries (ibid) – all of which have an impact on the SDGs. An increasing number of “Kommunen” have hence also started focusing on the SDGs: they carry out consultations with relevant stakeholders, hand out prizes for sustainability, or adopt SDG-strategies (Skew Engagement, n.d.).

b. The regional level: The role of the 16 Federal States

Equally, the 16 Federal States have competence over a range of areas of importance to sustainability: education, culture, policing, right of assembly historic preservation, and many more (bpb, 2014). In 2019, the 16 Federal States and Federal Government declared that they want to jointly drive the transformation towards a sustainable society (Bundesregierung, 06.06.2019). An increasing number of the Federal States have hence also made concrete plans on how to approach the issue of sustainability – be it through roadmaps, the appointment of a sustainability council (“Nachhaltigkeitsbeirat”), or through sustainability strategies. Each of these strategies focus on areas on which the regional government has competence and gives particular attention to the regional context. The Sustainability Strategy of Brandenburg for example focuses, among other things, on tackling challenges in sparsely populated rural areas (such as access to medical care) and on long-term unemployment (Rat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung, 2021). Similarly, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has found

entrance into policies of the Federal States – though to very different extents, ranging from entire ESD regional strategies to only implicit inclusion in some school-subjects (BMBF, n.d., “Bundesländer”).

c. The national level: Role of the Federal Government

According to the UN, countries have the “primary responsibility for follow-up and review, at the national, regional and global levels, with regard to the progress made in implementing the Goals and targets by 2030” (UN, n.d., “The Sustainable Development Agenda”). In 2016 the German government adopted its National Sustainable Development Strategy with over 70 indicators measuring progress towards the SDGs at national level. The Strategy has since been updated on a regular basis – most recently in 2021. During the review in 2021, particular focus areas were: human well-being and capabilities, social justice, energy transition and climate action, circular economy, sustainable building and the transformation of transportation, sustainable agricultural and food systems, pollution-free environment (The Federal Government, n.d., pages 48-59). The Federal Government has also adopted a National Action Plan on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (BMBF, 2017) and adopts a report on ESD once every legislative period (BMBF, n.d., ”Bericht der Bundesregierung”).

3. How libraries contribute to the SDGs and how they can use it for political advocacy

It will not come as a surprise to the public attending the Cork Satellite meeting, for which this paper is written, that libraries – by their very nature – make an important contribution to the SDGs. Their core mission is to provide access to knowledge and information to everyone, which – thanks to the successful advocacy activities of the International Library Association IFLA – is in itself a subgoal of SDG 16. In addition, libraries offer a wide range of products and services that promote the achievement of each of the SDGs: libraries are safe, welcoming spaces, they promote literacy, and they advance digital inclusion through access to Information and Communication Technology, internet connection and skills (IFLA, 2018) – to name a few.

While this will not come as news to librarians and Cork satellite meeting attendants however, it will come as news to many other stakeholders and most definitely to the political world. It is this political world that is responsible for shaping sustainability strategies and actions at different political levels and for bringing together the relevant stakeholders. This section will therefore describe ways of making the political world aware of libraries’ contribution to the SDG and – at the higher political levels – describe the state-of-play regarding the inclusion of libraries in political strategies.

a. At local level: A way for libraries to showcase their societal relevance

As described above, it is the “Kommunen” that finance many public service tasks in Germany – and this includes libraries! This means that most public libraries are under the responsibility of the “Kommunen” (Bibliotheksportal, 2017)¹ and that the amount of funding a library receives may very well vary from one city, town or municipality to another. As libraries are also not a “compulsory task” (“Pflichtaufgabe”), funding can strongly depend on political priorities or the fiscal revenues of the “Kommune”. Public libraries hence need to be in a constant dialogue with and show their societal relevance at the local political level.

¹ In addition, there are many church libraries in Germany. These are however mostly very small structures that are driven with the help of volunteers.

An excellent example of how a library has succeeded in demonstrating its societal relevance through the topic of sustainability is the “Green Laboratory” of the City Library of Hameln. By collaborating with 34 project partners, including three secondary schools, the German Society for the Conservation of Nature (NABU), and the rural adult education authority, the library functions as a central platform bringing together people with interest in green issues. Together with its partners, it can offer exciting and educational activities around nature, including upcycling workshops, “explorer days” (“Forschertage”), excursions, scavenger hunts, and much more. The “Green Laboratory” space on the second floor of the library includes a stage for performances, a collection of books about nature and the environment and even real trees provided by the local forester. And thanks to modern technology, it will soon be possible to video-stream directly from the local forest into the “Green Laboratory”. Most importantly however, the library functions as a central knot among the 29 participating organisations, a connection between the city and nature and as central meeting point for the local inhabitants (HamelnR Redaktion, 03.05.2022).

This activity has not gone unnoticed within the city of Hameln. The Head of Section for Culture at the city of Hameln for instance said: “The Green Laboratory is unique. It is a meeting point in the centre of the city, focusing on green themes in a playful and happy way. Such a physical place for exchange is duly needed, especially in these times” (HamelnR Redaktion, 03.05.2022).² The city administration is thus clearly recognizing the important contribution that libraries are making as places of encounter within the city community.

b. At regional level: Inclusion in sustainability strategies

At regional level in Germany the interests of the libraries are represented through regional library associations. In addition, library competence centres (so called “Fachstellen” or “Büchereizentralen”), usually under the relevant Ministry within the Federal State, assist, promote and advise libraries. Both of these entities have sustainability on their radar and, in some cases, manage to actively participate in the political sustainability discussions and procedures.

One positive example is the ESD Strategy of Schleswig-Holstein, which was developed in the context of the National ESD Strategy and the UNESCO World Action Programme ESD. During the development process of the strategy, a wide range of stakeholders, including the “Büchereizentrale” of Schleswig-Holstein, were included. The Büchereizentrale was thus able to raise awareness for the contribution of libraries to ESD, to participate in discussions with the other stakeholders that were part of the process and to influence the strategic outcome (Brandt, 2021). In the final ESD Strategy of Schleswig-Holstein libraries are explicitly mentioned in the chapters on early childhood education and on non-formal education. In the early childhood education chapter, the strategy describes how local and mobile libraries service kindergartens with media boxes that promote ESD and that provide tips and inspiration (ibid).

² Original citation: „Neben finanzieller Unterstützung gibt es auch viel Lob: „Das Grüne Labor ist weit und breit ein Unikat“, sagt Dr. Dorothee Esser-Link, Fachbereichsleiterin Kultur bei der Stadt Hameln. „Ein Treffpunkt mitten in der Stadt, der sich ausschließlich grünen Themen widmet. Ohne erhobenen Zeigefinger, sondern spielerisch und fröhlich. Ein Ort für physischen Austausch, den wir dringend brauchen, und zwar gerade jetzt.“ Auch Stadträtin Martina Harms sieht das Grüne Labor als Bereicherung für die Region: „Ich freue mich sehr, dass es dem Team der Bücherei mithilfe des Landes gelungen ist, einen solchen Ort zu schaffen, der regional seines Gleichen sucht.“ <https://hamelnr.de/leben-nachhaltigkeit/gruenes-labor-eroeffnet-in-der-stadtbuecherei-hamel/63140/>

In the case of Schleswig-Holstein, the Büchereizentrale thus managed to showcase the societal relevance of libraries and to become an active participant in discussions on sustainability. Libraries are however unfortunately far from being included in all existing regional strategies on sustainability or on ESD. Much more active political advocacy will thus be necessary to bring libraries into upcoming strategies.

c. At national level: Hopes for increased inclusion through the new government

Sustainability at the national level is one of the focus areas of the German Libraries Association/ “Deutscher Bibliotheksverband e.V.” (dbv). During the revision of the German National Sustainable Development Strategy between 2019 and 2021, the dbv in a position paper called for the inclusion of libraries in the Strategy. It proposed, in particular, that libraries should be mentioned in relation to goal 16 “peace, justice and strong institutions” (through a new indicator on “access to knowledge and information”), goal 4 “quality education” and goal 11 “sustainable cities and communities” (dbv, 30.10.2020).

In the final revision of the strategy, cultural heritage is taken up as a new indicator for goal 11 and is being measured by the number of objects in the German Digital Library DDB (The Federal Government, 2022). A wider recognition of the contribution of libraries to sustainability, similarly to the ESD-strategy of Schleswig-Holstein, was however not achieved. This might partially be due to the fact that the revision was aimed at being an evolution (“Weiterentwicklung”) of the already existing strategy – thus not leaving many options for inclusion of new indicators.

A somewhat new tone regarding sustainability has been adopted by the new German government that came to power in December 2021. In the coalition treaty between the three coalition parties, sustainability features already in the title³ and sustainability is to be a guiding principle („Richtschnur“) for political action (Bundesregierung, 2021, p. 36). In addition, the new government is planning to further develop the National Sustainable Development Strategy and to review the governance structures of the Strategy (ibid). Finally, the new government is planning to anchor and strengthen the National Action Plan on ESD in all educational phases and areas (ibid, p. 98) and to develop a “Green Culture” desk, which assists cultural institutions with regard to their green transformation (ibid, p. 122).

These plans provide some hope that libraries will be able to set a foot in the door of national discussions on sustainability and hence help them demonstrate their invaluable societal role. This hope is further sustained by the answer of the Green political party, which is now part of the government, to a set of questions by the dbv directed at all political parties prior to the national election in summer/ autumn 2021. In their answer, the Greens say that the indicators of the National Sustainable Development Strategy need to be adjusted and that new indicators need to be included. They also mention that, within this “ambitioned development” (“ambitionierte Weiterentwicklung”) of the Strategy, they want to include all relevant societal stakeholders and provide libraries the opportunity to participate in this process, in order to include their proposals into the process (Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen, September 2021, p. 2). The dbv will thus continue to strive for inclusion of libraries in the National Sustainable Development Strategy and other relevant strategies or actions by the German government, including the “Green Culture” desk.

³ The title is: „Mehr Fortschritt wagen. Bündnis für Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit“.

d. How are the three political areas connected?

The three political areas mentioned above do not function as separate silos – they are interconnected and efforts on one level may positively benefit advocacy efforts at another political level. Libraries can be of great help in supporting advocacy efforts at both regional and national level, and, in turn, the regional and national library associations can support libraries in their advocacy efforts.

How libraries can support advocacy efforts at regional and national level

A useful method for demonstrating societal relevance at local level, is to invite or include local politicians – as was done in the above-mentioned “Green Laboratory” of the City Library of Hameln. In addition to inviting local politicians to their SDG-activities, libraries can also invite regional and national politicians from their own constituency. This will allow these politicians to get a first-hand how libraries contribute to sustainability – most likely a welcome change to the, often abstract, discussions on sustainability at the national political level!

Libraries indirectly also support advocacy efforts by actively participating in relevant funding programmes, prizes and actions at regional, national and even European level. The above-mentioned “Green Laboratory” for example received funding through the regional programme “Zukunftsräume Niedersachsen” aimed at strengthening the anchoring role of small- and medium-sized city centres in Lower Saxony (Amt für regionale Landesentwicklung Leine-Weser, n.d.). During the opening the library received praise and acclaim (and thereby attention) not only by local, but also by regional politicians. At national level, libraries can for example receive funding through the “Kommunalrichtlinie”, supporting communal actors, such as libraries, with lowering their greenhouse gas emissions (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Klimaschutz, n.d.).

Finally, libraries can bring attention to the issue of libraries and sustainability at regional and national level, by participating in prizes or action days. A prize for sustainability of great importance for libraries in Germany is the “Projekt Nachhaltigkeit” given the four Regional Hubs for Sustainability Strategies (RENN) in cooperation with the German Council for Sustainable Development and under the umbrella of the Joint Action for Sustainable Development (Projekt Nachhaltigkeit, 2022). And the German Sustainability Action Days, aim at enhancing “enhancing visibility throughout Germany of real commitment that sets an example to others, to foster public awareness of the topic of sustainability and to inspire more people to undertake a commitment to sustainability” (Council for Sustainable Development, n.d.). In the year 2020 libraries throughout Germany participated with activities such as repair cafés, workshops on sustainability, mobile bike repair shops, impro theaters, and of course exhibitions and book collections on sustainability (Bibliotheksportal, 22.09.2020).

By participating in these programmes, prizes and action days, libraries appear on the radar of regional and national administrations and politicians – they become aware of their societal role. This in turn increases the chances of libraries to be included in future programmes, actions and strategies.

How regional and national library associations can support libraries in their advocacy efforts

In turn, the regional and national library associations can support libraries in their advocacy activities by providing trainings, holding online-seminars or making available relevant background information. The dbv has published a [brochure](#) explaining the contribution of libraries to the SDGs (dbv, April 2020). Libraries can order this brochure to inform themselves, to display it in the library for their users or to bring it along to talks they might have with political representatives. The dbv is also running the website www.biblio2030.de, which showcases a growing number of practical examples of how libraries contribute to the SDGs. Finally, the dbv regularly offers trainings and seminars in different formats about the issue of libraries and sustainability. At the moment, the dbv is organizing a series of online-seminars highlighting different aspects of sustainability in libraries – from environmentally friendly construction to CO2-measurement and reduction, practical examples on ESD in libraries, and sustainability in (cultural) politics. The recordings of the lecture series are available on the dbv-website: www.bibliotheksverband.de/online-seminare#Nachhaltigkeit

Conclusion

The contribution that libraries make to achieving the SDGs can be an important tool for advocacy: it can help libraries to showcase their societal relevance, to become part of political networks and to be perceived as invaluable institutions within our society. By taking the example of the German political and library systems, this article has sought to demonstrate that action is needed at every political level and that efforts at each of these levels are interdependent und mutually reinforcing. At the same time, the article has shown that libraries still do receive too little attention politically for their contribution to the SDGs. More advocacy efforts at every political level will thus be necessary in the future in order to make the topic of “libraries and sustainability” inescapable in the political debate.

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