

Satellite Meeting: Inspired and Engaged on Sustainability

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Leading by Example. Initiatives in Austrian Public Libraries to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract:

As cultural and educational institutions with a broad impact, public libraries contribute to the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Their core mission of ensuring and providing the population with free access to information is closely linked to the 2030 Agenda goals. This paper highlights the diverse activities of public libraries in Austria that aim to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda. The focus of the paper lies on best practice examples that show that small, rural public libraries can be models of sustainability. The projects are diverse and address a variety of sustainability goals. The commitment of small libraries to sustainability and to activate the respective community will be shown.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations Agenda 2030, Austria, Public Libraries

1 INTRODUCTION

Back in 2014 the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) lobbied for libraries to be recognized as important players in the United Nations development agenda. IFLA demonstrated that the free access to information provided by libraries is essential for sustainable development. Since then, the association has supported libraries around the world in their work to implement the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and has advocated for the establishment of libraries as capable partners in the 2030 Agenda.¹

¹ Klauser (2018), p. 686–687.

The Austrian Library Association (Büchereiverband Österreichs, BVÖ), which represents the interests of public libraries, has also responded to these efforts. The German-speaking library associations met in 2017 in Vienna. 22 multipliers from Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and South Tyrol addressed the question of how libraries can contribute to sustainable development. It was agreed that libraries already are sustainable institutions in itself – for example, through the circulation of media. Some of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda describe core tasks of libraries, such as free access to information or guaranteeing quality education and lifelong learning opportunities.

2 TAKING EXAMPLES TO THE PUBLIC

The aim of the workshop was to set the course for how libraries can make a more comprehensive contribution to sustainable development. It was also discussed how libraries can use this work for their lobbying. This meeting was the starting point for a joint platform: based on the IFLA Library Map of the World², the biblio2030³ platform was initiated. This platform shows projects of German-speaking libraries that are committed to sustainable development in the sense of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda. Libraries are called upon to submit their projects and thus make them accessible to a broader public. In turn these examples act as a source of inspiration for other libraries. Each library can independently and easily present their projects using an online submission form. In May 2022, more than 50 projects from Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and South Tyrol were gathered on the platform and exhibit the diverse work that libraries are doing in terms of sustainability. In addition to this collection of examples, the platform also provides general information on the 2030 Agenda, details on the various goals, and ideas on how these can be implemented in the library setting. Furthermore, there is a link collection with freely accessible promotional materials, such as posters or bookmarks. This platform is based on the belief that the broad visibility of best practice examples can inspire other libraries to undertake projects and assist in generating ideas and their implementation.

The Austrian Library Association offers comprehensive information about the library system in its member magazine “Büchereiperspektiven” (“Library Perspectives”), which is published at least twice a year. With a circulation of 3,000 copies, the magazine is the professional library journal with the widest reach in Austria. Each issue is devoted to a specific focus topic, takes up (inter)national trends in the library sector, and offers a service section.⁴

In 2015 the issue 2/15⁵ was already dedicated to the topic “Go green! Bibliothek und Umwelt” (“Go green! Library and Environment”). This focus explored the question of how libraries can reduce their ecological footprint and communicate topics such as resource conservation and sustainability. International best practice examples illustrated lived sustainability in the library.

Titled “UN-Agenda 2030. Nachhaltigkeit in der Bibliothek”⁶ (“UN-Agenda 2030: Sustainability in the Library”), the issue 2/20 presented library projects from Austria that contribute to achieving the sustainability goals of the 2030 Agenda. The chosen projects

² <https://librarymap.ifla.org> (accessed 19 June 2022)

³ <https://www.biblio2030.de> (accessed 19 June 2022)

⁴ Büchereiverband Österreichs (2020), p. 71.

⁵ https://www.bvoe.at/epaper/2_15

⁶ https://www.bvoe.at/epaper/2_20

address different sustainability goals: Events that focus on feminist concerns and thereby contribute to gender equality and self-determination of women and girls (SDG 5), self-sewn bags that advertise the library or the reuse of discarded books to demonstrate responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), or cooperations that contribute to raising young people's awareness of global interrelationships and take steps towards reduced inequalities (SDG 10).

Libraries are sustainable institutions simply by virtue of their central tasks – for example, providing low-threshold access to information or by sharing media. But even beyond these tasks, libraries are actively committed to achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. In the following, an insight into the diverse initiatives of public libraries in Austria for the implementation of various sustainability goals is given.

3 PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN AUSTRIA

To be able to understand these projects better, a short overview of the public libraries in Austria is given here beforehand. There are about 1,300 public libraries in Austria, about half of them are run by municipalities alone, 26.8% are run by several institutions. To a lesser extent, they are run by church institutions (15.7%). When one talks about public libraries in Austria, one automatically talks about volunteerism. Around 80 percent of library employees work on a voluntary basis and thus shape most of the library landscape in Austria. Of more than 10,000 employees in public libraries, about 7,700 are volunteers, meaning they do not receive regular compensation for their work. It is also worth noting the gender distribution of library staff: 87.1 percent of staff are women and 12.9 percent are men.⁷

The majority of the public library projects presented below take place in villages that have between 5,000 and 10,000 inhabitants and are often located in rural areas. The two main exceptions are the library in Wiener Neustadt, with a population of around 50,000, and the city library in Linz, the capital of Upper Austria, with a population of around 200,000. Small and rural libraries were deliberately selected to demonstrate possibilities for communicating sustainable topics despite the lack of a large budget. The library as a firmly anchored community institution in a municipality holds great potential in this matter.

At least in the German-speaking countries sustainable projects in public libraries are showing trends that are being implemented across regions, for example: the library of things, upcycling projects, repair cafés or urban gardening projects. In this paper it was aimed to give space to more unique projects and initiatives as well. For a clearer structure, the respective library projects are categorized under single SDGs, even if they often act in the direction of several SDGs and they could be sorted into more than one area.

4 QUALITY EDUCATION (SDG 4)

In a structure-weak region in the province of Upper Austria a mobile library – called MoBib – has been operated by volunteers with a great deal of commitment since summer 2019. It delivers reading material directly to where life takes place in the small villages of Upper Austria. The project was initiated by architecture student Florian Radner, who developed the project as part of his thesis. Since rural regions with poor infrastructure often

⁷ Stieber (2022), p. 46–50.

lack both premises and financial resources, the idea of sharing cultural infrastructure was the result. Every first Monday of the month, a tractor pulls a small wooden house full of books through the valley between Hinterstoder, Klaus and Steyrling. These are the three villages that share the mobile library. The library has defined opening hours, depending on the location. It is generally open two or three times a week for three hours. Due to its mobility, the library can stop at well-visited public places. For example, in Hinterstoder the MoBib is located between the municipal office and the playground, in Klaus next to the outdoor public swimming pool and in Steyrling next to the village store. The MoBib also provides a space and setting for special occasions. With its double doors open, it serves as a stage for readings. But also, concerts, book flea markets or similar events have been organized or are planned in the future. In addition, the MoBib can be used by schools as a learning space, for example for writing workshops. With more than 150 active users and over 1,000 borrowed media after one year of operation, expectations were exceeded. The MoBib offers more than just reading material; it is a place where people can meet. In summer, it invites children from the neighboring playground to sink into the deck chairs in front of it with a book or to play on a picnic blanket. The mobile library offers easy access to information and supports (early) literacy.⁸

In Götzis (Vorarlberg) librarians are working hard to welcome learners of all ages into their spaces. Events, courses, and workshops for all age groups, offers for early reading promotion and more are already part of the standard program of many libraries. The multilingual library in Götzis is trying to go one step further. Its affiliation with both the municipality and the adult education center (Volkshochschule) in Götzis makes it possible to offer a wide range of learning and further education programs: German and other language courses, basic education for adults, early literacy, hand lettering, natural cosmetics, fasting courses, tumble groups, STEM offers for children, workshops for multilingual parents and lectures for all educators. The diverse offering is made possible through cooperations with the adult education center and other partners from the education sector. The new “Learning Mentors” project of the Diocese Feldkirch therefore came at just the right time for the library. The aim of this project is to utilize volunteer learning mentors wherever people need help and support in learning. Not only students are addressed, but also adults, such as people learning German. A regular “learning afternoon” is therefore planned in the library in Götzis: Interested people can drop by without registering and get assistance and (homework) tips from the learning mentors. And maybe they will also borrow a book. The multilingual library in Götzis offers inclusive spaces where cost is not a barrier to new knowledge and skills.⁹

In addition to the more interactive projects, the providing of literature and information on the topic of sustainability is of course also an important task of the library. The librarians' association in Salzburg offers support to libraries in this regard, especially in the educational offerings for adults: “A Climate Suitcase on a Library Journey” has been in place for two years. There are five suitcases, each filled with 60 items of media on the subject of climate and further material. The suitcases will each stop at a library for three weeks. The state of Salzburg provides each participating library with a special grant of 300 euros to purchase media related to the theme. At the same time, the respective library – usually in cooperation with an adult education provider – organizes an event. Despite difficult conditions in the last two years due to the pandemic, 50 public libraries in Salzburg have taken part so far.¹⁰

⁸ Büchereiperspektiven 1/21, p. 36–37.

⁹ Büchereiperspektiven 1/22, p. 14–15.

¹⁰ Büchereiperspektiven 1/22, p. 17.

5 LIFE ON LAND (SDG 15)

The municipality of Purkersdorf in Lower Austria recently became an SDG municipality, and the library views it as its task to contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. This is how the project “BiblioBienen” (“BiblioBees”) came into being. The theme of bees was chosen as the focus of the annual project because it can appeal to several target groups, and it reflects the diversity of the library work. The library takes over the patronage of a beehive, which is placed on a centrally located spot in the village. The BiblioBienen can be visited there at any time. In summer, the honey is extracted together with the beekeeper in the nature park and then sold in the library for a charity project. To provide expert knowledge on the subject, two lectures by the beekeeper are organized, one for adults and one for children. In addition, kindergarten children will attend the play “Becoming Beezzzz” in the library. Also, the mascot BiBee was created, which creates a high recognition for the project.¹¹

At the library in Schwertberg (Upper Austria) the focus is not on bees but on butterflies. Children can follow the transformation from caterpillar to butterfly themselves at the library. The fact that there is a great deal of interest in environmental experiments among children was apparent years ago when the library combined a reading session on the topic of spring with a practical introduction to butterfly breeding. This is how the butterfly project was born. With the help of a butterfly expert, many butterfly caterpillars move into the library's caterpillar home each May. Via social media the customers are notified of the new pets, as they quickly need a new home where they will be cared for and fed. About 60 families, school classes, kindergarten and nursery groups pick up the little animals at the library each year. The staff prepares a free “caterpillar starter kit” for the handover, which families can use to build a caterpillar home (plug-in sponge, fly net, rubber band and information on feeding, care, development, release). In the weeks that follow it's time for the families to go out into nature every day, collect nettles, feed, muck out, and wait for the miracle to unfold. While taking care of the caterpillar, many children become curious to learn more about the life of butterflies. Therefore, there are non-fiction and picture books, info sheets and postcards at the library's theme table.¹²

At the public library in Eferding (Upper Austria) the librarian is also a botanist and offers nature workshops, STEM programs and a plant exchange in the library. For fifteen years there has been an annual nature workshop with a focus theme for children: vegetables, fruits, weeds, witchweeds, pond, and meadow have already been among them. When the weather is nice, the workshop starts with a story being read to the children in the library, followed by a plant search game outside: Each child is given a card with a plant on it and has to search for it. The children can mark the plants they have found on a worksheet. Afterwards, there is crafting. The edible plants are spread on sandwiches, and herb butter has also been made. The nature workshop takes place in any weather; if it rains, the plants are brought into the library without further ado.¹³

Amateur gardeners can not only learn about useful and ornamental plants through borrowed media in the Chamber of Labor (AK) libraries in Carinthia, but since 2021 they can also “borrow” seed packets in the seed library. Interested people may take up to two different seed packets and sow the seeds in their garden or on their balcony and enjoy flowers or vegetable

¹¹ Büchereiperspektiven 1/22, p. 66–67.

¹² Büchereiperspektiven 1/21, p. 70–71.

¹³ Büchereiperspektiven 1/22, p. 22–24.

harvests beyond the summer. In total, the AK libraries currently offer over 100 varieties of different flower and vegetable seeds in the library. Users who want to become real gardeners will also find a special section for gardening in the AK libraries.¹⁴

All the presented projects support a sustainable approach to the environment and ensure low-threshold access to it and the relevant information.

6 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION (SDG 12)

At the library in Walchsee in Tyrol around 700 items of media are discarded each year. Instead of simply disposing them, they are reused as individual book gifts. The maculated books are first wrapped in newsprint, then each book is labeled with a note, for example “nonfiction”, “novel with a heart” or “thriller”. A bookmark is placed in each book with the library's contact information and hours. The book gifts are given at events, senior outings, flea markets or directly to library users. Books that are no longer suitable for re-gifting are creatively processed at craft afternoons in the library. By reusing the books that have been sorted out, the Walchsee library contributes to sustainable consumption and production patterns.¹⁵

The library in Purgstall an der Erlauf in Lower Austria is housed in two rooms at the back of the town hall, so there is no way to draw attention to the library and its offerings in a window display. So, an alternative was found to get the library out there: first, bags were sewn from scraps of fabric. Then stamps were made from wooden letters to add the words “Bücherei Purgstall” to the bag. The finished bags are given to the library users free of charge to transport the borrowed media. If the bags are then reused, for example, when shopping, the advertising effect for the library will be even greater. Fabric supplies are also provided: users bring leftover fabric, discarded bedding, and the like to the library, so that only the paint and wooden letters had to be purchased.¹⁶

Under the motto “sharing is caring” the public library in Linz 2021 launched a library of things. Since then, in addition to books, it has also been possible to borrow practical items such as an impact drill, a window vacuum cleaner or a bread baking machine. When purchasing, emphasis was placed on acquiring things that help customers implement projects of various kinds. Interested parties can find a list of available items in an online catalog. The desired thing can also be selected on site and directly taken away. The city library wants to help users both save money and space and at the same time do something for the environment.¹⁷ In 2019 the environmental management of the city's Planning, Technology and Environment Division and the city library have started renting cargo bikes for free. Cargo bikes are an environmentally friendly alternative for taking children or transporting loads up to 100 kilograms. A transport bike often gets you to your destination in Linz faster than a car and saves on parking fees. To enable residents of Linz to use and get to know these environmentally friendly forms of mobility, the city's environmental department has launched the free rental service in Linz. The cargo bikes were purchased from the environmental

¹⁴ https://www.bvoe.at/news/saatgutbibliothek_der_ak_kaernten

¹⁵ Büchereiperspektiven 2/20, p. 17.

¹⁶ Büchereiperspektiven 2/20, p. 16.

¹⁷ <https://wissensturm.linz.at/bibliothek/Dingleih.php>

department's budget, and they can be rented from the city libraries. The “Linrad” (“Linzbike”) project was longlisted for the IFLA Green Library Award 2021.¹⁸

There are many other small, and for many libraries easily implementable, projects that encourage sustainability and increase users' awareness of the importance of the issue. Excess fruit and vegetables unfortunately often end up in organic waste or rotting in the garden, although many people would be happy to have the leftovers. That's why the library in Henndorf (Salzburg) started a fruit and vegetable exchange in August 2020 at the library. Offerers can leave a note with the goods on a green wooden leaf and hang it on a tree in the library. The takers also leave a note with the produce they wanted. A full-page report in the newspaper “Salzburger Nachrichten” and a video attracted a lot of attention, and the Robert-Jungk-Library for Questions of the Future included the exchange market in its Atlas for Sustainable Development. The exchange now takes place every year and will continue to expand.¹⁹ The library in Saalfelden (Salzburg) operates an open refrigerator in the library. Users can easily hand in food that they cannot use up, and others diligently take it with them, so that the careful use of food is exemplified locally.²⁰

7 CONCLUSION

Clearly, only a small selection of the diverse activities around sustainability in Austrian libraries could be presented here. There are many other libraries that are also very active in this area, just as the larger city libraries integrate sustainable initiatives into many parts of their work and are continuing to expand them.

Hopefully, this paper has highlighted that public libraries in Austria demonstrate through innovative projects that even libraries with a small budget can play an important role in raising awareness for and achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

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¹⁹ Büchereiperspektiven 1/21, p. 71.

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