



HE. Ms. Michelle Bachelet,
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
Palais des Nations
CH-1211 GENEVA 10,
Switzerland

Dear High Commissioner,

Please find below a joint submission from the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, Prins Willem-Alexanderhof 5, 2595 BE, The Hague, The Netherlands, www.ifla.org) and Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation (MBAPF, Baho Road Corner of Baho and Ahlone Roads 55, Ahlone Township, Yangon, Myanmar, <https://www.mbapf.org/contact>) for the third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review in Myanmar.

IFLA is the global organisation for libraries and library associations, founded in 1927, at present with over 1500 members in more than 150 countries. IFLA works to represent the interests of library and information services and their users, and is committed to promoting the principles of universal and equitable access to information and freedom of expression as drivers of development and well-being.

The Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation was founded in 2002 by a group of committed librarians, business and civic leaders with the goal of promoting knowledge and learning among Myanmar people, especially those in disadvantaged communities. MBAPF works in conjunction with local and international non-governmental organizations to assist libraries with training and donations of printed and digital material, and the preservation of Myanmar historical and contemporary print culture.

Overview

1. The Myanmar population has access to a large library network. A 2014 study showed that there were nearly 5,000 active libraries in the country;¹ and recent estimates suggest that there are currently approx. 400 public libraries run by the Ministry of Information's Information Public Relation Department and around 6,600 libraries run by local communities – by youth, village leaders or other influential community members.
2. Myanmar libraries are trusted community institutions, and their work is especially relevant in ensuring access to information and knowledge for vulnerable groups. Moreover, many community libraries have transformed into community centres, delivering services to meet local community needs. Such services range, for example, from ICT skills training to seminars, workshop and discussion venues. As such, libraries work to help deliver on human rights pertaining to access to information (Article 19 of the Universal Declaration on Human rights), education (Article 26), and the right to participate in cultural and civic life. Their work is relevant to the recommendations 143.117, 143.53, 143.74, 143.111, 143.117.

Access to information for vulnerable groups: development and human rights

Recommendation:

143.117. Continue efforts to develop its human capital through education, training and empowering vulnerable groups.

Rural and peri-urban residents and access to information

3. Aside from traditional services focused on access to print materials, a significant number of community libraries have taken on the role of digital community hubs. Access to digital telecommunication services and the Internet in Myanmar has rapidly increased in the last years – especially when it comes to mobile internet, where recent estimates currently show about 105% SIM penetration and 80% smartphone penetration.² This points to a dual community need: many people who make use of such connectivity for the first time can benefit from ICT skills training and digital literacy; while availability of public internet facilities can help towards the digital inclusion of those who cannot afford individual connectivity.
4. Many libraries strive to meet these community needs. *Beyond Access Myanmar*, a large-scale project run by the Myanmar Book Aid and Presentation Foundation, IREX, Ooredoo Myanmar and the Ministry of Information since 2013 has assisted and equipped many libraries to transform into such digital hubs, and measured the impact.
5. The project focused on libraries in rural and peri-urban areas,³ since the majority of Myanmar’s population lives in rural areas (with approx. 15 out of 55 million people living in urban areas).⁴ The project equipped 150 libraries with internet connectivity and access devices – as well as trained librarians to be able to offer digital skills support and learning opportunities for the members of their communities.
6. A survey documenting the impact of the intervention between February 2015 and April 2019 shows that, in 150 libraries over 45 months:
 - More than 360,00 people made use of new library facilities;
 - 20,000 people accessed the internet for the first time;
 - Over 40% used the new library facilities to access news or online learning opportunities;
 - Over 30% used the service to improve their technology skills;
 - About 20% used the service to search and/or apply for jobs.⁵
7. The usage statistics point to the link between digital inclusion and people’s rights to education, work, and freedom to seek information. An established network of libraries can help ensure such inclusion and help deliver on these human rights. Based on the library network’s fit for these objectives, a further expansion of the project is planned.⁶

RECOMMENDATION: We encourage further efforts to support meaningful digital inclusion, especially in rural areas, to help deliver on human rights to information, education and employment. We invite forthcoming digital inclusion initiatives to draw on the library network’s established infrastructure, inclusive learning capacity and reach to deliver effective interventions.

Access to information and knowledge for women and girls

Recommendation:

143.53. Continue to take steps to enhance women empowerment.

8. The large library network also offers an opportunity to ensure better access to information and knowledge for women and girls. Like many other countries, Myanmar is experiencing a gender digital divide – in the ability to access and make use of the internet and ICT devices, digital skills,

and access to relevant digital content.⁷ Libraries can help mitigate this digital divide⁸ – and one example of a large-scale intervention implemented in the library sector is the “Tech Age Girls Myanmar” project, sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

9. The Myanmar Book Aid, Beyond Access and Presentation Foundation and IREX have introduced this project in Myanmar (also delivered by IREX in other countries) in 2016. The goal of *Tech Age Girls Myanmar* is to offer digital literacy, leadership and project management skills training to girls between the ages of 16 and 20. Librarians throughout Myanmar make use of the TAG curriculum to deliver training and community engagement. One participating library also formed the *Intensity Ladies Network*, where project participants offer weekly sessions on a wide range of topics – language, communication and business skills, ICT and civic education – to girls and women of all ages.⁹
10. This project has been successfully running for 4 consecutive years; and received a *Seed Alliance* award for ISIF Asia for Gender Empowerment and Innovation at the 2018 Internet Governance Forum.¹⁰ This intervention demonstrates how the broad library network can deliver concerted actions to offer access to knowledge and information for a vulnerable population.

RECOMMENDATION: In light of the library network’s capacity to deliver access to knowledge, information and learning for vulnerable communities, we encourage further adoption of such initiatives and support for libraries in implementing them.

Communities at higher risk of human trafficking and ‘risky migration’

Recommendation:

143.74. Step up efforts towards the prevention and suppression of human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants by air, land and sea.

11. Another pilot intervention to ensure access to crucial information for a vulnerable community has been implemented by the Asia Foundation and the Myanmar Library Association in 2016-2017. The project saw 39 librarians trained to deliver a curriculum on human trafficking, risky migration, and personal development. The goal was to raise awareness and expose at-risk community members to information that would help reduce their vulnerability to these forms of exploitation.¹¹ The project estimates that by the end of 2017, the training has been delivered to more than 500 at-risk young people across Myanmar.¹²
12. Similarly, the *Navigator* project implemented by IREX and MBAPF in Myanmar works with libraries in Yangon, Bago, and Magway regions to support migrant workers. As part of the project, librarians are trained to reach out to migrants and prospective migrants, as well as their families, and provide them with key current information. For example, they offer skills training and relevant advice - how to contact Myanmar embassies, anti-trafficking agencies and organisations supporting migrants abroad, what the potential risks are and how to avoid them, how to get a passport, and more.¹³ These examples show how the library network’s position within Myanmar communities can help implement programs aimed at vulnerable groups.

RECOMMENDATION: We invite the report to further examine the role of awareness-raising and capacity building initiatives in preventing ‘risky migration’ and human trafficking, and the role the library network can play in implementing these.

The right to education

Recommendations:

143.111. Redouble steps taken in providing quality and affordable health and education services, including providing adequate learning opportunities.

143.117. Continue efforts to develop its human capital through education, training and empowering vulnerable groups.

13. Libraries around Myanmar also offer learning opportunities, helping realise people’s right to education. School and university libraries support formal educational institutions in their operations, and community libraries offer informal learning opportunities for their members. The latter is particularly important for children and youth who are not in the formal education system. A 2016 Reuters report references census results showing that one in five children were working rather than attending school¹⁴ – and libraries offer informal learning opportunities for these members of their communities.

14. Meanwhile, *Myanmar Book Aid, Room To Read*, the Myanmar Library Association and the Ministry of Education have launched a pilot project to renew and revitalise school libraries. A key goal of the project is to complement formal literacy education with library-based interventions to promote reading habits among school children. In 2018, 20 school libraries were refurbished, their library collections renewed, a library management and monitoring system introduced and capacity-building programs delivered to librarians and other key stakeholders. The project was later extended, having now reached 309 schools with the help of such partners as UNICEF.¹⁵

RECOMMENDATION: We strongly encourage further implementation of library-based educational initiatives, particularly for vulnerable and marginalized populations. We encourage further development of an enabling policy environment which helps libraries to serve as informal learning centers for their communities.

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- ¹ The Asia Foundation, Myanmar Book Aid and Presentation Foundation, 2014, “Myanmar Library Survey: a comprehensive study of the country’s public libraries and information needs”, <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/MyanmarLibrarySurvey.pdf>.
- ² Oxford Business Group, 2019, “Growth of mobile and internet usage make Myanmar ICT more competitive”, <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/overview/tech-transformation-mobile-and-internet-usage-rise-sector-set-expand-and-become-more-competitive>.
- ³ Telecom Review Asia Pacific, 2019, “Ooredoo Myanmar’s digital library program encourages digital literacy among citizens”, <https://www.telecomreviewasia.com/index.php/news/network-news/1649-ooredoo-myanmar-s-digital-library-program-encourages-digital-literacy-among-citizens>.
- ⁴ The World Bank, 2019, “Myanmar’s Urbanization: Creating Opportunities for All”, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/myanmar/publication/myanmars-urbanization-creating-opportunities-for-all>.
- ⁵ “Ooredoo Myanmar’s digital library program encourages digital literacy among citizens”.
- ⁶ <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/05/11/2019/Ooredoo-expands-digital-libraries-project-to-60-more-locations>
- ⁷ IREX, 2017, “Ending the Gender Digital Divide in Myanmar: summary of a problem-based political economy assessment”, <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/node/resource/overview-gender-digital-divide-myanmar-assessment.pdf>.
- ⁸ IREX, Beyond Access, “Why young women need digital skills now to participate in Myanmar’s new information society”, <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/myanmar-gender-study-findings.pdf>.
- ⁹ Mary Grace Reich, 2016, “How are tech-savvy girls in Myanmar closing the gender digital divide?”, IREX, <https://www.irex.org/success-story/how-are-tech-savvy-girls-myanmar-closing-gender-digital-divide>.
- ¹⁰ Internet Governance Forum, 2018, “IGF 2018 - Day 2 - Salle XI - SEED Alliance Awards Ceremony – output of real-time captioning”, <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/igf-2018-day-2-salle-xi-seed-alliance-awards-ceremony-0>.
- ¹¹ Mi Ki Kyaw Myint, 2018, “Can Myanmar’s Libraries Help Combat Human Trafficking?”, The Asia Foundation, <https://asiafoundation.org/2018/03/28/can-myanmars-libraries-help-combat-human-trafficking/>
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ IREX, “Navigator – Supporting Safe Migration and Antitrafficking Efforts in Myanmar and Nepal”, <https://www.irex.org/project/navigator-supporting-safe-migration-and-antitrafficking-efforts-myanmar-and-nepal>.
- ¹⁴ Reuters, 2016, “One in five children in Myanmar go to work instead of school - census”, <https://www.reuters.com/article/myanmar-youth-labour/one-in-five-children-in-myanmar-go-to-work-instead-of-school-census-idUSL3N1702TV>
- ¹⁵ Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation, 2017, “Let’s Read Project”, <https://www.mbapf.org/projectdetail/16>.