



# Libraries and Good Governance

A Briefing, 11 May 2018

- Information is central to good governance, in terms of governments' own use of knowledge and citizens' ability to get the best from eGovernment tools and hold those that rule them to account.
- Libraries have a role to play in all of these areas, informing policy making, supporting use of eGovernment tools, and giving the public access to information and the support needed to use it.
- This brief offers examples of library contributions in each of these areas, in order to stimulate discussion, notably around the Open Government Partnership.

Libraries play an essential role in promoting development from the bottom-up. They enable citizens to access information, and to develop the skills and confidence to apply it to improve their, and their families', lives. Information can make a huge difference to people in finding a job, staying healthy, increasing agricultural protection, and simply staying in touch with family and friends. Information also underpins individuals' understanding of their rights.

But some challenges need to be tackled at a bigger scale. Effective governments can achieve what cannot be done at the level of the individual, from keeping people safe to access to welfare, education and social security. This includes developing infrastructure, running health systems and schools and promoting soft skills among citizens. To be effective, governments at all levels need to be well informed, able to implement their policy goals, and accountable to the people.

Libraries have a major role to play in all these areas, as this brief aims to show. It is intended to inform library associations about the possibilities for advocacy around the subject. External readers may be interested in understanding what libraries can offer.

## Libraries and Better Policy Making

In order to be successful, governments need to be able to call on evidence and expertise. With a growing understanding that there are no simple answers to many of the policy challenges faced today, the need to make full use of all available information is growing. Both in developed and developing countries, 'Evidence-Based Policy-Making' is high on the agenda (see right).

Government libraries are at the heart of the response. They have a core role in **making the link between officials and the wider world**, especially

academic sources or international comparisons which may not be available open access, as well

## Defining Evidence-Based Policy-Making

*'Evidence-based policy-making (EBP) is a discourse or set of methods which informs the policy process, rather than aiming to directly affect the eventual goals of the policy. It advocates a more rational, rigorous and systematic approach.*

*The pursuit of EBP is based on the premise that policy decisions should be better informed by available evidence and should include rational analysis. This is because policy which is based on systematic evidence is seen to produce better outcomes. The approach has also come to incorporate evidence-based practices'.*

Sophie Sutcliffe and Julius Court Overseas Development Institute. See the [full article](#).

as publications by civil society. With time short for many decision-makers, the work librarians do in summarising and sharing the latest ideas and views is essential.

**Supporting government libraries and ensuring that they are properly integrated into the work of ministries will make a contribute towards better informed policy-making.** This in turn should lead to better government.

### IFLA Statement on Government Provision of Public Legal Information in the Digital Age

This statement sets out a number of recommendations to governments as concerns how they manage – and give access to – laws, regulations and other legal information:

- *Ensure that all public legal information produced in digital format is available to the public on an equitable, no-fee basis.*
- *Protect official publications of law in a digital format through authentication using technological measures, in order to ensure that the content is trustworthy, and make this clear to people.*
- *Incorporate technology-based authentication measures as part of the creation of online sources of public legal information rather than adding such technology later. Especially in the case of developing countries, addressing this concern from the start will save time and money in the long run.*
- *Develop and implement effective policies and programmes for the preservation of trustworthy legal materials in digital format, in partnership, as appropriate, with libraries, archives, or other memory institutions. When adopting new technologies to make legal information available digitally, ensure that these are built in such a way as to facilitate preservation for long-term public accessibility.*
- *Make preserved materials permanently accessible to the public without charge.*
- *Incorporate strategies for providing online access to public legal information into national development plans to implement the UN 2030 Agenda.*

See the [full statement](#)

### Libraries and eGovernment

eGovernment – the use of digital tools to provide government services – brings many potential benefits, from more money to spend on public services to greater flexibility and convenience for users. However, it also relies on all users having access to a computer, smartphone or similar device, and the confidence to use it.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Frequently, it will be those most in need of public services who will struggle most to benefit. The challenge will only grow as governments move from 'digital-first' to 'digital-only' services, with no opportunities to phone or visit offices.

Ever since eGovernment emerged, libraries providing Internet access have taken on a key support role. **Those who do not have home access, or who do not feel comfortable filling in forms alone, come to the library**, where there is the potential of support on hand. In many cases, libraries organise drop-in clinics and other initiative to ensure that eGovernment does not leave people behind.

As well as services, libraries can also help people – especially marginalised groups – **access information about the laws that protect them**, for example regarding migration or worker protection. Law clinics in libraries – such as in the [US](#) and [Lithuania](#) – or even those simply helping people write administrative letters, as in [France](#), can help.

Of course to achieve this, as set out in

IFLA's Statement on Government Provision of Public Legal Information (see box), people must be able to **access the laws that govern them for free**, and **be sure that the text they are reading online is authentic** (i.e. has not been hacked or changed).

### Libraries Supporting Freedom of Information

In **Senegal**, many libraries have public information corners, where it is possible for users to engage with information from the government, and in **California** librarians are [being trained](#) to support freedom of information requests.

In **Mexico**, the role of libraries in helping people realise the right of access to public information is [recognised in law](#). In **Colombia**, libraries are not only serving as collection points for air quality data, but are also [teaching people data literacy skills](#) in order to be able to understand this, and use it to push for measures against pollution.

### Libraries and Accountability

Libraries provide access to all sorts of information, but have a particular role when it comes to information about government. This is essential if citizens are to be able to hold governments to account for things they have (or haven't) done. Information about budgets, decision-making, and the people who have met and shaped policies, is essential if governments are to respect the desires – and interests – of those they rule. See the inset box for more.

In order to ensure that governments cannot escape responsibility for their past actions, it is **essential that documents and information are preserved**. In its statement on Government Provision of Public Legal Information (see above), IFLA also highlighted the need for effective digital preservation strategies. Without this, it is not possible to go back and confirm what was said or promised previously, and so hold leaders to account. **Law libraries**, and **government information libraries** have a particularly strong role in this regard.

Librarians and library associations can play an important role upstream in **supporting the development of structured, user-friendly portals for government documents and data**. This is essential if we are to expect normal people to engage with information governments make available.

It is worth noting the specific case of **parliamentary libraries**. These play an essential role in supporting elected representatives in reviewing draft legislation and holding governments to account. Given that many members of parliament will not have the time or resources to understand all the issues they are faced with in detail, parliamentary libraries can provide them with valuable summaries, research and briefings. This allows them to ask questions, check on governments' claims, propose amendments to legislation and offer alternatives.

### The Open Government Partnership (OGP)

This initiative, launched in 2011, brings together [75 governments](#) which have **committed to promoting transparency, accountability and citizen engagement**. Potential members have to sign up to the [Open Government Declaration](#), and then enter a cycle of developing **National Action Plans**, undergoing review, and updating plans. The goal is to build a political momentum in favour of openness, and to encourage peer learning and pressure. Through an annual summit, this work is brought together.

National Action Plans work over a two year cycle, and should be the result of cooperation ('co-

#### The Goals of the Open Government Partnership

- *Increase the availability of information about governmental activities*
- *Support civic participation*
- *Implement the highest standards of professional integrity throughout our administrations*
- *Increase access to new technologies for openness and accountability*

creation') involving civil societies. The [guide](#) on how to develop these suggests a simple template, with an introduction, a summary of open government efforts to date, a description of the process followed in developing the new plan, and then a set of 5-15 commitments.

These commitments should cover actions on **transparency, accountability, and participation**. Each commitment should explain how the commitment contributes to open government and the OGP's values, how it will be measured, and milestones.

**National action plans – and their preparation – offer a valuable opportunity for librarians and library associations to underline the contribution that they can make.** The Australian Library and Information Association, in 2016, made its own [contribution](#) to a consultation on their National Action Plan, and saw the importance of public information centres and the National Library explicitly recognised in the final report.

### Opportunities for Librarians and Library Associations

IFLA's [Manifesto on Transparency, Good Governance and Freedom from Corruption](#) (2008) includes a number of key recommendations, ranging from advocating for better laws to practical steps libraries can take.

These, alongside IFLA's [Guidelines for Libraries of Government Departments](#) (2008), [Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services](#) (2015), and the [Statement on Government Provision of Public Legal Information in the Digital Age](#) (2016), offer a range of helpful arguments and recommendations.

Here are some things librarians and library associations could look at:

- 1) *Look at the available IFLA statements and guidelines. Use these in your own context.*
- 2) *Find out if your country is involved in the Open Government Partnership.*
- 3) *If it isn't involved, take a look at the [opportunities for engaging](#). Find out who else is arguing for transparency, accountability and citizen engagement in your country – can libraries help?*
- 4) *If it is involved, is there a National Action Plan, and does it reference libraries?*
- 5) *If not, when is the next review due? Send a letter to the responsible team, setting out how libraries can help.*
- 6) *Let IFLA know how you are getting on, and ask questions if you need help!*

*This brief has been prepared with input from the IFLA Government Libraries Section, Research Services for Parliaments Section, Government Information and Official Publications Section, and Law Libraries Section.*