



Understanding, Inclusion, Healing and Remembrance

An Article on Libraries and Peace, for International Peace Day 2018

Libraries and their users, as much as anyone else, have a strong interest in peace. As set out in Sustainable Development Goal 16, this is a basic pre-condition for the core library activities of supporting education, research, and access to culture.

International Day of Peace is therefore a time to remember the importance of peace for libraries – the tragic examples of the library in Mosul, or that of the National Library of Iran in the Iran-Iraq war¹ are evidence enough of what the lack of peace can mean. But it also gives an opportunity to think about what libraries can and do do to promote peace.

This article draws on papers presented at the World Library and Information Congress (WLIC) to identify four areas where libraries can help make a difference – understanding, inclusion, healing and remembrance.

Understanding

The ability to live together in communities is a key characteristic of humanity. As communities have grown, so too has the diversity of their members. Some have of course seen variation as a threat, and tried to impose single ways of thinking or doing, with those who do not belong removed.

Yet diversity is a reality, and can be a source of strength. For this to happen, there needs to be critical thinking at the level of individuals², strong institutions which protect rights³, and, crucially, tolerance and understanding within and across communities.

There are a number of examples of how libraries can help build understanding when it comes to religious differences, a frequent cause of conflict. As Maria Beatriz Marques sets out in a paper from 2017, developing ‘a spirit of religious solidarity and tolerance’ sits alongside encouraging ‘intercultural dialogue through activities that promote cultural diversity’ as a mission of libraries⁴. IFLA indeed has a Special Interest Group on Religions, Libraries and Dialogue, exploring these issues.

There is a particular role for libraries attached to religious institutions. Examples from Indonesia show that such special libraries can help the followers of one faith nonetheless find out about the beliefs of others. On the basis of this understanding, it is then possible to discuss, and build harmony⁵. In Bosnia and Hercegovina, which has seen terrible religious-ethnic conflict barely twenty years ago, there is also an effort to engage theological libraries in efforts to overcome the different social realities and perspectives that religious divides can create⁶.

Libraries can also help by understanding what people have in common. The Library of Alexandria in Egypt, for example, runs courses and visits for young people at different stages of their education, and from different parts of the country. These visits show that diversity is indeed part of Egypt’s heritage, and illustrate a history of co-existence and tolerance. This helps challenge discourses focused on the primacy or power of individual groups or religions, at a time of filter bubbles and extreme speech⁷.

¹ Pasyar, Parisa and Khosravi, Fariborz (2017)

² Simionescu, Codruța-Diana (2017)

³ Van Snellenberg, Richelle and Horváth, Edit (2017)

⁴ Marques, Maria Beatriz (2017)

⁵ Sari, Indah Novita and Haryanti, Ni Putu Premierita (2018)

⁶ Pejic, Irena and Mijovic, Tea Vuglec (2018)

⁷ Youssef Salib, Dina (2018)

Inclusion

Linked to understanding is inclusion. Where individuals – and groups – feel excluded, disadvantaged or subject to discrimination, there is tension and a risk of conflict. The chances of peace are stronger where there is no interest in rebellion or revolt. Libraries can help here too.

A powerful example comes from Colombia, which experienced one of the longest civil wars in modern history, between the government and FARC rebels. While the attention has tended to be on the two armed opponents, there has been less consideration of the groups caught in the middle, often of indigenous or Afro-American descent.

Jérémy Lachal, Romain Berthier and Muy-Cheng Peich, in a paper presented in 2018, explore how libraries have sought to help these communities, which have long either been ignored, or suffered from exactions by both sides. The deployment of mobile public libraries has made it possible to develop skills and provide access to information, giving the possibility to connect to wider society, and become economically sustainable. But the project has also allowed the communities to celebrate their own cultures and uniqueness, opening up the possibility for dialogue on an equal footing⁸.

But this is far from the only example. Libraries can lead the way in inclusivity by adapting more inclusive practices themselves. Collections is a key one, where ensuring that the diversity of a country or area is reflected on the shelves can be a first step towards greater inclusion in life outside. This is the case, for example, in Uganda, Makerere University, one of the oldest in the region, is also working to reflect the diverse groups and languages found in the country⁹.

Even in those situations where conflict is a reality, libraries can help prepare for peace by ensuring that the narrative of an inclusive, diverse society survives. In the case of Myanmar, for example, libraries in Illinois are seeking to counter the mono-ethnic policies of the government over the years¹⁰. Meanwhile, the Jarring collection of Uyghur manuscripts provides reminders of a situation where different groups lived together peacefully, in the hope that this may happen again¹¹.

Healing

Peace can be fragile. There are too many places which have known conflict in the recent past, and the risk of it returning is high. There is a need to promote healing and reconciliation with what has happened in the past, as a means of ensuring peace in future.

Libraries have been at the heart of efforts to promote this healing in Colombia. Libraries have played a specific role in inviting people to enter, and share their own experiences. By telling their stories, it becomes possible both to come to terms with their own suffering, but also to class it as history, and move on. This has required careful work by the librarians and researchers involved to ensure freedom of speech without harming reputations, but the model is already spreading¹².

The mobile public libraries project mentioned above also has a strong element of healing. Radio stations have been set up, allowing ex combatants to share their stories. Communities have created

⁸ Lachal, Jérémy, Berthier, Romain and Peich, Muy-Cheng (2018)

⁹ Naluwoza, Monica and Nabbosa, Racheal (2017)

¹⁰ Miller, Christopher A. (2018)

¹¹ Nilsson Nylander, Eva (2017)

¹² Rozo Higuera, Carolina and Solarte, Roberto (2017)

murals on the subject of the peace deal, and held discussions. Others have simply collected materials and built archives¹³.

In India and Pakistan, there has been extensive work by libraries and archives to work with women who witnessed and suffered from terrible violence during the Partition on 1947. Despite their suffering, they risk otherwise being written out of history and forgotten. However, by collecting their stories and experiences, libraries and archives are finally helping them to come to terms with their experience, and know peace themselves¹⁴.

Remembrance

Finally, libraries are essential as the guardians of history, and of the lessons this teaches us about the futility of conflict and the harm it does. Almost every library contains books and other materials about the past, and in doing so, contribute to avoiding the repetition of mistakes. They can also provide important counter-narratives to efforts to glorify certain interpretations of the past¹⁵.

Librarians and archivists are also often present on the ground – or at least virtually – gathering and recording the information that can help build understanding, and teach lessons later. Work by librarians in refugee camps in Tanzania is making it possible for researchers and the United Nations to understand what has triggered conflict, and avoid it in future¹⁶.

Meanwhile, the North Caucasus continues to see tensions and conflict between different groups, in order to track this, and provide the evidence of what has been said and shared in order to promote peace in future, libraries at the University of Illinois have created a digital archiving programme of newspapers and blogs. This will provide a vital resource¹⁷.

Conclusion

The examples given in this article are varied, and illustrate the diverse ways in which the work of libraries helps to prevent conflict happening in the first place, as well as ensuring that it doesn't return. Through promoting understanding, inclusion, healing and remembrance, libraries can make a difference.

Importantly, this is not just a question for libraries in conflict zones. Every library can contribute. As noted by Lek Choi Ngian, in an article on the role of libraries in strengthening tolerant and inclusive societies, 'armed with literacy and other skills that come more easily with literacy skills, citizens will also be more likely to be open, curious, interested in other people's culture and lives, and more tolerant. This creates better environments for more inter-cultural exchanges, leading to a higher chance of achieving tolerant and inclusive societies, and global peace and prosperity.'¹⁸

¹³ Lachal et al (2017), *ibid*.

¹⁴ Kaur, Trishanjit and Singh, Nirmal and Kaur, Simran (2017)

¹⁵ Luyt, Brendan (2018)

¹⁶ Obodoruku, Benedicta (2018)

¹⁷ Condill, Kit (2016)

¹⁸ Ngian, Lek Choh (2017)

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