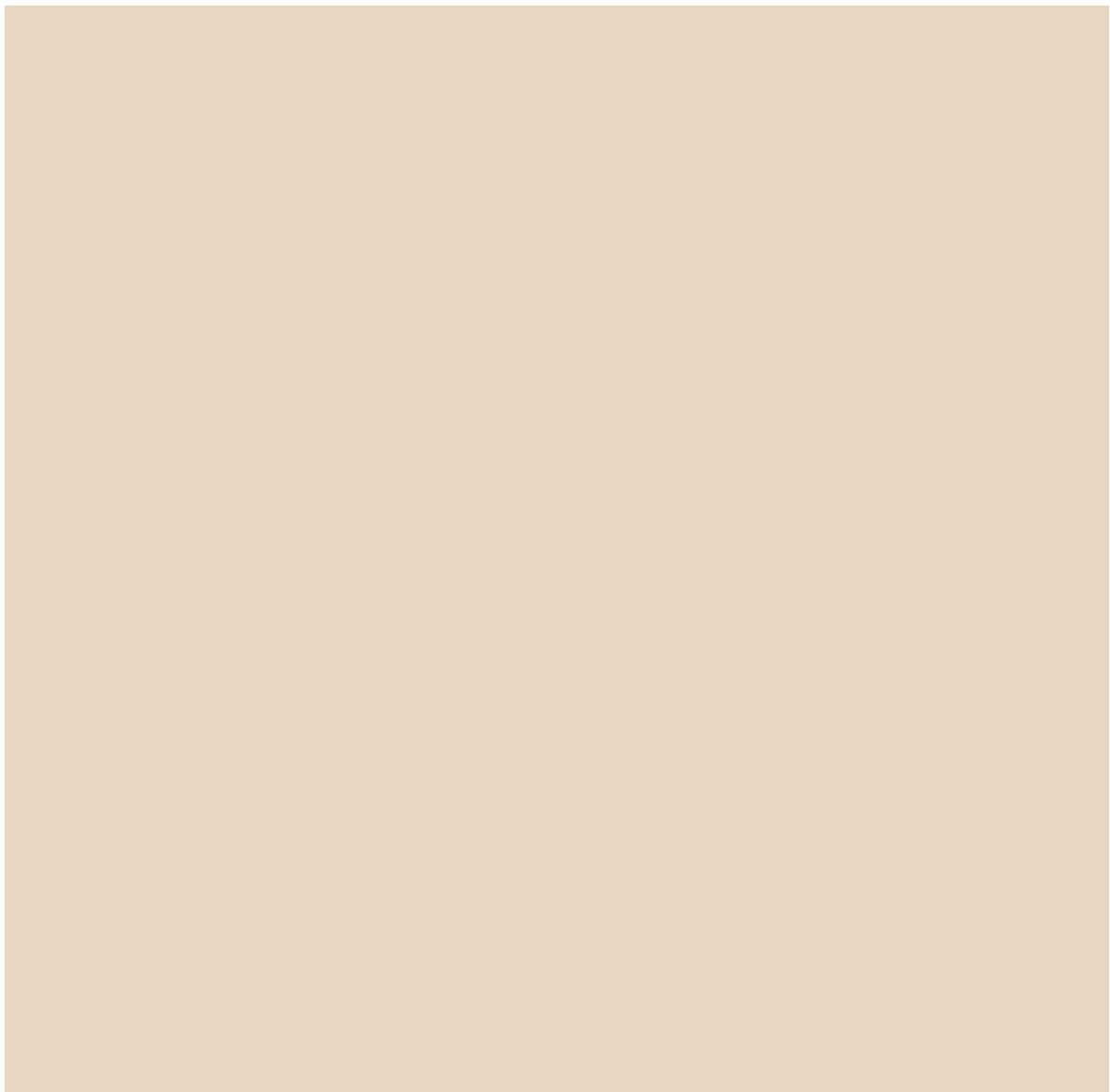


Sustainable Development Goals as guidelines for library impact assessment

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Abstract

The relevance of public libraries in our modern world is increasingly being called into question. In their search for accountability and legitimacy libraries set up research to measure the outcomes of library services and broader impacts that libraries have on society. The Sustainable Development Goals provide a framework that can be used to guide library impact research and communicate the library's impact in a way that appeals to government officials on local, national, European and global level.

A new performance story for libraries

For a long time, the public library sector could naturally count on government support. Their importance for society was undisputed and library policy received broad political support. In the past ten to fifteen years this changed dramatically. Society digitized rapidly, the preferences and behavior of readers and information seekers changed, and subsidy relationships between cultural and government institutions became more businesslike. In this climate local governments and other authorities more and more started to question the self-evidence of their investment of taxpayers' money in the public library systems. What role is there for public libraries to play in a society overloaded with information? What will happen if the shift from print to digital continues? Will people still borrow books in a couple years? As a result, the pressure on libraries increased to support and illustrate their role in society with a better evidence base.

For quite some time, evidence supporting the role of libraries consisted mainly of traditional statistics such as the number of registered users and visitors, the number of organized events, the number of books borrowed and the sizes of collections. Together with customer satisfaction surveys, these easy-to-count quantities gave a shallow impression of the volume and quality of the services libraries provide to their users. In recent years, there is an increasing awareness that these traditional and easy-to-count statistics provide an incomplete picture of the role and significance of libraries to society. The common idea is that research should not only address the question 'what have we done?' but should also answer the question 'what good have we done to our patrons and society as a whole?'. As a result, a worldwide search for information about the value of libraries and their impact on society started and resulted in a growing body of studies on the outcomes and impact of public libraries.

Figure 1: Comparing public library outputs, outcomes and impacts.

Output	Outcome	Impact
Directly visible, tangible or countable results of an activity and the extent to which it has been used, such as the number of computer courses and the number of participants. Output is countable and is expressed in (a) numerical value (s).	(Positive) change that has been brought about with library products and services in people's lives or within the community. Outcomes are often closely linked to the goals of a specific activity and show the extent to which a program is successful or effective.	The change that an organization brings about in the long term. Where "outcome" indicates a specific change as a direct consequence of an activity, impact is about the extent to which an activity has influenced the lives and environment of participants on a wider scale.

Public libraries and the Sustainable Development Goals

In recent years a new perspective was added to the conversation about the role and value of public libraries, as a result of the establishment of a global Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Agenda, which was adopted in 2015 by all member states of United Nations (UN), offers a common framework to help create a better world. It presents 17 universal Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs) - and 169 underlying targets - that reflect mayor global problems and policy areas in which positive change is needed. Since the establishment of the

Agenda several reports have been published that explore the link between libraries and SDGs. They emphasize the potential role of librarians as a key-partner for global development, in particular in the areas of ICT, culture, literacy and access to information (see for example Ifla, 2019a). In order to fulfill that role and make it visible to stakeholders, the SDGs should be incorporated into library strategy and used as guidelines for library impact research. Various arguments underlie that conviction:

- The SDGs help distinguish the policy fields or social issues that are considered to be relevant by policy makers and society in general and thus help prioritize library activities.
- They provide a common framework for assessing library impact and a common language to report on impact in a way that appeals to government officials on both local, national, European and global levels.
- This helps strengthen the dialogue between libraries and governments / stakeholders and create "an adequate advocacy narrative for elected Members, administrators and granters" (EBLIDA, 2019),
- and contributes to maintaining a positive "license to operate" - by drawing up a strategy that is in line with government priorities.

But how do we demonstrate the contribution that libraries make to achieving sustainable development?

SDGs as a framework for library impact research

So far, only a few attempts have been made to substantiate claims about the contribution of libraries to sustainable development with evidence. These studies match SDGs with relevant library indicators and data. In Portugal a mapping tool was developed that matches SDG targets and indicators with library "change dimensions" and library indicators (Pinto & Ochôa, 2017). And in the USA a "Library Environment Sustainability Progress Index"(LESPI) was developed that helps to assess and benchmark compliance with the Goals, based on 46 "library friendly indicators" (Aytac, 2019). Furthermore, in 2019 Ifla, together with the University of Washington, published a report about the contribution that "properly enabled" libraries can make to providing meaningful access to information as part of the UN Agenda (Garrido & Wyber, 2019). This study does not use quantitative library data to link library services to sustainable development, but illustrates the potential role that libraries can play by presenting case studies.

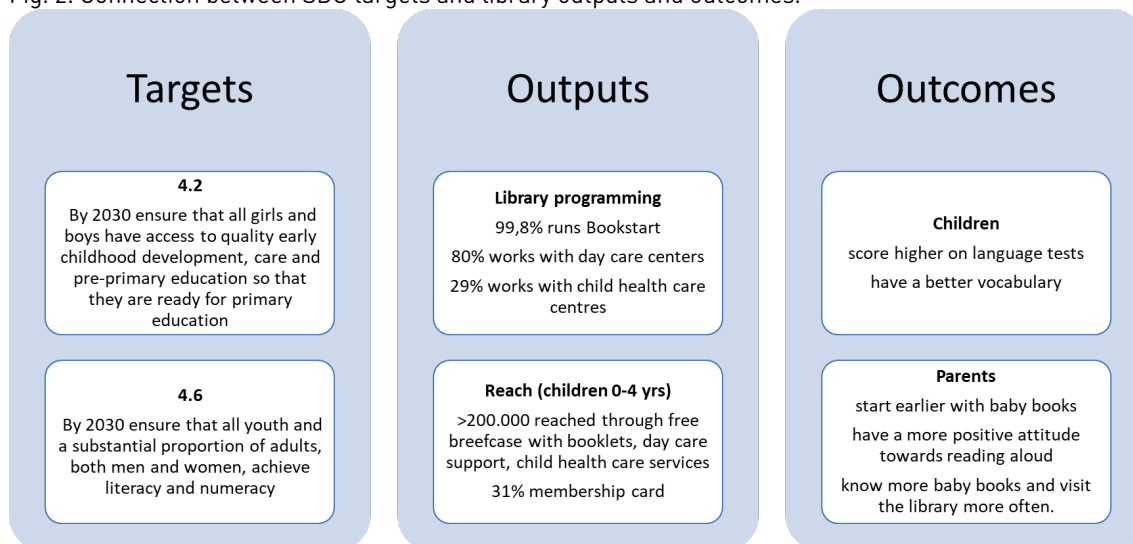
The research into the contribution of libraries' to the UN 2030 Agenda is thus scarce. Moreover, the evidence that is sought for in existing studies is limited: only indicators for activities and outputs are provided, the outcomes that libraries help achieve are not included. As a result, only the commitment and good intentions of libraries in the field of sustainability development are reported. There is no proof that positive change has actually taken place. In other words: the question 'what changes have we made in pursuing sustainable development?' remains unanswered.

Library impact and sustainable development: an example from the Netherlands

An important challenge for the future beyond impact measurement is to use library impact data to assess the extent to which libraries really make a contribution to achieving the universal goals. An example of that is presented in figure 2. It shows the match between library services and SDG 4: *ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*. We look at the role of public libraries in the field of pre-school education, from a national perspective. Promoting reading among children and preventing literacy deficiencies at a later age has always been an important policy goal for public libraries in the Netherlands. One of the most important educational programs that pursues this goal is Boekstart (Bookstart). In this program young children (0-4 years), parents and professionals are offered a stimulating reading environment, access to books, training and coaching. Both in the library, as well as at home, at day care centers and at child health care centers. The purpose of this program - stimulating literacy and giving young children a better start in primary school - shows a clear match with SDG4, especially if we look at target 4.2 and 4.6 which focus specifically on early childhood development and literacy. Although the connection between these targets and library services seems obvious from a substantive point of view, evidence will help support this claim. Information about outputs, as shown in column two, will give a first indication of the scale on which libraries make an effort. As is shown, there are many libraries that provide services in the field of preschool education.

And a large number of children and parents are reached by these services. This might indicate a big contribution to SDG4. The third column adds evidential value to this, by presenting research findings on the impacts of the early literacy programs. These show the positive changes that are brought about by the programs in terms of reading promotion and language skills.¹

Fig. 2. Connection between SDG targets and library outputs and outcomes.



Conclusion

In the international library sector it is agreed that libraries support sustainable development and could be important contributors to achieving the global SDGs. But the evidence supporting these claims is thin. First of all, because the number of studies that have been carried out is limited. Second, if evidence is presented, it is restricted to good examples or outputs about library services and reach. Collecting data on outcomes and impacts, rather than just outputs, could help libraries shed light on their significance to society and advocate for funding to continue their work. The SDGs could be used to prioritize areas that should be focused on in library impact research to identify the positive change that libraries make, especially in fields that are identified globally as important.

But of course research should not only be aimed at finding proof and confirming assumptions about library impact. It should also be carried out with the purpose of critical reflection on the library sector and the role it plays in solving social problems. It's nice to have a better view on the positive changes that libraries make, but it is just as important to see where libraries lag behind. Library impact research should not only be about proving, but also about improving impact on sustainable development.

¹ For more information about the early literacy programs and the various impact studies, see <https://www.bibliotheekinzicht.nl/organisatie/impact-van-de-bibliotheek-op-jeugd-en-lezen>.

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