

Do libraries have the key to the framework for implementing the SDGs?

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By Lisa Cornish

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A library. Photo by: [Pixabay](#) / CC0

MELBOURNE — As nations such as Australia struggle with finding the right way to implement the [Sustainable Development Goals](#), could libraries have the answers they are seeking?

At [Australia's second Sustainable Development Goals Summit](#), held in Melbourne on March 13, the [Australian Library and Information Association](#) launched their [report on supporting the SDGs](#) highlighting their important role in working across government, private sector, and among the community to create effective change.

Libraries cut across government jurisdictions. They are found within large communities, but through mobile services they also reach remote areas — and they reach disadvantaged or disabled people who may not be able to reach central services. Crucially, they are deeply trusted institutions.

More importantly, ALIA Chief Executive Officer Sue McKerracher explained to Devex, sustainability is part of the “DNA of librarians.” With strong will from both the top-down and the bottom-up to create a shift in how libraries operate and deliver services, they are creating a model for SDG implementation that governments ought to take note of.

Establishing the foundations early

Globally, libraries have been involved in the SDGs since early on. Through the [International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions](#), libraries contributed to the negotiating for the SDGs. The work of libraries can be seen threaded throughout the goals — including public access to information, access to technology, and lifelong learning.

“We lobbied really hard in New York,” McKerracher said. “And once we got those targets our international body asked the question on how libraries could put these through in every nation.”

“The first reaction when we talk about libraries and the SDGs is surprise and slight confusion. But then when you explain what it is we do and how we serve communities, people get excited.”

— Sue McKerracher, CEO of the Australian Library and Information Association

With a solid understanding of the goals and what they aim to achieve, libraries have been able to identify how they can best assist and transform their operations to enable support at all levels of society in which they operate.

In Australia, ALIA has already changed its constitution to include supporting the SDGs as a key function of their operations.

“For us, it is a major framework to describe the work we are doing,” McKerracher said.

Adapting to a transforming society

Just as governments need to change the way in which they operate to support a society transforming in the digital age, so do libraries.

“Libraries are an industry that is transforming,” McKerracher said. “The digital age is introducing new opportunities. Information used to be about the print book and now it is in multiples places. This allows us to transform the way we use library spaces — including making larger spaces to study as our private spaces become smaller.”

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McKerracher said the SDGs come at a good time to be part of this transformation. And it provides an important avenue to talk to governments, including agencies that they wouldn't traditionally consider to be key stakeholders.

“The good thing about libraries is we cut across various government jurisdictions,” she said. “We are a bit about education. We're a bit about breaking the poverty and its cycle through literacy. We're about health and well-being to help people live better and more fulfilling lives. And we're about culture and preservation. So it is important for us to talk to government.”

“The SDGs are a framework for us to have conversations with various government departments we usually wouldn’t.”

How libraries are embracing the goals

ALIA operates as Australia’s peak body for libraries. They support local libraries, state libraries, university libraries and more, acting as the “catalyst and filter” for libraries on a national and international scale, including promoting how their work supports the SDGs — such as services for women and refugees, support for micro-businesses, and sustainable and innovative buildings.

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In addition to being an example of how business and government can support the SDGs on a daily basis, they are an important avenue for educating communities. But rather than being the sole educator on SDGs, the plan is for libraries to collaborate with others for a wider impact.

“At this point, we have put the offer out there,” McKerracher said. “We are happy to work with the United Nations, Australian government, and other organizations. Bringing business, civil society, and government together as part of one awareness campaign with a single coordinating agency is a bit of a nightmare. We all do talk about the SDGs, but at different times and in different volumes. So if we organize a time — say between May and August — where we all talk about the SDGs in our own way and through our own methods, we potentially have a campaign that can coordinate itself with a large audience to hear us.

“I don’t want to run an awareness campaign through libraries that is made up of one sad poster and a bookmark.”

Moving forward, libraries are looking at how they can best support the goals and continue to progress the agenda.

In July, they are bringing libraries from Australia and the Pacific together to discuss their implementation of the SDGs, what is working, and how they can go beyond simply the goals to transform society. And they are supporting Australia’s first Voluntary National Review of the SDGs in collating case studies of their work.

But McKerracher said libraries want to move beyond business as usual.

“We have gathered case studies, but we also have data that we need to start reconfiguring it to match up with the Sustainable Development Goals — and we can report them in a way that supports other people,” she said. “Part of it is looking at data — what do we know, what can we generate easily and what we can supply to national reporting.

“The other thing is that we can talk about what we currently do and what we would do anyway — but the question is what e/se do we want to do?”

In creating a business and operations framework where the SDGs are just the start of transformation and engagement on a national and international scale, libraries are creating a model of governance that could be replicated within governments — to be truly representative of the SDGs.

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About the author



- **Lisa Cornish**[lisa_cornish](#)

Lisa Cornish is a Devex Reporter based in Canberra, where she focuses on the Australian aid community. Lisa formerly worked with News Corp Australia as a data journalist for the national network and was published throughout Australia in major metropolitan and regional newspapers, including the Daily Telegraph in Melbourne, Herald Sun in Melbourne, Courier-Mail in Brisbane, and online through news.com.au. Lisa additionally consults with Australian government providing data analytics, reporting and visualization services. Lisa was awarded the 2014 Journalist of the Year by the New South Wales Institute of Surveyors.