

Dynamic Coalition on Public Access in Libraries: annual activity report (February 2021)

The Dynamic Coalition on Public Access in Libraries (DC-PAL) has formally operated within the Internet Governance Forum since 2012. It is dedicated to catalysing action, collecting data and facilitating an exchange of good practices on public access in libraries (and similar facilities) to support digital inclusion. The focus of the DC spans different aspects of the public access practice and policy (e.g. digital literacy, affordability, long-term sustainability, its role in supporting the Sustainable Development Goals, etc.)

Throughout 2020, members of DC-PAL have worked both jointly and individually to help realise the goals of the DC. The key joint outputs for this year were the substantive thematic paper “Public Access in Libraries: Achievements and Insights from Broadband Policy Implementation”, and the 2020 Declaration by Partnership for Public Access.

THEMATIC PAPER: LIBRARY PUBLIC ACCESS IN BROADBAND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

The 2020 thematic paper was prepared by a dedicated working group from the founding members of DC-PAL – Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL), and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). This paper builds on and extends the report prepared by DC-PAL in 2019, which explored the roles libraries play in national broadband policies in different countries.

The 2019 report highlighted that libraries – especially libraries equipped with ICT and public access facilities – can support digital inclusion goals in several important ways. This includes providing affordable public access to the internet and ICT, offering digital skills training, helping make valuable local content available to the public, and supporting formal educational processes. Comparing national-level policy documents also showed that there is an assortment of policy means and tools that can help deliver on this potential: from Universal Service Funds to public-private partnerships and beyond.

The second phase of the study focuses on how these different policy approaches were implemented in practice – and what impacts they achieved. At the beginning of 2020, the work on the new report began with outreach efforts - to find contact persons knowledgeable about how policies referenced in the 2019 report were implemented in libraries in their country. This included both broad outreach (e.g. a wide call for expressions of interest through the DC-PAL mailing list) and more targeted contacts with members of the DC-PAL, IFLA and EIFL networks from countries in the sample of the 2019 paper.

Once subject matter experts from library and/or policy sectors were identified, the working group proceeded with background data collection and interviews. A series of interviews (either virtual meetings carried out through Zoom, or asynchronous written interviews and data collection through email) with experts from Colombia, Kenya, Lithuania and Romania formed the basis for individual chapters of the report.

Each chapter details how policy measures supporting public access have been implemented, their impacts on libraries and communities they serve, and lessons learned from the implementation. Subject matter experts had a chance to review and suggest changes to the draft chapters focusing on their countries.

Once the individual chapters were completed, the working group looked at broader trends, common themes and lessons learned across the different national experiences. The group’s work was coordinated through conference calls (approx. 5 in total, excluding interviews) and several rounds of feedback.

Broadly, the experiences from the four case studies suggest that implementing public access solutions in libraries can help support digital inclusion among vulnerable social groups, offer access to advanced

technologies, and power the implementation of more services and development initiatives. Furthermore, the four case studies suggested some good practices to help ensure that policy implementation fully delivers on this potential. These include e.g. taking stock of existing infrastructure and needs in early planning phases, considering the long-term sustainability of public access facilities, establishing partnerships to maximise impacts, and more.

The 2020 thematic paper can be accessed at: <https://www.ifla.org/digital-plans>

EVERY COMMUNITY CONNECTED: CALL TO ACTION

In light of the severe impacts of digital exclusion during the pandemic, several members of *Partnership for Public Access* (P4PA) and DC-PAL also worked to develop a call for action, establishing key elements of a response to the connectivity crisis through public access solutions. The call for action (<https://p4pa.net/2020-declaration/>) was issued on 16 October 2020 and widely shared through the networks of P4PA members and signatories.

DC MEETINGS AND SESSIONS

The work on the substantive paper, preparations for the DC-PAL session and other involvement with the 2020 IGF were organised through several online conference calls throughout the year.

The Dynamic Coalition organised a dedicated session at the 2020 IGF (which, inter alia, presented the key findings of the substantive paper), participated in the DC Main Session, and hosted a networking break focused on the call for action “Every Community Connected”.

THE WORK OF INDIVIDUAL COALITION MEMBERS

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)

In 2020, IFLA continued to advocate for public access as an important part of the response to address the digital divides, and to develop tools and materials to support decision-making and advocacy by members of the global library field.

Throughout 2020, IFLA continued to monitor and highlight the responses of libraries in different countries to the pandemic – including the measures they have taken to continue supporting digital inclusion (<https://www.ifla.org/covid-19-and-libraries>). This includes, for example, different libraries’ experiences with sharing connectivity or access devices when their doors were closed; and available guidance and suggestions on safely reopening public access facilities.

IFLA continued to support and encourage libraries to participate in policy dialogues to fully deliver on the potential of public access – e.g. by organising a session on public access and meaningful inclusion in the 2020 APrIGF. IFLA also continued to gather and review evidence to support decision-making around public access, libraries and digital inclusion; from the *Library Map of the World SDG Stories* (<https://librarymap.ifla.org/>) highlighting what libraries equipped with ICT can do to support sustainable development, to reviewing how libraries feature in digital skills strategies (<https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/93525>).

Drawing on this evidence, IFLA continued to engage with international processes and consultations relevant to the topics of public access and digital inclusion. This includes, for example, preparing a statement ahead of the 59th meeting of the United Nations Commission on Social Development; and, together with local stakeholders, collecting evidence and submitting input to the Universal (Human Rights) Periodic Reviews in several countries – e.g. Myanmar, Australia, Georgia – detailing, inter alia, how library digital inclusion initiatives can help deliver on key human rights.

In addition, to support the P4PA 2020 Declaration, in November 2020 IFLA issued the Library Pledge for Digital Inclusion (<https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/93399>). The goal of the Pledge is to mobilise commitment from relevant library field stakeholders to champion key dimensions of digital inclusion - affordable access, digital skills, relevant content, and policy action. The Pledge currently has more than 300 signatories.

Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL)

EIFL continued collaborating with libraries and library consortia in developing and transition countries through four key programmes ([EIFL-Licensing](#); [EIFL-OA: Open Access](#); [EIFL-IP: Copyright and Libraries](#); and [EIFL-PLIP: Public Library Innovation Programme](#)) to enable access to knowledge for education, learning, research and sustainable community development. The EIFL network includes library consortia from 38 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, representing more than 3,000 libraries. In addition, EIFL work with project partners in another 15 countries, across the globe.

In 2020, EIFL continued licensing content relevant to EIFL partner consortia and their member libraries – ensuring availability of 56 commercial e-resources from 25 vendors by the end of the year. The shift to virtual learning due to Covid-19 pandemic was particular challenging in transition economy and developing countries, as many university libraries do not have sufficient IT infrastructure or funding to install remote access systems that are needed to allow faculty and students to access subscribed e-resources from home. To assist them EIFL-Licensing has reached out to publisher partners and content aggregators to provide access to journals, e-books and databases for libraries in 38 EIFL partner countries via username & password so that students and faculty can continue to have access to these e-resources from home.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted EIFL-OA work on policy and repository improvements on local and national level, but also created new opportunities to engage with larger audiences in online events and mainstream open science. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, EIFL-OA curated the OpenAIRE COVID-19 Gateway and the Coronavirus Disease Research Community - COVID-19 on Zenodo and coordinated the social sciences section of the Research Data Alliance COVID-19 Data Sharing Guidelines and Recommendations. EIFL joined the UNESCO Open Science Partnership and through the UNESCO Open Science Advisory Committee engaged in developing UNESCO Open Science policy recommendations.

EIFL evaluated the impact of the pandemic on copyright and libraries, and supported efforts to develop a global policy response. In 2020, EIFL-IP engaged with 25 countries on copyright issues, and reviewed copyright laws or made recommendations for amendments in nine countries (Belarus, Brazil, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Georgia, Kenya, Myanmar, Namibia, North Macedonia). EIFL co-wrote an open letter calling on WIPO to ensure that the IP regime supports urgent efforts to tackle COVID-19, and we endorsed the Open COVID Pledge to remove IP barriers.

The lockdown highlighted the importance of ICT in public libraries and competent staff for connecting communities to sources of information and knowledge, EIFL continued advocacy at the international level for public access to computer and internet infrastructure in public libraries in EIFL-PLIP partner countries, and international level.

To showcase creative solutions and encourage other libraries to replicable effective practices of technology use, we reached out to our partner libraries collected [good practices of response to COVID-19](#). In addition, in 2020 [EIFL Public Library Innovation Awards](#) focused on digital literacy training to recognize innovative solutions and creative approaches applied by public and community libraries to tackle digital divide.

Gigabit Libraries Network (GLN)

As a DC-PAL participant, the Gigabit Libraries Network has been keenly focused on technologies and service models to attain digital inclusion as well as increase community resilience against disasters. Their current central activity is the Community SecondNets project. "Libraries partnering with schools, clinics, colleges and other anchor institutions, as second responders, install dual use, wide area wireless networks, creating redundant communications capability to expand inclusion and strengthen community resilience against disasters."

Yet, like nearly every grant, project and enterprise, public or private, foreign and domestic, the Community SecondNets initiative has had to shift gears in response to the global pandemic. But not that much. Already oriented as Libraries in Response to large scale crisis events, the Project has been able to pivot in active support of library readiness policies and new response resources.

Triggering near universal closures of schools, libraries, most businesses and public offices, the novel coronavirus has caused the preexisting trends towards a rapidly increasing virtualization of the economy and society at large, to accelerate. As demand for library digital content has jumped, the wider need for internet access inclusion has gone from a national embarrassment to become a full blown connectivity crisis. 10's of millions of people in the US have suddenly found themselves in even more deeply lacking in access to the digital resources most Americans take for granted.

Community SecondNets were originally developed to serve as backup networks in response to connectivity needs during large scale disaster events like fires, floods and hurricanes. The Project was already designed to encourage libraries to extend a crucial library resource, access to digital services including the open internet, into public spaces across communities as new neighborhood outlets.

In the context of the Covid-19 emergency, any new point of library services access should be understood as responsive to urgent community learning and information needs. To date, the Project and its partner organizations have set up or otherwise supported 100's of new library access stations or points of presence.

GLN maintains that there are many new exciting and affordable technologies and service models available anywhere that can make a difference in community connectivity levels. It should be in every community's self-interest to take responsibility for learning about its options and circumstances towards developing a plan and a strategy to achieve it. Even the act of discussing such an action will bring connectivity closer to that community as the community will become more attractive to the kinds of emerging opportunities we witness every day. And further that the institution or even concept of a library as a shared and sharing community resource should be universal and sit at the heart of every community of learners and information seekers.