

UN Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights Call for Input: Cultural Rights and Migration

Response by: The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)

Website: <https://www.ifla.org/>

Contact: Claire McGuire (claire.mcguire@ifla.org)

Introduction

Libraries can help displaced people in dire conditions, while also providing platforms through which displaced people and their diversity to lead to greater cultural awareness and community enrichment.

This consultation draws heavily on a large piece of work currently being finalised by IFLA's [Section for Library Services to People with Special Needs](#), *The International Guidelines for Library Services to Displaced Persons*.

The Guidelines have been informed by in-depth interviews with selected library staff of libraries that serve displaced populations, as well as a survey that garnered 352 responses from 32 countries.

Key Questions

1. What are the key issues that relate to the role of libraries in upholding cultural rights of displaced persons?

Informed by the consultations and research carried out in support of *The International Guidelines for Library Services to Displaced Persons*, the following key issues have been identified in upholding access to culture and participation in cultural life:

- Displaced people in the community may not be legal residents. Refugees may lack permanent addresses or an identification (ID) cards, which in some cases excludes them from accessing library services, such as borrowing rights.
- There may be a lack of trust for government institutions among those who view themselves as being outside “the system”, as migrants perhaps do. Cultural institutions like libraries must overcome this through awareness raising and outreach in order to build trust and ensure that all people can access their services.
- Language accessibility is critical for upholding cultural and information access rights and should be considered in all services and resources, including staffing. People must be able to participate in cultural life in the language of their creativity.

- One solution does not fit all. There is a need to create opportunities to listen to communities. Dialogue sessions can enable librarians to listen and learn from their communities, empower staff to develop relevant and responsive solutions specific to their communities, and build stronger relationships with library users.
- Service for displaced people should be integrated into the mission statement of the library. This could be, for example, with a statement such as, “Cooperating with our multicultural community to create equitable opportunities for support, learning, discovery, and connection.”
- It is optimal to build relationships and networks with other people and organisations in the community who work with displaced persons.
- One must acknowledge the need for long-term planning, and the reality that the political situation will have an economic impact on service. This can be mitigated with an effective fundraising strategy
- It is important to consider mechanisms that ensure rights in situations of intersectional vulnerability in contexts of migration, such as gender identity, women, youth, and disability.
- It is critical to ensure all staff fully support this work. Enacting training to counter unconscious bias against displaced persons and avoid outdated/offensive language is important.
- Flexibility to test and adjust services in response to community needs must be maintained

2. How do libraries help ensure migrants, asylum seekers and refugees have access to cultural services and institutions of the host society?

The IFLA Code of Ethics defines the core mission of libraries as “to ensure access to information for all for personal development, education, cultural enrichment, leisure, economic activity and informed participation in and enhancement of democracy”.

Specific services offered to migrants in support of these rights include:

- Equal access to information, ICT, and services
- Awareness raising on how those services could help displaced populations
- Access to community and support networks to counter social isolation
- Access to a variety of resources for integration, education, and cultural enrichment

Examples:

Access to library services:

Libraries of the Australian Capital Territories (ACT) [Australia] offer free membership to anyone living, working, or studying in the ACT with proof of identification and residential address.

As noted, asylum seekers may not have formal identification documents, so the ACT Government has introduced an [ACT Services Access Card](#) for ease of access to ACT government services, including Libraries ACT.

This does not only take place in brick-and-mortar institutions. The **ECHO Mobile Library** [Greece] reaches vulnerable populations in Greece's refugee camps from a refurbished van. They welcome adults and young people, offering WiFi, comfortable seats, language learning resources and book collections. Their collection consists of Arabic, Turkish, Kurmanji, French, English, German, Greek and Urdu.

This includes fiction, textbooks, children's books and English learning books, and basic language resources in English and Greek. Further, they offer access to online university courses through Coursera, and in 2019 reported 52 library users have received awards through this programme. Read more: [Multicultural libraries in a bordered world: the case of ECHO for Refugees](#).

Multilingual collections:

The World Library Norway and Sweden: <https://varldensbibliotek.se/>. This online multilingual collection service offers books in 12 different languages to read and listen for free. It is run by the Libraries in Malmö and is funded by the Royal Library, the National Library of Norway and the Swedish Cultural Council, as part of the Strengthened Libraries initiative.

Following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, **libraries across Europe** have worked to accumulate books and other resources for entertainment, education, integration, and job-seeking in Ukrainian language, including [Belgium](#), [the Netherlands](#), [Czech Republic](#), [Germany](#), and more.

Polish libraries have been offering essential aid for Ukrainians as they arrive, as well as support in terms of access to books, audiobooks, educational and cultural materials in Ukrainian language.

The [Provincial Public Library in Krakow](#) prepared a "Library support and assistance" plan to support the needs of their Ukrainian community. Activities include the purchase of Ukrainian literature and films for the library's collection, organisation of Polish language lessons, and literary walks around Krakow in Ukrainian. This plan further included the launch of a lecture series providing expert legal and accounting advice, as well as cultural integration meetings and children's events.

Providing access to technology:

In 2022, the **Ukrainian Library Association (ULA)** have reported that libraries across the country have been providing computers with internet access and copying documents free of charge for local users and temporary migrants who have become residents within communities.

They have shared [examples](#) from the town of Tulchyn and city of Vinnytsia, where libraries are supporting migrants by sharing information on local administrative and social services.

Reassigning library resources:

The ULA has [reported](#) that libraries across **Ukraine** have acted as temporary shelters for refugees and as collection points for humanitarian aid materials, such as food, medicine, and clothing. The [Lviv Regional Library for Youth](#) has become a place of shelter for a great number of displaced people fleeing other parts of the country. The library has coordinated volunteers and engaged in humanitarian activities to support those in need, such as by preparing food.

The **Armidale Regional Council Libraries** [Australia] reported in IFLA's Global Survey on Library Services for Displaced Populations that they offer their library's meeting rooms for Settlement Services International to orientate new arrivals.

The **Denver Public Library** [USA] offers specialised Cultural Inclusivity Services. The programme provides online and in-person services in 11 branches with 40 staff. Services currently offered include

free library registration and library cards, English language classes and discussion practice, citizenship classes, free use of ICT equipment, use of tools such as sewing machines, audio, and video recording equipment, 3D printers, and coding classes, stories, songs, rhymes, arts, and crafts, cultural celebrations, and more.

See more: [ResiliArt x Mondiacult: Library Voices Joining the Global Conversation on Cultural Rights](#).

3. What steps to libraries take to help migrants access, practice, maintain and transmit living cultural resources?

Libraries champion universal access to information, which can and must include the preservation and transmission of living and intangible cultural heritage. IFLA's Guidelines suggest libraries can take action to document the history of refugees, and by acquiring relevant collections and collecting primary materials when possible.

Examples:

Recording Memory

An example of this in action is the two-year intercultural storytelling project, [Refugee Lives: a Million Stories](#), initiated and led by **Roskilde Libraries** [Denmark], in collaboration with **Malmö** [Sweden] and **Cologne** [Germany] **public libraries** and the **Future Library** in Athens [Greece].

The project contains more than 600 stories from refugees that have fled to the European Union in recent years, creating a digital library of lived experiences.

Similarly, the Services to Immigrants and Refugees team of the **Denver Public Library** [USA] created the audio-visual exhibit, [Mementos From Home](#), which features immigrants recording stories about items they brought with them to the United States and what those objects mean to them.

Cultural programming

In **Kharkiv, Ukraine**, city libraries have worked with the Department of Culture to distribute books from underground metro stations [[read more here](#)]. These stations have become shelters for the city's population, and through this volunteer effort have been transformed to also be places to access books, creative workshops, and entertainment events for children.

The [Lviv Regional Library for Youth](#) has continued acting as a cultural institution, engaging visitors of all ages in activities that celebrate Ukrainian intangible cultural heritage, such as traditional song and dance.

Despite the hardship, they have carried on organising [therapeutic cultural and artistic events](#), [lecture series](#), and [offering literature recommendations](#), among other activities.

[Romanian libraries](#) have likewise offered special events geared towards Ukrainian and Romanian children and adults. Some of these activities were geared at multicultural exchanges.

The Tulcha County Library, for example, held an event in which Ukrainian children were invited to read Ukrainian poems and give song and dance performances [[see the video here](#)].

Veria Central Public Library [Greece] has reported in IFLA's Global Survey on Library Services for Displaced Populations that they have organised programming that included cooking lessons in the library with families from Greece and Syria.

4. How do libraries help different sectors of the population learn about the cultures of the migrants, especially new and forced migrants?

Countering the ill effects of misinformation while supporting welcoming environments that value cultural diversity and exchange of ideas are close to the heart of the mission of libraries.

For an example of library programming countering hate speech, the **State Library of New South Wales** [Australia] has participated in the [“Remove hate from the debate”](#) campaign by the State of New South Wales through Multicultural NSW.

The **Toronto Public Library** [Canada] and local government have collaborated to welcome and support Syrian refugees through the Canadian Government’s #WelcomeRefugees initiatives. Between 2015-2018, diverse library programmes reached over 2,000 refugees, positively impacting families, and supporting the immigration work of both private sponsors and government agency staff. Programming included speaking events featuring Syrian newcomers, to help the community better understand the challenges refugees face. More here: [IFLA SDG Stories – Toronto Public Library](#).

Similarly, **Hamburg Public Library** [Germany] has participated in the city’s ‘Refugee Help Forum’ following the unprecedented influx of refugees arriving to Germany since 2015. The library helped offer the ‘Dialog in Deutsch’ volunteer project, in which 109 conversation groups were established across 33 libraries, in which refugees and migrants are able to apply and practice their German speaking skills with local volunteers. More here: [IFLA SDG Stories – Hamburg Public Library](#).

There is of course a bias in terms of correlation between those who would participate in such events and those who already have an established respect for cultural diversity. Reaching into the community and into the formal education system is a powerful way that library programming can have a broader impact in countering misinformation and inspiring dialogue.

For an example, the [“Brussels Reads Aloud Festival”](#) was organised by **Brussels Libraries** in 2019. The programming featured multicultural storytelling in public spaces throughout the city, including in public transportation. Storytellers from different language communities were invited to tell stories, including traditional stories from the homelands of the language communities.

Guadalajara [Mexico] is the [UNESCO World Book Capital for 2022](#). Its programming focusses on reclaiming public spaces through reading activities, reading for social bonding, and using storytelling to reinforce neighbourhood pride.

Libraries are playing key part of delivery, alongside bookshops, reading rooms, publishers and the city’s successful bookfair.

As a part of the "Guidelines on educational inclusion of foreign students" and the National Reading Plan, the **Ministry of Education of Chile** implemented the ["Migrant Library" programme](#) in 2018 in 50 municipal educational institutions with high populations of foreign students in four regions of the country.

This programme includes an integration with the formal school system, in which the provision of diverse curricula and reading materials contribute to building respect for intercultural exchange and diversity among students.

5. What challenges do migrants face currently in practicing, maintaining and transmitting their culture?

Library programming and services can assist in overcoming barriers to the cultural participation of migrants related to language, lack of social capital, lack of access to resources and biases in the community, among others.

IFLA's Guidelines have identified the top-5 challenges for libraries serving displaced populations. These challenges can be considered as intersecting closely with the challenges facing migrants in practicing, maintaining and transmitting their culture through access to library services:

1. **Political Context:** the political situations and governmental rules and policies differ in each country, which makes a global perspective quite complex.

This can be reflected in institutional policies as well, especially concerning participation of community members without permanent addresses and government identification.

Above all else, IFLA recommends a rights-based approach, where international laws that safeguard human rights for all people supersede varying national political landscapes.

2. **The COVID-19 Pandemic:** The pandemic has strained resources and introduced new challenges which affect vulnerable groups (displaced populations) the most.

The pandemic has put both the digital divide and unequitable access to social capital in starker relief than ever before. This could provide an opportunity for greater investment in recovery efforts that support all members of the community – especially the most vulnerable.

3. **Xenophobia:** library staff and community members may display both conscious and unconscious bias and prejudice that works to exclude displaced persons from participation in cultural life through the library.

Dedicating resources to bias training and cultural awareness training can work to counteract this, as well as creating opportunities for dialogue with the target community members themselves.

4. **Lack of Funding and Resources:** IFLA's survey showed that the biggest barriers that libraries face to serve displaced populations includes a lack of funding and resources. This is compounded by the fact that external partners for serving this population tend to also be non-profit organisations facing similar complex and unstable funding realities.

Resources must be allocated to effective fundraising in order to offer programmes targeted at displaced persons, while not sacrificing autonomy to donors to set policies.

5. **Lack of long-term planning:** institutions that support displaced persons, including through support for their enjoyment of cultural rights, may a lack of mandate to continue the work related to displaced populations. In many cases, specific services targeting these groups are offered within a programme that has a specific timeline, and the library budget for cultural programmes are affected by local government choices.

One function of IFLA's Guidelines is to support libraries in integrating services for displaced people into their long-term business plan to establish sustainability of these services.