Aligning public libraries' performance with Sustainable Development Goals

A strategic and evidence-based approach

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Introduction

Published in 1987, the Brundtland Report set out the most commonly quoted definition of *sustainable development*: "sustainable development is development that meets the needs of present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). Although some researchers argue that there is a conceptual distinction between *sustainable development* and *sustainability*, in line with Gray (2010) and Giovannoni and Fabietti (2013), we will use these concepts interchangeably, since we consider that both entail the same dimensions and the same implications in terms of policy and strategies.

In September 2015, the United Nations (UN) Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development setting the global, national and local framework for putting that responsibility into action (United Nations, 2015). The new global Agenda is formed by 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SGDs) which must be implemented by all countries until 2030, so that "no one will stay behind". The 169 associated targets are monitored and reviewed using a set of global indicators (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2015).

Sectorial organizations worked on bringing their potential contributions to sustainable development to the attention of Member States and the UN. In the post-2015 process, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) continued its active engagement towards promoting libraries within the UN 2030 Agenda and consolidated it in one of the Key Initiatives under the Strategic Directions set for 2016-2021 (IFLA, 2015). It should be stressed that access to information has been recognised as a target under SDG16 (target 16.10), culture and ICT have also been included in the SGDs (target 11.4 and targets 5b, 9c, 17.8, respectively) and universal literacy is recognised in the vision for the UN 2030 Agenda (IFLA, 2018).

In Portugal, initiatives to promote library and information services within the 2030 Agenda are still modest, as research intersecting Information Science with Performance Evaluation and Sustainable Development is not yet sufficiently developed. However, the recent advocacy strategy towards the promotion of libraries' role in the achievement of SDGs carried out by B.A.D. - the Portuguese Association of Librarians, Archivists and Documentalists should be highlighted. On the other hand, in November 2016, a team of researchers at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of Universidade NOVA de Lisboa (NOVA FCSH, Portugal) started a research project entitled Bibliotecas Públicas e Sustentabilidade: Recolha de Evidências da Contribuição para os ODS [Public Libraries and Sustainability: Gathering Evidences of Contribution to SDGs (Project PLS)] aimed at the development of a framework for evaluating public libraries' contribution to SDGs and tailor it to Portuguese public libraries (Pinto and Ochôa, 2018a).

Based on the outcomes of Project PLS, this paper discusses the role of strategy alignment and impact evaluation practices and competencies in the processes of gathering evidence and advocacy towards public libraries' contribution to the UN 2030 Agenda.

Strategy Alignment for Sustainability

Background and general methodological approach

Since 2012, researchers at NOVA FCSH/CHAM – Centre for the Humanities have been pursuing a line of research that intersects Library and Information Services (LIS) performance evaluation with sustainability transitions management and competences development. During the period 2013-2014, this intersection was put into practice in co-creation workshops on "Building a Sustainability Assessment Framework", directed at students of Library and Information Science courses. These interdisciplinary experiences led to the outlining of a draft conceptual framework for assessing the sustainability and impacts of LIS, which was further consolidated (Ochôa and Pinto 2014) and expanded by introducing the standard ISO 16439 (2014), as well as media and information literacy evaluation perspectives (Ochôa and Pinto, 2015).

The intensification of IFLA's advocacy initiatives towards global sustainability after 2013 (for example, *IFLA Statement on Libraries and Development,* 2013; *Lyon Declaration*, 2014), together with the international adoption of the Post-2015 Development Agenda (United Nations, 2015) in September 2015 and the release of the *Final List of Proposed Sustainable Development Goal Indicators* (United Nations, 2016) in June 2016 highlighted the need for providing the LIS community with methods and tools [1] for measuring as well as evaluating its contribution to sustainable development. Other IFLA initiatives towards professional capacity building were also an inspiration: Building Strong Library Associations (BSLA programme, 2012) and the International Advocacy Programme (IAP, 2016) [2]. According to Streatfield and Markless (2019), IFLA consistently developed programme impact evaluation, giving a lead to the library and information community worldwide, particularly in relation to public library evaluation.

In November 2016, a team of researchers at NOVA FCSH, willing "to think globally, but act locally" and looking for an answer to the question "How can public libraries gather evidences and evaluate their contribution to Sustainable Development Goals?", initiated a research project named Bibliotecas Públicas e Sustentabilidade: Recolha de Evidências da Contribuição para os ODS [Public Libraries and Sustainability: Gathering Evidences of Contribution to SDGs (Project PLS)]. Project PLS aims to develop a framework (model) for evaluating public libraries' contribution to SDGs and tailor it to Portuguese public libraries.

Evaluation research and evidence-based theory provided the general framework for Project PLS. The research question was addressed through an eminently qualitative methodology supported by the combination of two principal methods: literature review and construction/application of conceptual models as well as tools for analysis. The literature review process was complemented by a questionnaire that analyzed Portuguese public libraries' involvement in SDGs international, national and local initiatives.

An integrated and holistic approach was used to build the Model for the Alignment and Evidence Gathering of Libraries' Contribution to Sustainable Development. It is important to clarify the underpinning concept of *evidence*: it can be any type of information or data used to help answering a question; the information / data collected becomes evidence when it is used to demonstrate library's contribution(s) to sustainable development, to determine goal or target achievement, to show the alignment initiatives adopted or to understand its various impacts on stakeholders (adapt. from Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2015).

In the alignment process, the use/adaptation of library assessment data was valued: UN Global Indicators and the corresponding Portuguese national indicators (whenever possible), as well as of ISO 11620 – *Library performance indicators* and ISO 16439 - *Methods and procedures for assessing the impact of libraries*, complemented by the *Global Libraries Impact Planning and Assessment Guide* (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2015), the *Generic Learning Outcomes* and *Generic Social Outcomes* (Arts Council England).

The Model for the Alignment and Evidence Gathering of Libraries' Contribution to Sustainable Development was consolidated and expanded within another project ran by B.A.D. in conjunction with IFLA, under IAP - the Project Libraries for Development and the UN 2030 Agenda (April- July 2018). In order to accelerate library and information professionals' involvement in the systematic process of evaluating and promoting libraries' contribution to SGDs, a step-by-step *Guide for Libraries* (Pinto and Ochôa, 2018) was built on this Model and made available through B.A.D.'s website. One of the

Model´s tools – the Roadmap for the Alignment and Evidence Gathering of Libraries' Contributions to the 2030 Agenda – was tested in two workshops targeted at Portuguese public libraries' professionals (July 2018) and provided the framework for creating a national award related to sustainable development best practices in libraries of all types (October 2018).
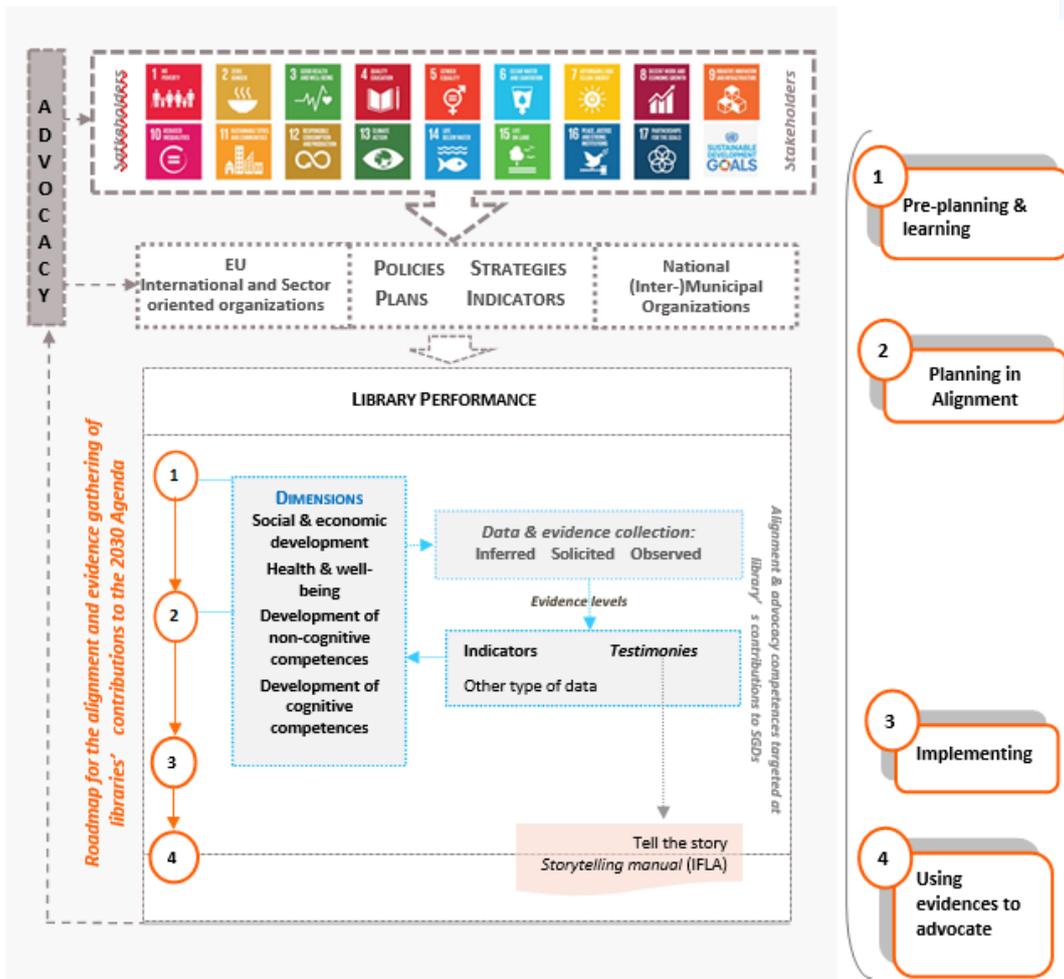

Figure 1 Model for the Alignment and Evidence Gathering of Libraries' Contribution to Sustainable Development

The Roadmap: a four-step process

The cornerstone of the Model for the Alignment and Evidence Gathering of Libraries' Contribution to Sustainable Development is a Roadmap that is anchored in the identification of potential (inter)relations between the Dimensions that frame impacts of library activities/ projects and the SDGs. The Roadmap supports the alignment cycles in four steps: Step 1 - Pre-planning and learning; Step 2 - Planning in the face of alignment; Step 3 - Implement measures and indicators; and Step 4 - Using evidence to advocate for libraries.

Step 1 - Pre-planning and learning

This first step intends to create the conditions for the implementation of the process that will allow libraries to obtain evidence of their contribution to drive forward the UN 2030 Agenda. Library and Information professionals need:

- To understand the architecture and main concepts of the Model for the Alignment and Evidence Gathering of Libraries' Contribution to Sustainable Development.

- To recognize and identify relevant strategic information that, at various levels, should be considered when aligning library's strategy(ies) with SDGs.

- To identify possible SGDs and alignment Dimensions for which the library contributes through its performance.

- To set up frequent communication channels with key stakeholders.

This process of competences development is reinforced by the inclusion in the *Library Guide* of supporting documents: a *Glossary* (alphabetical list of key terms used), a list of *Information sources* [suggestion of information sources relevant to the alignment of strategy(ies)] and the *Alignment map* (representation of potential (inter)relationship between Dimensions that frame possible impacts of library activities/projects and SGDs).

Step 2 - Planning in the face of alignment

Based on the information collected in the previous step, it is now time to take the decisions that will determine what evidence will come out of the alignment process. This requires the following actions:

- Identify, select and characterize services / activities considering the alignment of strategy(ies).

- Check the baseline state of the service / activity or aspect that is going to be developed / improved.

- Define the needs, resources (inputs), results and impacts related to these services / activities.

- Clarify the general reasons for gathering evidence.

- Select the alignment Dimensions and the results / impacts that will be measured.

- Define the SMART indicators (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-oriented) that will be used to assess whether the expected results / impacts have been achieved.

- Choose the adequate methods to gather data / evidence.

- Plan results report and communication.

The implementation of this step is backed by a supporting document on *Measures and Indicators* included in the *Library Guide*, which contains transversal measures and indicators potentially applicable to SGDs, along with examples of specific indicators, measures and other sort of evidence that are relevant to public libraries. The use/adaptation of library assessment data is recommended: UN Global Indicators and the corresponding Portuguese national indicators (whenever possible), as well as ISO 11620 – *Library performance indicators* and ISO 16439 - *Methods and procedures for assessing the impact of libraries*, complemented by the *Global Libraries Impact Planning and Assessment Guide* (Bill & Melinda gates Foundation, 2015), the *Generic Learning Outcomes* and *Generic Social Outcomes* (Arts Council England).

When defining indicators and selecting methods for collecting data / evidence, it is important to bear in mind the quality, robustness and suitability of the evidence that will be generated. As such, evidence can be structured and provided according to five levels [3], being Level 1 the minimum requirement that is expected and Level 5 the highest threshold. Level 1 only demands a clear description of the project / activity along with an explanation of its importance to the community and SGDs, while Level 5 implies the recognition of library's contributions to SDG by national and international entities. The progression up this scale reflects library's ability to plan the alignment of strategies according to evidence collection, reporting and communication options that were taken.

Step 3 - Implementing

At this stage, what was planned needs to be put into practice. Data is gathered and analysed and then the information that will be communicated is prepared. Several aspects need to be taken into account during the implementation phase, namely:

- Check / test selected data / evidence collection method(s) and make any necessary corrections.

- Regularly monitor the data collection process.

- Keep stakeholders informed about the development of the data / evidence collection process.

- Analyse the results and plan how to contextualize evidence according to the characteristics of library's target audiences.

- Build the "story" giving meaning to evidence that was obtained and prepare the report or other communication materials that demonstrate library's contribution in achieving SDGs.

Step 4 – Using evidence to advocate for libraries

The last stage of the Roadmap is focused on the effective use of evidence advocating for library's contribution to sustainable development and to the pursuit of the 2030 Agenda. To reinforce communication with stakeholders, library and information professionals are advised to follow IFLA's *Storytelling manual* recommendations (IFLA, Library Map of the World Team, 2018). This manual was designed to help library and information professionals in telling compelling stories about library activities and projects and its impact on the community they serve. It is a narrative tool that values the use of anecdotal evidence for impact assessment obtained from users, staff and other stakeholders. The SGDs story must provide answers to the following questions:

- Why? (Description of the problem or challenge in the community that library activity or project was designed to address).

- Who did what, how and when? (Description of the activity or project, including statistics whenever possible).

- So what? (Description of impact on user's lives and community and evidence of library´s contribution to local, regional, national or global sustainable development).

The contributions of narratives for improvement results is generally recognised. Streatfield and Markless (2019) flagged the collection of stories of change as a new interest within international development evaluation community in response to the growing frustration with the limitations of attribution studies and logic models of evaluation that takes little account of the complexities in achieving change.

Conclusions

In line with Streatfield and Markless (2019), we consider that systematic impact evaluation must articulate different levels and types of contributions to change. Thus, the Model for the Alignment and Evidence Gathering of Libraries' Contribution to Sustainable Development fosters a set of tools that values strategy alignment and impact evaluation practices and competencies in the processes of gathering evidence and advocacy towards libraries' contribution to the UN 2030 Agenda. One of those tools - the Roadmap - proved to be particularly useful in developing library and information professionals' alignment and assessment competencies, as well as in supporting public libraries' advocacy efforts towards their recognition as active and valuable partners in the development and implementation of national, regional and local strategies that will help delivering on SGDs.

In early 2019, the *Library Guide* was presented, discussed and tested by students undertaking the module *Performance Evaluation and Sustainability in Information Services* taught in the Master of Information Management and Curation (a partnership between NOVA FCSH and NOVA Information Management School). This approach to teaching and learning aimed to involve future information managers and curators in sustainable development theory and practice, enabling them to manage several kinds of strategy alignment (macro, *mezzo* and micro) and to (re)use / adapt indicators and statistical data through evidence gathering and processing.

As discussed previously, the role of strategy alignment and impact evaluation practices in the processes of gathering evidence and advocacy towards libraries' contribution to the UN 2030 can emerge from several perspectives:

- From library performance evaluation models, namely ISO 16439's systematization of methods and procedures for assessing impacts.

- From evidence management research and practices.

- From stakeholders' advocacy strategies and methods, namely storytelling;

- From sustainability management transitions, as a new governance approach based on the analytical perspective of transitions, namely transitions dynamics evaluation.

Since 2012, the line of research we have been pursuing at NOVA FCSH/CHAM, together with several teaching and learning experiences target at students looking for a career in Library and Information Management, but also at experienced library and information professionals, highlight the importance of further developing performance evaluation competences and enhancing stakeholders' active engagement throughout evaluation processes in the LIS context (Ochôa and Pinto, 2017; Ochôa and Pinto, 2019, 2019a). The matrix recently developed by Streatfield and Markless (2019) to help IFLA tracking the engagement with the UN SDGs through various stages (emergent, committed, engaged and integrated) and different types of evidence collection presents an interesting challenge facing the analysis on how these different expressions of evaluation cultures can influence the progression of Portuguese public libraries up this scale of engagement with the 2030 Agenda.

The 2030 Agenda and library performance evaluation pathways might be considered separate areas of interest and separate lines of research, nevertheless, in our opinion, the Model for the Alignment and Evidence Gathering of Libraries' Contribution to Sustainable Development offers a way of linking different perspectives, as a management tool and as an agenda for joint research with several stakeholders. In a future research agenda, communities of transdisciplinary and evaluative practices will be central to the creation of co-evaluation integrative models where different alignment strategies and evidences will be valued to deal with the complexity of new open evaluation processes.

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Notes

[1] More information about this project is available at https://bad.pt/agenda2030/.

[2] More information about these initiatives can be found in, respectively, https://www.ifla.org/bsla and https://www.ifla.org/ldp/iap.

[3] Adapted from Nesta's *Standards of evidence* (Puttick & Ludlow, 2012).