Active Contribution of Lithuanian Public Libraries to the Implementation of Human Rights

Lietuvos bibliotekininkų draugija (LBD) / Lithuanian Librarians' Association (LLA)

Lithuanian Librarians' Association consists of over 2400 members who are gathered in 78 branches of the Association. All types of libraries are represented in the Association - schools, colleges, universities, municipal and county public, national. The size of the section varies greatly, from 3 to 70 members. The Lithuanian Librarians' Association was founded in 1931. The Association is headed by the President of the Association and the Council, which consists of 15 members. The activities of the Association are focused on the advocacy of libraries, professional development and.ltcommunity building. (LLA address: Gedimino ave. 51, LT-01109, Vilnius. www.lbd.lt

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According to the 2020 statistics, there were 1,226 public libraries, 5 county public libraries and 60 municipal public libraries with 122 urban, 1,030 rural and 9 children's branches in Lithuania. Public libraries make up over 53% of all Lithuania's libraries.

The public library network is the densest institutional network of cultural establishments in Lithuania reaching the population even in remote areas. 68% of Lithuania's citizens perceive the accessibility of libraries as being good and very good.

When quarantine was declared in Lithuania because of the COVID-19 pandemics on 16 March 2020, buildings and premises of libraries became closed for physical visitors, but service provision did not stop: books and other items were loaned in a contactless way (by ordering in advance, using book issuing machines or delivering books to homes). A significant part of library services (events, educational sessions, lectures) were rapidly adapted to circumstances of the new reality, and services began to be provided virtually.

Public libraries of various countries, as well as of Lithuania, substantially contribute to the implementation of human rights. Within the field of library performance, the most important are the following domains of human rights:

- the right to get information;
- the right of access to information and knowledge;
- the right of access to information from reliable sources (official information and that prepared by public authorities);
- the right of access to teaching, learning and education;
- equal opportunities for all members of the public / members of communities served by libraries and non-discrimination;
- the right to participate in the cultural life of the community;
- the right to health.

In this text, the contribution of Lithuanian libraries to the implementation of human rights draws on the newest study data, including the study done by the Lithuanian Librarians Association. The study involved 105 public libraries and their branches (8.6% of Lithuania's public libraries).

All the newest studies clearly identify the boundary between the library performance before and after the pandemics. It is a pronounced divide showing the importance of library activities and their relevance for the public both under usual circumstances and their effectiveness under unusual ones.

Libraries for all. Lithuania's public libraries provide services for all who need them and for all visitors. Among service recipients of Lithuanian public libraries, there are people who for various reasons cannot use library services unaided and those experiencing physical, social, informational and technological exclusion (people with disabilities (92.4%), receiving healthcare in hospitals and living in care homes (31.4%) and individuals with restricted freedom (14.3%)). There has been growing need in society to adapt information and library services for people with reading disorders and difficulties (autism spectrum disorders, dyslexia). Since 2020, Lithuanian public libraries have been applying infrastructural solutions, getting involved in professional training schemes and establishing new services for people with disorders of autism spectrum and other communication, language and behaviour disorders.

Reliability and social responsibility. The closure of almost all establishments during the quarantine period brought to light the social exclusion of certain parts of society. Double exclusion has been experienced by seniors who have no computers at home and computer literacy skills and do not know how to use the Internet because of the fact that the world closed during the quarantine period and the absence of possibilities to use virtual services. Lithuanian public libraries not only rapidly and flexibly adapted their own activities to new circumstances but also taught skills of living in the new reality their users. Libraries employed various means (Websites, phone, informative posters in windows of library buildings, etc.) promoted urgent information presented by official sources (the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Lithuania, municipalities) and provided various other information according to users' queries and needs.

Public libraries devised new forms of events, were expanding the use of possibilities of social networks and employed various means (bibliotherapy sessions, virtual readers' clubs, creative writing) to help users overcome anxiety and uncertainty caused by the pandemics. Before the quarantine, the number of people older than 15 years old involved in creative and Weblog writing was more than 230,000. In 2020, compared with 2017, Weblog writing increased by 3% and creating fiction and non-fiction, by 2%. Users (both from Lithuania and abroad) who participated at creative writing workshop organised by public libraries acknowledged that this activity helped them relieve anxiety and feel themselves members of the library community.

The quarantine clearly demonstrated the necessity of books and reading. Even under the strictest restrictions, Lithuanian public libraries found ways to compensate the deficit of books experienced by readers. One of such ways is reading books by phone.

Public libraries are not only socially responsible establishments themselves but they also encourage social responsibility of the general public by employing volunteers for delivering books to homes and instructing members of the serviced communities on responsible social behaviour.

The right to get information. The right to receive information via libraries. At Lithuanian public libraries, the ensuring of these rights is mostly perceived as provision of free access to information (94.3%), free supplying of digital tools (69.5%) and aggregation and dissemination of e-resources. Noteworthy is the contribution of the library staff: they

create various content for users, provide remote services, inform and consult users and teach them computer literacy skills. Previous studies showed that digital skills were most needed by people living in rural areas, especially seniors. Together with the initiative *Prisijungusi Lietuva*, Lithuanian public libraries are seeking to improve this situation. This project has the purpose to help citizens effectively, safely and responsibly use the Internet and digital technologies. For improving the citizen's digital literacy, the project employs the infrastructure of Internet access points at libraries and human resources (1,200 librarians joined the initiative). Some libraries trained more than 1,000 people on computer literacy over the previous couple of years. Libraries create instructional videos on how to order books by using library e-catalogues, how to use e-services, etc.

Quality information from reliable sources. As reliable sources for informing the community and enhancing communal spirit and cultural inclusion, libraries use sources of official information, information published on Websites of public authorities, databases subscribed by libraries and information from public providers. Lithuanian public libraries themselves create and digitise various local history information and provide access to it.

During the pandemic, there was significant increase of the importance of the content and trustfulness of information. Lithuanian libraries contribute to the increasing of media and digital literacy of the general public by:

- events and trainings (95%),
- assistance in searching in the Internet (94.3%),
- assistance in recognising fake news (over 57%),
- lectures and discussions on cyber safety (53.3%).

These activities are oriented at groups who are most vulnerable in that respect: children and seniors. Libraries organise Internet weeks, trainings in the form of a game as well as provide film screenings about personal data protection and dangers in the Internet.

Lithuanian public libraries and ensuring the right of access to education. Lithuanian public libraris contribute to formal (76%) and informal (38%) education. As data from as far back as 2015 show, the number of visitors participating in educational activities was very large: 75% (EU average is 25%). Informal education activities of Lithuanian public libraries include trainings for citizens (78%), educational sessions (80%) and hobby groups and clubs (43.8%). Libraries cooperate with education establishments, educators, school librarians, organisations of seniors as well as organise language teaching (within schemes of informal education for seniors) and various camps for children. Among informal education activities, there are lectures on issues of human rights. Citizens are also taught skills in entrepreneurship, photography, robotics, art and other fields.

Within their contribution to formal education, libraries regularly cooperate with education establishments (49.5%). Such cooperation takes the form of project implementation (39%) or takes place sporadically (47%). Libraries play a very significant role in ensuring the right of access to education during the quarantine period. After Lithuania's schools switched to online learning in 2020, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania and the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania reacted to the appeal by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports to supply schoolchildren and teachers with computers in order to ensure possibilities for online learning / teaching. Under a service contract, over 3,000 stationary computers, obtained for the public library network within a EU programme, were temporarily handed over to municipalities. This action of libraries meant concrete help in ensuring the right of access to learning; it was a fundamental contribution towards ensuring the right of access to education for children growing in socially sensitive families and those with low income.

Enhancing inclusion. Lithuanian public libraries create and provide services for the following categories of citizens experiencing exclusion for various reasons:

- seniors (95%),
- people with disabilities (76.2%),
- the unemployed and people who lost their jobs (72.4%),
- families with low income (65.7%),
- representatives of national minorities (26.7%%),
- individuals with restricted freedom (19%),
- young people who are not in employment or not in education (2.3%).

The following examples of services were provided by the study participants:

- publications of special formats (25.7%);
- adaptation of spaces; sensory spaces (59%);
- adaptation of facilities, mostly for the visually impaired (40%).

There is also the delivering of books to homes (some libraries provide this service by cooperating with a social taxi service), assistance for children from immigrant families and the consulting of immigrant families on how to use e-systems of public authorities, creation of a guidebook for the deaf and cooperation with prisons and day care centres.

However, premises of some libraries are only partially adapted or wholly unadapted to people with disabilities, and some libraries do not provide special services (people with disabilities or seniors can use only the same services as the library's other users).

Inclusion into the cultural life. Libraries, by employing their information resources (66.7%), events and programmes (87.6%), local history activities (80%), as well as by creating digital content and ensuring its access (47.6%) and creating archives and providing access to them (38%), provide possibilities for readers to get to know the world's and Lithuania's cultural heritage.

Among digital products created by libraries, noteworthy are the mobile application *Literatūrinis Alytus* ("Literary Alytus"), the virtual game *Pažink Kauno rajoną* ("Get to Know the Kaunas District")*,* the virtual map *Molėtų rajono literatūriniai tiltai* ("Literary Bridges of the Molėtai District") and the Websites *Vilnijos vartai* ("The Gate of Vilnija"), *Raseinistika* ("Raseinistics"), etc.

31.4% of libraries contribute to ensuring representatives of national minorities the right to participate in the cultural life. Not all the libraries include the creation of services for national minorities into their activities; it might be predetermined, among other factors, by the demographic composition of the serviced community ("there are almost no national minorities in our town"). Libraries operating in border regions collect literature in Polish and Russian and communicate with visitors in Latvian.

Public libraries are agents within natural processes of the integration of national minorities ("there is a large community of Roma in the District. Their representatives often use Internet access at the Library"); they also organise occasional events devoted to events significant to cultures of national minorities. Some libraries have long-time experience of working with national minorities as regards the organisation of day camps and implementation of employment programmes for children of national minorities.

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Active immigrants or representatives of other nationalities who are temporarily staying in Lithuania are pleased to find pursuits at Lithuania's public libraries, thus promoting the language and culture of their countries ("at our Library, a volunteer from Belgium teaches French").

The right to health. 79% of public libraries actively contribute to ensuring the right to health. They collect, provide and popularise information on health and disease prevention (74.3%), promote healthy lifestyle (53.3%), encourage and organise trainings on healthy lifestyle and physical education activities (39%) and create, provide and popularise services devoted to improving mental health (38%). Libraries present examples of best practice: cooperation with a bureau of public health; meetings with physicians, nutritionists and experts of medicinal herbs; preparation of broadcasts on healthy diets and healthy lifestyle; trainings on using the public e-system *esveikata.lt*; popularisation of walking with northern sticks together with a health centre; and seminars on stress management.

Enhancing public awareness of human rights. In order to enhance public awareness of human rights libraries:

- collect, aggregate and provide information on this subject (54.3%);
- organise meetings and lectures (36.2%);
- prepare various content enhancing public awareness of human rights (33.3%);
- organise discussions (20%).

Libraries host commemorations of the Europe Day, meetings with politicians and philosophers and debates of applicants to public authorities.

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Lithuanian public libraries, by aggregating, creating and disseminating qualitative and reliable information, enhance public awareness of human rights, expand boundaries of knowledge and promote social inclusion and communal spirit.

The factors increasing possibilities for Lithuanian public libraries to ensure human rights are the following: dense library network, programmes by public authorities, involvement into joint initiatives, improvement of the library infrastructure, improvement of the staff's competences and effective cooperation between libraries and with other institutions. Activities of libraries regarding the ensuring of human rights became prominent during the pandemics: they promptly reacted to the change in situation and began creating and providing services under circumstances of the new reality by teaching their users skills how to live in the new reality with a focus on those categories of users who experience exclusion.

Lithuanian public libraries are not only socially responsible establishments themselves but they also encourage social responsibility of the general public (volunteering and involvement of the public in helping libraries organise information services to users experiencing exclusion).

Lithuanian libraries significantly, actively and in an effective manner contribute to the implementation of human rights.