



UN OHCHR Special Rapporteur on minority issues:
Call for Submissions on Education, Language and the Human Rights of Minorities

Response from the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions would like to thank the Special Rapporteur for the opportunity to contribute to this call for submissions on Education, Language and the Human Rights of Minorities. IFLA welcomes the Special Rapporteur's initiative to prepare and present a report on this topic, and we look forward to seeing further progress made in this area.

As a federation of associations and institutions, IFLA works with libraries worldwide to develop standards, share best practices, raise awareness and inspire action to protect and promote regional and minority languages. On the basis of these experiences, we would like to take this opportunity to offer information on relevant initiatives and good practices in promoting linguistic diversity and addressing the educational needs of linguistic minorities in the library sector.

Providing access to information in minority languages

Libraries provide educational materials in minority languages

A lack of learning materials and access to information in minority languages can be a considerable obstacle to their inclusion in education processes. [A 2017 study requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education](#), for example, points out that many minority language education efforts they had examined experienced difficulties obtaining high-quality teaching materials. The [2016 European Centre for Minority Issues brief](#) highlighted the crucial role of libraries in providing both teaching and reading materials in minority languages.

A direct way for libraries to address these needs is by providing access to textbooks and educational materials in minority languages. One example of such initiatives is the [2012-2013 pilot of the Digitization Project of Kindred Languages](#) by the Finnish National Library. In the first years of the project, more than 150 monographs in Ingrian, Mari and Mordvinic and Veps languages were digitised and made available online. The majority of these publications were textbooks and dictionaries.

The 2012 [periodical report on the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in Hungary](#) points out that libraries organised by minority self-governments operated in schools, providing educational and scientific literature in minority languages. In other cases, textbooks in minority languages can be offered by the national library: for instance, the [National Library of Armenia holds](#) scientific and educational materials and textbooks in Russian, Yezidi, Assyrian, Kurdish, Ukrainian, Greek, Georgian and Persian.

Highlighting these good practices, we would therefore invite the final report to encourage educational institutions to further cooperate with national, minority and public libraries to deliver relevant and high-quality educational materials in minority languages.

Building multilingual collections to promote literacy

More broadly, many libraries strive to provide a range of reading materials in regional and minority languages. While these books are not related to the educational process directly, the [2009 UN Forum on Minority Issues](#) pointed out that access to reading and media materials in minority languages promotes cultural rights of minorities and assists the fulfilment of their educational rights.

From a library perspective, providing materials in minority languages is particularly important to promote minority language literacies through reading. [Eisenclas et al \(2013\)](#), for instance, discuss the documented benefits of “home-language literacy”, including the suggested benefits to educational achievements and literacy in general. As such, access to reading materials in minority languages can be an important contribution to the linguistic minority population’s overall literacy and educational success.

To that end, many national, public and specialised libraries work to provide multilingual collections which meet the needs of the linguistic minority representatives in their communities. [The latest periodical reports](#) on the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in Ukraine, Romania, Spain, Slovakia, Slovenia, Poland, Hungary, Germany, the UK and the Czech Republic highlight the work of various libraries to stock reading materials in minority languages.

Community engagement can be a strong advantage of providing reading materials in minority languages through libraries. As [Hill \(2017\)](#) points out, including a thorough consultation process when building a multilingual library collection is crucial; it can ensure that the collection and services meet the needs and interests of linguistic minorities.

Another advantage is libraries’ ability to arrange exchanges and intra-library loans to widen the linguistic minority users’ access to reading materials. For instance, the National Library of Romania holds annual book exchanges with several foreign libraries (e.g. the Croatian National Library, the National Library of the Czech Republic, institutions in Hungary and Germany, etc.)

There are guidelines and toolkits available to help libraries build multilingual collections and library services that reflect the needs of minority language speakers in their communities: for instance, [guidelines](#) and [a toolkit](#) issued by IFLA, as well as the guidelines by the [American Library Association](#). The IFLA “[Guidelines for Library Services to Deaf People](#)” similarly offers recommendation on library services for deaf or hard of hearing people, including recommendations on library collections and provision of programmes (including literacy programmes) in sign languages.

We therefore invite the report to reaffirm the importance of access to reading and media materials in minority languages for both cultural and educational rights of linguistic minorities; and to encourage development of, and support for, multilingual library services as a means of providing such access.

Digitisation, copyright permissions, and creation of new reading materials

Aside from their existing collections, libraries carry out related tasks to ensure wider access and creation of new materials in minority languages. Digitisation initiatives, for instance, allow libraries to offer a wider range of reading materials. For instance, the [Tulipana project](#) in Brazil, the [Digitization Project of Kindred Languages and Minority Languages](#) and the [Digitization Project of Uralic Languages](#) in Finland digitise materials in minority languages and make them publicly available.

Such library projects also frequently entail efforts to obtain copyright clearance to distribute the digitised materials. The two Finnish digitisation projects mentioned above included investigations into rightholders and clearance of rights in order to ensure public access to the digitised materials. Similarly, an extensive and longstanding project by national and specialised libraries in Nordic countries works to provide reading materials to migrant populations, prioritising such languages as Somali, Tigrinya, Arabic, Persian, Pashto and Dari - to achieve that, they obtain the rights to electronically distribute the selected titles.

Finally, there are examples of libraries working to create new materials in minority languages to address the lack of relevant reading and educational materials. Some notable examples include:

- The [Trøndelag county library in Norway](#), which worked with the Saami population in its community to create and publish children's books in the native language;
- The [Danish Central Library for Southern Schleswig](#), which coordinated the publication of three children's books in Danish for the linguistic minority in Germany;
- The [National Library of Scotland, which partners with Creative Scotland](#) to appoint a Scots Scribe – one of his obligations is to create new works in Scots.
- The [Technological University at Chocó Library \(Colombia\)](#), which works with the local indigenous communities to help them create a dictionary of their languages.

We would therefore encourage, wherever possible, a wider adoption of such practices in libraries worldwide, as well as support for digitisation initiatives, the removal of unnecessary copyright restrictions on the sharing of materials across borders on a non-commercial basis and practical arrangements for clearing rights to use such materials, if necessary.

Informal learning initiatives

Library initiatives to build multilingual collections provide reading and educational materials which can assist formal educational processes or help develop minority language reading and literacy skills. Other library initiatives focus on facilitating or organising informal learning initiatives to develop and promote various literacy skills in minority languages directly. Such library initiatives step in to address the shortage of institutionalised efforts to teach minority languages outlined by [Eisenclas et al \(2013\)](#).

An illustrative example is the "[Russian Reading Diploma](#)" initiative organised by the Finnish library network "HelMet" for Russian-speaking minority children in Finland. The librarians and Russian language teachers developed annual reading lists for different ages, based on the Russian literature available in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area public libraries.

Based on an existing Finnish "Reading Diploma" model, this program includes a reading list, several associated tasks and a participation card; if a child completes the full programme, a diploma is awarded. This model can be implemented to promote minority language literacy in different cultural and national settings. Notably, the experience of Finnish organisers highlighted the importance of interorganisational cooperation to promote the programme (e.g. cooperation with educators, reading club hosts, etc.)

Other types of literacy initiatives organised by libraries are less formalised. A model often used in libraries across different countries is *storytelling events* in minority languages – for instance, the *Noche de Cuentos* events in several libraries in the US or the *Hungarian storytelling hours* in the Lendava Library in Slovenia.

Similarly, sign language storytelling events in the Vancouver Public Library in 2015 offered literacy learning opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing children. The District of Columbia Public Library [hosts American Sign Language \(ASL\) classes](#); and Montgomery County Public Libraries carried out ASL and Cued Speech classes in collaboration with other organisations and community partners.

Learning opportunities for older learners and marginalised representatives of linguistic minorities

This call for submissions emphasised ability of linguistic minorities to pursue education, including studies of minority languages as distinct subjects, beyond basic education at older ages (i.e. university education). Traditionally, library services can encourage lifelong learning and provide informal learning opportunities for older learners.

For example, between 2014 and 2016 the public libraries of Palma and Maó in Spain, supported by the Directorate-General for Culture, hosted book clubs for both children and adults which promoted reading in minority languages (in Catalan in particular). The Mykolaiv regional library in Ukraine [hosted interactive reading events](#) for Polish speaking youth, organised by the Regional Society of Poles (2015-2016).

A different example is [“Echo”, a library in a van](#) in Greece which (among other functions) provides refugees with access to literature in their native languages. This effort is particularly important for refugees who did not have the opportunity to fully develop their native language competencies - either because they were unable to complete their formative education due to displacement, or because they were prohibited from using their native languages. When possible, the library employs native speaker volunteers to assist them with developing their reading skills.

The last example highlights the potential importance of informal learning opportunities that libraries can provide. Their initiatives to raise literacy in minority languages are typically free of charge, with little or no barriers to entry – meaning that they can offer marginalised representatives of linguistic minorities an opportunity to practice and further develop their language competencies.

Based on these examples, we suggest that the final report could include references to the importance of informal and non-formal lifelong learning opportunities for minority language literacy, particularly for adult learners and marginalised or vulnerable representatives of linguistic minorities. We would invite relevant stakeholders to draw on the experience of, and partner with, the library and information sector to deliver such informal learning initiatives.