**Abstract:** In 2015, the United Nations adopted a program of principles, Agenda 2030, to create a more sustainable world and better the living conditions for people. In this ambition, culture plays a crucial role. As such, the world goals seem to be an obvious topic for Danish public libraries, but this has not been the case until recently.

This study is based on a mixed-method approach including document studies, semi-structured interviews, and participation in a practitioners’ conference. It finds that Danish librarians strive to make the world goals comprehensible and articulate the parent institution as local communicators. Libraries are shown to be correctives to current commercial structures, but apart from this display great variation in how far the various libraries are advanced in their sustainable transformation.

The study concludes that public libraries inform citizens about the ambition of the world goals as a starting point for adjustments in the citizens’ actions. Public libraries have ventured into unknown territory, where previous practices do not hold much status. Many library professionals lack this awareness, which is necessary for our understanding of the United Nations world goals as a library policy task.

**Keywords:** Public library, sustainable development goals, culture action

1 Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations adopted a program of principles, Agenda 2030, which consisted of seventeen sustainable development goals and 169 targets. The ambition was to create a more sustainable world and improve living conditions for all people by the year 2030. The sustainable development goals were created as the latest of several responses to some of the global challenges humanity currently faces and have since served as a supranational benchmark, the most important components of which are 1) sustainable change within production and consumption, and 2) more equitable distribution of resources. Sustainability in production and consumption is important because the current utilisation of resources has reached a level of intensity seriously threatening to do irreparable damage to the ecological cycle. Therefore, new considerations regarding the exploitation of natural resources are necessity. At the same time, the material and economic inequality in the world has grown, with fewer people owning still larger parts of the resources. This bias has had several consequences, including a decline in the living conditions of poor people and increased migration movements.1

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1. van Vlimmeren (2021).

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In the ambition to create sustainable production and consumption, and a more equal and just world, culture plays a crucial but neglected role. The report Culture 2030 global campaign states how:

“The reality is that references to culture in the SDGs are scarce and do not sufficiently acknowledge the many ways in which cultural aspects influence and contribute to sustainable development. The keyword analysis of the VNRs research finds that the cultural dimension of sustainable development lags significant behind.”

However, culture may be regarded in many ways. In this article, I will use Christian Jantzen’s pragmatic definition, which builds on the dual concept of culture, originally developed by Johan Fjord Jensen. Fjord Jensen describes how there are two scientific definitions of culture: an aesthetic definition, denoting man’s different artistic creations (the narrow conception of culture as something we may own), and an anthropological definition, denoting man’s different ways of life (the broad conception of culture as something, we may be). Fjord Jensen points out how these two definitions are two perspectives on the same phenomenon, and hence denote his model “the double culture concept” (author’s translation). Culture refers to something people are because communities always produce objects, rituals, etc. which people in communities have in common – and vice versa: culture always refers to the objects, rituals, etc. which communities have in common because people in communities live their lives together. Jantzen expands this double concept of culture and proves how action unites the two cultural perceptions:

“Culture is not something which exists. It neither is something to be nor something to have. ‘Culture’ is something that is done: it is an effect or consequence of actions, such as makes texts explicable and interpretable as explanations and interpretations of life. It is the core of the pragmatic concept of culture, which is based on concrete actions: in the processes in which meaning is actualised and realised, and in which this formation of meaning produces effect.”

This definition of culture as action makes it possible to understand the public libraries of the Western world and their long-standing function as cultural laboratories. The Western public libraries have long functioned as frameworks in which citizens could experiment with and exercise their democratic participation in a safe, institutional setting and where enlightenment and cultural activities still played crucial roles. Enlightenment refers to a process where citizens are informed about social and political decisions concerning the individual’s personal conditions, her family relationships and/or local circumstances, while cultural activity denotes activities allowing citizens to evaluate their cultural skills and actions in community with others. As such, the sustainable development goals are an obvious topic for the Danish public libraries – but this is apparently not the case. Firstly, the Danish public libraries were slow to respond. The sustainable development goals were adopted in 2015 and the first, specific initiatives appeared approximately 3 years later, in 2018. As one of the participants in my study put it: “we have certainly not been [...] first movers!”.

Secondly, I have an assumption that considerations regarding the sustainable development goals’ impact on the social legitimacy of public libraries are absent. Several leading members of the Danish library community emphasise their view of public libraries as significant players in the attempt to fulfil the sustainable development goals, but very few have specified which overall ideological changes public libraries can, must and should implement. The recommendations are often limited to passive declarations of intent to ensure free and equal access to information and/or the designation of library-relevant sustainable development goals. Thirdly, I assume that initiatives concerning the sustainable transformation of the library’s core services often refer to services which were a part of the public libraries’ activities already before 2015 and which, under the impression of the sustainable development goals, are being renamed. Business as usual is fine if it contributes to the fulfilment of one or several essential goals but must not appear as greenwashing in which case the public library could lose popular legitimacy.

Against this background, it is interesting to study what cultural initiatives the Danish public libraries are launching to contribute to the implementation of the sustainable development goals. The research question which this project aims to answer is the following: what cultural contributions do public libraries make to the Danish society’s fulfilment of UN’s sustainable development goals? This article focuses on the cultural aspects and examines what culture initiatives

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2 Culture 2030 global campaign (2019) 5 ff.
3 E.g., Bennett (2010), Hastrup (2005), Solhjell (2001).
7 Emerek (2001), Culture 2030 global campaign (2019).
8 Holmquist (2021).
9 Sena, see also Hauke (2021).
12 Andersen et al. (2019).
public libraries in an industrially developed country may initiate, to create space for citizens’ reflection and self-reflection and thus for changes in attitudes and actions in a sustainable direction. I assume, that access to information does not solve any problem on its own, but access to information is crucial as a basis for being able to make well-considered decisions and the enablement of appropriate acts.

2 Theoretical framework

Through his analyses of the path of French, English, and German society towards free constitutions, Jürgen Habermas identifies the political realm as a specific sphere arising between the state and the private realm. The political realm developed in the 18th and 19th centuries as a sphere where citizens could partake in public affairs and gain political influence – but the path to this went via the world of the letters (see table 1). According to Habermas, the arts debates and especially the literary debates played a crucial role in the development of the bourgeoisie’s mind-set in accordance with democratic values, because the debate with its argumentative, debating, and critical form served as an exercise area for the democratic conversation – a form which was later translated into active participation in the political realm:

“Even before the control over the public sphere by the public authority was contested and finally wrested away by the critical reasoning of private persons on political issues, there evolved under its cover a public sphere in apolitical form – the literary precursor of the public sphere operative in the political domain. It provided training ground for a critical public reflection still preoccupied with itself – a process of self-clarification of private people focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel privateness. Of cause, next to political economy, psychology arose as a specifically bourgeois science during the eighteenth century. Psychological interests also guided the critical discussion (Räsonnement) sparked by the products of culture that had become publicly accessible: in the reading room and the theatre, in museums and at concerts.”

The art and literature debates trained the communicative skills of the aspiring bourgeoisie, who saw opportunities to acquire political action abilities and to change their position from passive commoners to co-determining citizens who took an active part in the leadership of society. At the same time, the democratic dialogue had a decisive influence on the prevailing perception of culture as a prescription for how citizens can, should and must act. The democratic mind-set became par excellence a normative ideal for the whole way of life: in the interaction between people, in the relationship between the sexes, in the upbringing of children, etc.

Many of the Western public libraries arose at the same time as the nations’ transitioned to democratic constitutions and hence became one of the institutions which came to institutionalise democratic action in practice. Therefore, the concepts of enlightenment and cultural activity are still crucial to the public libraries’ self-understanding and in the library professional practices. The public libraries’ concept of enlightenment draws on Immanuel Kant’s dictum of man’s opportunity to detach himself from his self-inflicted incompetence by means of his rational judgment. Through reason it is possible for the individual to empower herself, but it is a continuous process requiring persistent enlightenment: only by applying the insights knowledge provides, is it possible to achieve political and cultural influence, better one’s living conditions, etc. Therefore, it is not sufficient when, for example, Meschede et al., Kosciejew, or Pichman claim that the public libraries’ most significant contribution to the sustainable development goals is to provide access to information. There is more to it, namely action!

Cultural activity defines the parts of the public library’s activities reaching beyond dissemination of information and enlightenment. Cultural activity provides citizens with the opportunity to gain subjective and collective experiences of democratic participation through common action and at the

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same time to be able to reflect on the diversity of the world. According to Henrik Kaare Nielsen, literature (and other cultural activities) holds this function because the aesthetic experience in cultural activities must be considered based on Kant's second concept: the one on reflective judgment. Reflective judgment refers to the, in principle, infinitely subjective process of experience arising in people's encounter with artistic objects and cultural manifestations. In this encounter, the viewer/reader/participant is confronted with an infinite series of possible interpretations of the aesthetic content. Because the content is of an aesthetic nature and thus cannot be determined in normative or scientific terms, the interpretation is in principle open to discussions. This openness may be transferred to social conditions because the social field cannot be defined in normative or scientific terms either and hence reminds people of their subjective presence in the world we have in common. Through the reflective judgement people gains the opportunity to reflect on other people's alternative perceptions of the world, to make introspective self-observations, and realise their own subjectivity. Reflection and self-reflection nuance our perceptions of other people and ourselves, and thereby influence our attitudes and actions. Any artistic or cultural activity thus creates opportunities for subjective reflections to be specified through democratic conversations and used in other areas, such as for instance a politically conscious consumer:

„Die Bevölkerung wird im Hinblick auf die Zukunftsfähigkeit der Gesellschaft als wichtigster Akteur eingestuft, nimmt sie doch mehrere Rollen ein. Als Konsument ist sie der wichtigste Ressourcenverbraucher und kann durch entsprechendes Verhalten Veränderungsprozesse bewirken. Wahlberechtigte können politische Entscheidungen für mehr Nachhaltigkeit erzwingen oder gezielt Umweltorganisationen unterstützen.“26

The library professional interpretation of the concepts enlightenment and cultural activity is specified in the activities made available by public libraries through their function as cultural laboratories. The starting point was originally the individual's democratic and active participation in society's decision-making processes as a citizen, but the sustainable development goals provide these processes with a new direction. The sustainable development goals may be seen as an attempt to create a series of new common benchmarks, the aim of which is to support a democratic development – in a more sustainable and just direction. The sustainable development goals identify the problems, try to create agreement on end goals and set a political framework around possible solutions – but the scale of the problems is of such a nature that they cannot be solved unless states, institutions, organisations, and ordinary people act together.29

3 Analytical considerations

This theoretical framework is the focal point for how my empirical data are being analysed. In Denmark, library policy priorities are often implemented at an institutional level via central authorities’ official guidelines and recommendations, which, however, was not the case with the sustainable development goals. Instead, several interest groups, like Library managers’ associations, the Danish library association and the Danish union of cultural and information academics entered the debate and posted suggestions on the development possibilities of public libraries. My analysis model is based on one of these interest organisations – local government Denmark and their contribution. Local government Denmark is an interest organisation for the ninety-eight municipal councils in Denmark and aim to ensure the local development of municipalities, as well as contribute to the further development of municipal self-government and local democracy. As the operation of the Danish public libraries is municipal, local government Denmark also represent the public libraries' superiors. In a paper from 2021, local government Denmark states how:

“The library has all the prerequisites to support several the UN's world goals, which many municipalities are already working on – special focus on health and well-being (world goal 3), quality education and lifelong learning (world goal 4) as well as focus on sustainable cities and communities (world goal 11).”35

These three areas are part of the public libraries' information and cultural activities and I therefore choose them as the first part of my analysis model. The second part is based on a publication from a workgroup under EBLIDA called European libraries and sustainable assessment. In the publication Toward the implementation of SDG indicators in European libraries, ELSA states how:

26 Fridrich (2021) 460.
27 Holmquist (2021) 473.
28 United Nations (w. d.).
29 Kosciejew (2020).
30 Kann-Rasmussen and Balling (2014).
31 Bibliotekschefforeningen (w. d.).
32 Danish library association (w. d.).
33 Forbundet kultur og information (w. d.).
34 Kommunernes landsforening (w. d.).
35 KL (2021) 2 (author’s translation).
36 ELSA (2020).
ELSA proposes three indicators: output, outcome, and impacts as a starting point for assessing the public libraries’ implementation of the sustainable development goals. Outputs are defined as the immediately visible results of activities and the extent to which they have been used, such as the number of participants at events or circulation figures. In contrast, outcome is defined as the positive changes in people’s lives resulting from a library product or service. Outcome is usually linked to the goals of a specific service or activity and shows how successful these are, for instance in the form of citizen involvement and commitment. The third element, impact, is defined as the long-term, strategic changes and is about the long-term impact of the cultural institution’s activities on people’s lives and/or local communities.

4 Method

The present study is designed as a hypothetical-deductive research project based on the ambitions of various Danish public libraries to implement the United Nations’ sustainable development goals. The field of tension between personal emancipation and collective discipline existing in the professional activities of public libraries also exists in my scientific method. I am influenced by the Scandinavian tradition of cultural analysis, where man is considered in possession of a free will, but also always under the influence of society's current, collective, and social structures. Since I am interested in an institutional field where it is the result of mutual interaction processes, I want to analyse, I consider my observations and interpretations as reconstructions of the observed reality. This study uses a mixed method approach and contains documentary studies of reports on practical projects, review of a strategy plan, participation in a conference day in March 2022 and interviews with 5 participants employed at Danish public libraries.

The literature forming the basis of my documentary studies is compiled through searches performed on December 9, 2021, in the databases EBSCO (44 hits), JSTOR (8 hits) and LISA (58 hits). The goal of the search is to find reports on practical projects, as well as scientific articles about the public libraries’ labour with the sustainable development goals in a Western context. Therefore, I omit articles concerning other types of libraries (e.g., university libraries), articles regarding countries outside the Western world (e.g., Nigeria and India), and articles from before 2015. The search consisted of the following search string:

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((sdg or sustainable development goals) AND
(Public library or public libraries or public library services)) AND
la:(eng OR en)
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The search yielded a total of 110 hits. After a thorough and critical review of the verified articles, where duplicates, irrelevant material according to the above criteria and materials in languages other than Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, English, and German were sorted out, I ended up with a search set of twenty-three articles and reports. These documents were reviewed and sorted into scientific and non-scientific publications. A thorough search of the websites of seven locally selected public libraries revealed that only one had an actual strategy for implementing the United Nations’ sustainable development goals. This strategy was included as a background for the analysis.

My point of departure is a hypothetical deductive perspective, and I chose to expand my documentary study with semi-structured interviews and to prepare an interview guide. The semi-structured interview is a subcategory of the ethnographic interview and useful for studies of individual considerations made by employees based on collective norms, for instance in connection with studies of institutional contexts. As there are (yet) no general recommendations from superior library authorities, I am interested in how designated staff members manage the formulated, albeit vague, responsibilities required to implement the United Nations’ sustainable development goals. Simultaneously, I am aware of how my approach intervenes with the subject field. As a researcher within library and information sciences, my questions constitute the subject field as a problem area for myself as a researcher and for the employees who function as my informants. Hence, my questions implicitly enable the interviewees to reconstruct and formulate their own experiences why I refer to these

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37 ELSA (2020) 4.
38 ELSA (2020) 6.
39 Helgason (2020), see also Bennett (2010).
40 Scott-Sørensen et al. (2010).
41 Alvesson and Skjøldberg (2000).
42 Edwards and Holland (2013).
43 See Appendix.
44 Edwards and Holland (2013).
as participants and not respondents. Had I asked other questions, I would have created an alternative framework and thus received different answers. At the same time, my questions set a framework for how I can interpret the participants’ answers. To deal with this uncertainty, the questions in the interview guide are based on my theoretical approach and on my analysis considerations.

Initially, I chose to contact one medium-sized public library to get different perspectives on the public library’s endeavours to implement the sustainable development goals. The intention was to find five participants from different departments for instance administration, management, front, and back-office teams and to conduct semi-structured interviews with these participants. This strategy quickly proved to be unrealisable. Firstly, there was only one staff member who responded to my initial inquiries at the selected public library and secondly, my contact revealed how many institutions have not yet written the sustainable development goals into their local strategies, but often leave the responsibility to one or a few employees, whose task is to generate ideas for the parent institution’s sustainable development projects. Furthermore, the project orientation meant that the public library focuses on the sustainable agenda for a limited period, after which a product or result must be available ready for implementation in the institution. It was thus the task of the designated employees to develop these products or results and to keep colleagues and management informed about the transitions in their organisation. As soon as this became clear, I chose to expand my empirical basis and contacted four additional institutions. One public library never responded to my request, while another declined participation due to a lack of initiatives. The remaining public libraries wanted to conduct couple interviews where two staff members were present at the same time which I accepted. My interview basis thus consists of interviews with five participants conducted in the period 18th–31st January 2022. The five participants were Sena (marketing employee), Sam (process and development consultant) Jon (library disseminator) Kim (area manager) and Gerd (learning consultant and project manager). Furthermore, I was invited to one of these public libraries’ Sustainability conference in March 2022, to give a short presentation together with other library professionals and practitioners.

5 Analysis

All the participants emphasised three overall focus points: 1) to make the sustainable development goals as specific and understandable as possible to the citizens, and 2) to designate the parent institution as a local communicator of the sustainable development goals. The United Nations sustainable development goals were considered “very high-flying” and as something which the public library had to translate and transform into an understandable everyday context. In addition, the participants mentioned the public libraries 3) as a corrective to current production and consumption structures and were, in several participants’ self-understanding, part of a sharing economy system functioning as an alternative to prevailing, commercial structures. As Gerd put it: “The library is actually the oldest sustainable thought we have!” In addition to these similarities, there was great variation in how far the various parent institutions were in their transition processes, how they approached the implementation of the sustainable development goals, and what topics they found significant.

5.1 Good health and well-being

In the answers of four participants, it was possible to identify various specific initiatives with a focus on good health and well-being. In particular, the well-being part was highlighted as an area where activities had motivated different groups of volunteers to engage in communities. As a specific output, Jon mentioned how her parent institution: “[has] 6 volunteers 60+ ladies who would like to work with […] some kind of world goals”. These volunteering women were well-known firebrands from the local community who had been active in the town’s cultural and social life for several years.
years and now engaged in exhibitions on issues like food waste and waste sorting. The six women was inspired by a workshop held in collaboration with the think tank future libraries, but they now continued voluntarily (Sam).

Gerd had similar experiences. In connection with a joint venture project together with the Danish gym and sports association (DGI, w. d.), her parent institution had held a literary event attracting 19 females and 1 male in the age group 60+. The project focused on literature, nature, and exercise, but had also had ambitions to create a basis for community “and this group of the twenty people have met subsequently. We have had a process with them [and now] they […] have made their own book group.”

The participants who did relate to the topic output, emphasised the well-being part including the ability of the respective public libraries to engage volunteers in social communities. Sena explained how her parent institution’s implementation of the sustainable development goals had begun in 2019, and how these activities had been strongly affected by the last 2 years covid-19 pandemic, where virtually all events had been suspended. In Senas response I found no further references to either good health or well-being.

As the interviews moved onto the long-term outcome of various dissemination activities, the participants again emphasised the well-being aspect. The participants focused on loneliness and the possibilities of meeting the needs of elderly citizens for social contact in response to the isolation, brought about by covid-19: “Roskilde [public libraries] labour with the concept of loneliness and the rest of us labour with the concept of community. They have a lot of focus on loneliness and somehow, we do the same because community is […] the opposite of loneliness”.

Gerd mentioned a similar consideration in her answer, where being part of communities was seen as counteracting the various challenges of isolation: “they did not sign up because of the reference to world goal number 3. They signed up because of the literature, the exercise, and the community. […] it is [also] about their mental health”.

In the participants’ answers, it thus became clear how good health and well-being are not considered as separate phenomena, but as close connected issues and may refer to different sustainable development goals at the same time. Furthermore, it became clear how the participants paid great attention to the citizens’ voluntary involvement in civil society projects.

53 Future libraries (w. d).
54 Gerd (2022).
55 Jon (2022).
56 Gerd (2022).
57 Gerd (2022).

5.2 Quality education

In comparison, the participants had much more to say about the parent institutions’ commitment to quality education. Sena, Sam, and Jon emphasised lifelong learning aspects and referred to different forms of nudging, while Kim and Gerd emphasised the educational aspects. As a marketing employee, Sena became very specific. One of the parent institution’s initiatives had been to produce a series of man-sized cardboard figurines standing around in the library's public area and thus conveyed various selected sustainable development goals statements: “It may actually help to […] get it into some form of daily thinking”, Sena claimed. She just emphasised this kind of nudging as her parent institution’s learning considerations.

In contrast, Jon emphasised the organisational measures introduced by the parent institution to reduce its climate footprint: “we are used to actually [dividing] waste into quite a few parts”. At first glance, sorting waste has nothing to do with lifelong learning, but in Jon’s interpretation, the actions of the employees became an example for citizens to follow. The parent institution’s low-practice source sorting was seen as a kind of nudging which could motivate citizens to take: “tiny little […] step in some huge upheaval of our way of being in the world.” Leading by example was considered a communication tool for enlightenment and for initiating minor concrete adjustments in people’s everyday life.

On the other hand, Kim and Gerd emphasised the educational aspect. The parent institution’s effort was described as consisting of three tracks: one for children, one for adults and one for the organisation (the latter track is omitted due to the focus of this article). Kim illustrated by referring to a local Children’s public meeting: “The first year [I] think 3 500 pupils attended. It is primarily for […] schools yes, but there is also a day where families may attend.” And Gerd added: “Last year, […] we were visited by [the local area’s] all fourth graders […]. Then we establish workshops and presentations and […] work with the world goals”.

For the adults, there were similar activities. The reading circle consisting of 1 man and 19 women 60+ ‘s arose due to an event whose purpose was to provide the participants: “nature training and exercise. They must have some learning, they must have some quality education and, among other things, hear about [a local author] out by [the author’s memorial].”

58 Sena (2022).
59 Jon (2022).
60 Jon (2022).
63 Gerd (2022).
The participants’ answers show how the Output was prioritised differently and what means were used: some focused on the passive nudging to influence the citizens’ actions and attitudes (Sena, Jon, and Sam), while others resorted to scaffolding learning activities and actual teaching (Gerd and Kim).

The participants had various considerations regarding the Outcome of their education activities. According to Sena, it was possible for the library to secure Outcome from virtually every sustainable development goal, but specified with only one example: with the library as a role-model, it was possible to make the sustainable development goals relevant and present, among other things through the lending of books: “when I borrow a book, then I also contribute to something related to responsible production and [...] to be aware of the resources”.

Jon expressed a more initiative-taking approach. Her response testified to greater interaction between librarian and citizens and stated how nudging was just one learning tool among several which employees could apply. The direct interaction with the audience was expressed as a desire to scaffold the citizens’ voluntary and collective empowerment processes:

“The dream is that they take it upon themselves, [...] do some things and play ball up against us occasionally. [...] As [Sam] talks about, the most important tool in that group [...] is actually to walk away from them once in a while. [...] If you sit there [all the time], you become an authority.”

In contrast, Kim and Gerd were far ahead in their planning of actual courses which included several external actors. The parent institution had succeeded in concluding an agreement with the United Nations association in Denmark. “We have established some kinds of networks and cooperation, [...] and then [we] have a lot of school courses online.” However, participant Kim and Gerd were also aware of the information aspect and how the parent institution should disseminate knowledge so to gain a more popular foothold. The means for this were dialogue and community-building activities, often developed and managed together with external partners. One such event was a recurring local Sustainability Day:

“[During] Sustainability Day, we are visited by [the employees from the municipality’s] Recycling department and Waste management department bringing [...] their green waste bags and their ten waste sorting fractions. And then they just help convey and explain why and how: what is the result and what comes out at the other end.”

The long-term outcome of the participants’ involvement in quality education all had references to responsible consumption or involvement in civil society – but the instruments were different. Where Sena focused exclusively on passive nudging, Sam and Jon were open to direct interactions with lifelong learning as a starting point. In contrast, Gerd had a clear focus on actual teaching and education.

5.3 Sustainable cities and local communities

All participants emphasised the local anchorage. Throughout the different interviews, it became clear that the Danish public libraries are part of a national library system occasionally collaborating with external partners, but always based their activities upon the wishes and needs of the local community! This anchoring was reflected in several specific emphases. Sena was clear in her report on the outputs of local initiatives, for instance regarding recycling:

“We have had some exhibitions down in the (lending) area, where we, among other things, have talked about how to collect household plastic [which] a local company has found a way to granulate. [The granulate will be] recycled in an injection moulding process and [...] in collaboration with a company [who have] designed a chair. So, in principle, [you] can collect [plastic] for your own designer chair.”

For Jon, the specific output consisted of a widespread collaboration with the library, external partners in the municipality, and the citizens. The collaboration was described as a kind of grassroots project: “At the same time, something is happening in the municipality, for example Rewilding [municipality name] which hopefully should dribble down from above”. A similar collaboration was outlined by participant Kim and Gerd, whose output centred on the activities arising from their educational activities:

“[We] got hold of the guy from the municipality’s planning department, who deals with solar cells and wind energy, and have had him make a Facebook video where he talks about why we in [the municipality] [...] should build a solar park. This is enlightenment for the citizens of the municipality [...] about sustainable energy.”
As a subject, sustainable cities and local communities were mentioned as a basis for specific health and well-being activities and quality education. However, the local anchorage also showed in the long-term outcome of the local activities. Here, Sena referred to climate change because her parent institution is situated in a geographically low-lying area experiencing regular floods. The global climate goals therefore seemed particularly relevant, “because we very well know that we live in a town, where a stream runs through one way and the fjord comes in the other way and [...] it does not take much here by us before we have a downtown where we must kayak!”

Sam emphasised the proximity of the parent institution to the citizens. As a framework for, for instance, lifelong learning activities, public libraries were described as “the most ingenious place to start talking about world goals because we have a lot of interested citizens coming through every day!” Gerd also emphasised the opportunities in being close to the citizens and the popular support, but simultaneous talked about the local anchoring as an opportunity to give the citizens expanded action competencies: “this is something we are experiencing right now: we have got a repair cafe and it has come by virtue of us getting some new people hired”. However, Gerd was also very aware how her parent institution had to be the driving force.

### 5.4 Strategic considerations

In the above quotations, there are few considerations regarding the libraries’ overall strategic considerations – their impact. The participants thematised the strategic possibilities, only these considerations were not associated with neither good health and well-being, quality education nor sustainable cities and communities. When the participants touched on the overall strategic ambitions, they did so from a holistic perspective, which at the same time reflected the current stage of the parent institutions in an organisational process and not from a dissemination or cultural point of view. Sam explained how the work with the sustainable development goals had arisen because of a study conducted by the think tank future libraries, while Sena focused on the parent institution’s ambition to get certified as a sustainable library. Danish education and culture institutions have an opportunity to be certified as sustainable institutions and this certification takes place in collaboration with Chora 2030, which is a project community established in 2014. Chora’s ambition is to initiate action through collaboration with, among others, libraries: “One of our contributions consists of a certification model developed by Chora 2030 [...] The World Goals Certification is a tool to work in a structured and holistic way with sustainability and a method to boost the sustainable movement.”

Kim and Gerd’s parent institution is part of Chora 2030’s project group and was thus the public library most advanced regarding the certification process.

The overall strategic considerations regarded the organisational conditions of the parent institutions. In time, the strategic ambitions will have an impact on enlightenment and cultural activities, but in its current form, there were nothing in the participants’ answers indicating what consequences these strategic considerations should or could have for the information and dissemination activities.

### 6 Discussion

For a long time, public libraries have served as cultural laboratories for people’s self-initiated cultural practices, whether these were aimed at the individual’s role as an enlightened and active participant in the political realm, the world of letters, or as a (self-)reflective actor in the conjugal family’s internal space cf. Habermas. At the same time, the sustainable development goals can be regarded as an enlightenment project obligating public libraries to take the goals into account in all aspects of their core activities, which is why the content of the cultural laboratory has been given a sustainable profile. As mentioned, three issues united the participants: 1) the ambition to make the sustainable development goals as specific as possible, 2) to consider the parent institutions as a local disseminator, and 3) to make the parent institution function as a corrective to society’s current production and consumption structures.

The local anchoring became particularly clear regarding the identification of subjects concerning sustainable cities and communities, which constitute a fundamental condition for the work with the other sustainable development goals in public libraries. This was to be expected because the Danish municipalities are required by law to conduct local public library services. The participants
emphasised how cooperation between municipal, private, and voluntary actors supported the creation of popular support and anchoring, but also provided the local population with knowledge and information about the local challenges of the sustainable development goals – and thus provided the citizens the opportunity to adjust their current actions accordingly (Sena and Jon), for instance in collaboration with the local water supply department (Gerd). These results broadly refute my third assumption: that the parent institutions simply renamed business as usual to make activities fit into the United Nations’ 2030 agenda. It should, however, be noted how activities mentioned by the participants were exhibitions, reading clubs, theme days, etc., which are activities appealing to the traditional users of the public library: the literary bourgeoisie.

The locally anchored specification of the sustainable development goals took place especially within the framework of the two other subject areas: good health and well-being, and quality education. The population in industrialised societies are not characterised by physical illnesses or malnutrition, but by mental illnesses, stress, and loneliness. Hence, the attention of the surveyed public libraries centred on for instance the prevention of social isolation among elderly citizens. In the participants’ responses, it became clear how good health and well-being in a Danish, library professional context was not considered separate phenomena, and how well-being may be considered a pleasant side benefit of different cultural and dissemination activities. The literary reading communities contained elements of knowledge about literature (lifelong learning), but also of exercise (health), community (mental well-being), etc., which at the same time points out how different activities may refer to different sustainable development goals at the same time.

The answers regarding quality education were of a similar nature and it became clear that the Danish public libraries’ task is not to oversee the primary and basic learning, but rather to promote the desire for reading and learning. The participants’ responses showed how the parent institutions prioritised locally and used different forms of communication, like nudging, workshops, or informal training. What was interesting in the participants’ answers, however, was how none of them exclusively stressed the free and equal access to information as the primary purpose of the parent institutions, but continuously emphasised people’s renewed capacity to act. The background for nudging, lifelong learning and education was the efforts to give citizens the opportunity to orientate and make informed decisions, as well as to construct a space where it was allowed to experimentally act.

The overall strategic activities had all influenced how the parent institutions planned the organisational assignments. As part of their implementation of the sustainable development goals, two out of three institutions surveyed were in the process of being certified as world goals libraries, which was due to a shift in focus and, among other things, a change in audience-oriented work. However, the certification in the parent institutions in question was not exclusively a rhetorical reformulation of business as usual, but included several efforts to create new foundations for the parent institutions’ activities. However, the mentioned strategic ambitions did not relate to cultural activities (yet) and one of the institutions I contacted declined participation due to lack of initiatives. Another institution never responded to my request. My second assumption regarding the absence of sustainable development goals from the public libraries’ overall strategic plans can thus not be rejected.

The cultural contribution made by the Danish public libraries to the implementation of the sustainable development goals especially concerns the citizens’ position on (over-) production and consumption, and the opportunity to act accordingly. In the designation of the public library as “the oldest sustainable thought”, it was precisely the role of a sustainable alternative to the commercial circuits which was indicated, whether speaking about voluntary communities, lifelong learning, waste sorting, repair-cafes, etc. In an overall, theoretical perspective, the implementation of the sustainable development goals thus represents a showdown with a previous public library practice. Habermas’ analysis showed how the arts and literature debate created the basis for the development of the political realm and the consequent democratic governance principles (see table 1). Through argumentation, discussion and critique in the literary public, the citizens were trained in the forms and norms of communication necessary in a democratic constitution. The public library is an inherited part of the world of letters and as such has always been a cultural laboratory for the citizens’ political participation. What is new is how the implementation of the sustainable development goals has motivated the public library to move into a part of the private realm that has not previously been a public

81 See also Meschede and Beutelspacher (2020).
82 Holmquist (2021).
83 Holmquist (2021).
86 Gerd (2022).
87 Gerd (2022), see also Meschede and Beutelspacher (2020).
88 Gerd (2022).
library issue, namely civil society: the realm for commodity exchange and social labour (see table 1). Here, the public libraries try to use the informal competence exercise of the art and literature debates, as a starting point for democratically based changes in the activities of civil society – and this takes place by means of the classical mechanisms: by giving citizens access to knowledge and information as a background for making informed choices and by giving citizens the opportunity to act accordingly, especially regarding production and consumption purposes. This confirms my first assumption – that it has taken the public libraries a long time to act – but it also explains why.

7 Conclusion

In the introduction to this article, I posed the following questions: what cultural contributions do public libraries make to Danish society’s fulfilment of the United Nations’ sustainable development goals? The question was asked with a focus on the citizens and on the assumption that cultural elements are crucial when society’s established structural routines need to be revised. Part of the answer may be found in the public libraries culture activities informing citizens about the background and ambition of the sustainable development goals and at the same time function as starting point for reflection processes which may lead to adjustments in the citizens’ individual attitudes and actions. Thus, public libraries do not just secure access to information – which is often emphasised by opinion leaders, stakeholders, and professionals – but also provide a space in which citizens can discuss and debate as well as train and test new attitudes and actions. My studies reveal how the public libraries’ contribution should be defined as far more initiative-taking than before and how the passive provision of information and knowledge is an overly narrow perspective to take. Instead, studies should focus on how public libraries work to promote sustainable activities enabling citizens to try out new techniques, technologies, and strategies. It is an important point, however, that the public libraries’ attitudes and actions do not take place to impose a particular attitude to the sustainable development goals, but to give citizens the opportunity to reflect on, and discuss why they do as they do – and to take the consequences thereof. The public libraries’ near-democratic basis is thus maintained, but the direction is set anew, by the sustainable development goals.

In other words, a form of initiative-taking library activity is emerging in the public libraries surveyed and this is made possible by the engagement in the sustainable development goals. This engagement has been difficult because the public libraries have been forced to move into a new territory. By applying Habermas’ theory, it becomes clear how the public libraries, by virtue of their commitment to the sustainable development goals, have ventured into the civil society, where past practices and routines do not necessarily hold the same effect and status as in the political realm and the world of letters. The public libraries have previously exercised influence in the conjugal family's internal space as a starting point for, for instance, the individual’s personal life choices. The sustainable development goals regard the civil society, which requires new forms of communication and new content because civil society is the focal point for the exchange of commodities (wage labour, production, and consumption) and for community labour. This awareness is lacking in all scientific and practical contributions to this subject; but is necessary for the public libraries’ understanding of the sustainable development goals as a library policy task.

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89 Holmquist (2021).

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Appendix: Sustainable development in public libraries

Interview guide
3. January 2022

1) What immediate consequences has the UN's sustainable development goals had for your library as an organization?
– What changes have been made in the library's purchasing or consumption pattern?
– What changes have been made by employees?
– What changes have been made toward the audience?

2) What operational or dissemination consequences has the UN's sustainable development goals had for your library?
– What reorganisations of services, dissemination or offers have the UN's sustainable development goals entailed?
– What changes in the activity calendar or year cycle have the UN's sustainable development goals brought about?
– Have the employees changed their attitude and/or action towards the audience in their ordinary service – and if so: how?

3) What long-term consequences of a more ideological nature have the UN sustainable development goals had for your library?
– How are the UN's sustainable development goals implemented or envisaged in visions, missions, or strategies?
– Can/should the UN's sustainable development goals have an impact on your library’s activities in general – and if so: how?
– What roles can/should the public library play as inspiration for other organizations or companies – e.g., as a sharing economical public company?