# Peer learning experience to grow public library innovation: the Initiative for Young African Library Innovators

## Authors: Ramune Petuchovaite (*EIFL*), Ugne Lipeikaite (*EIFL*)

### Introduction

IYALI - the Initiative for Young African Library Innovators - is a strategy of the EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) implemented through the Public Library Innovation Programme (EIFL-PLIP) with various partner organizations. An international learning, knowledge-sharing and networking experience, IYALI connects young African public librarians with their peers in other countries and continents and creates opportunities for them to expand their professional horizons, explore new service ideas, and reflect on their work in a global context.

Professional development of librarians embraces a wide range of learning activities, and actors. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Guidelines outline five groups of players with responsibilities for ongoing learning in the library profession: learners (or individual professionals), employers (libraries), library associations, LIS educators and training providers.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, public librarians from developing and transition economy countries face challenges in furthering their career development, initiating changes in their libraries and contributing to the growth of the profession, because they have limited opportunities for learning and lack the resources to travel and share their experiences and good practices beyond their own libraries and localities.

IYALI addresses this challenge with a different approach to international networking and visitor’s programmes as a part of continuing professional development. From the start, when developing the first IYALI learning experience in 2017, the EIFL-PLIP team worked with different library associations, libraries, and the learners. We emphasised a participative and co-creative peer-to-peer learning, trying to avoid conventional delivery of knowledge and instruction by librarians from the Global North to their peers from Global South.

In most cases, it is rare for young librarians, early in their careers, to acquire such an extensive exposure. This has opened my eyes to appreciate the profession far much more than I ever dreamed. - Bonny Olobo, Adult Library Officer at Kampala Capital City Authority Public Library, Uganda - IYALI 2017 participant.

In this case study we discuss the thinking behind the IYALI learning programme and describe the principles of building a transformative learning programme, and the initiative’s achievements. We conclude by offering for discussion several practical ideas that may be useful for including librarians that for a variety of reasons are excluded from major learning and knowledge sharing events, and for fast tracking adoption of innovative practices in the larger libraries’ community.

### What sparks innovation in the public library sector?

In creating the IYALI programme, we were guided by research commissioned by EIFL-PLIP in 2014/15 into what sparks and encourages innovation in public libraries, and how knowledge about innovations and innovative services travels within the public library sector.[[2]](#footnote-2) The study included a survey of over 120 public library managers and innovators, and several interviews with leadership of public library networks and professional associations from developing and transition economy countries. It found that the main reasons for public librarians to start new services and programme were:

* willingness to make the library more relevant to the community,
* personal satisfaction of being useful to the community,
* an opportunity to secure additional funding, and
* improvement of library infrastructure.

The majority of respondents said that peer-to-peer activities, for example, library visits, workshops and other interactive training events, professional meetings and collaborative projects, were the most effective ways of spreading innovative ideas among public libraries and encouraging take-up of these ideas by more libraries. According to the study, librarians valued peer-to-peer activities because they created the possibility of maintaining personal contact with colleagues from elsewhere, creating a platform for continuous exchange of good practices and for peer support.

Leaders of library networks and associations distinguished between ‘inspiration’ and ‘dissemination’ of innovation in relation to peer-to-peer activities. In their view, international conferences providing examples of innovative practices in other countries were the best way to ‘inspire’ innovation, while national conferences and meetings were the best platforms for disseminating new ideas previously tested in the local environment, and for encouraging replication by other libraries.

With these findings in mind, the EIFL-PLIP team developed IYALI to emphasise peer-to-peer learning in an international environment, with learning focused on innovative services, participating in an international conference, building international and local networks, and dissemination of good practice in the home country.

I definitely want to shift my library from being a traditional book lending library to a community engaging library, a library that is in touch with the needs of the community and helps meet the community’s needs. - Letshani Ndlovu, Chief Librarian at Bulawayo Public Library, Zimbabwe - IYALI 2018 participant

### The Initiative for Young African Library Innovators: a case study

##### Selection of participants

EIFL-PLIP invited participation in IYALI through open calls, targeting public libraries from across Africa. Applicants had to meet a three key criteria: age - they had to be aged under 35; experience - they had to have at least three years’ work experience in public or community libraries in Africa; leadership potential - we asked them to demonstrate leadership potential by describing an experience of developing an innovative library service (or services), and by elaborating their vision for the future development of their libraries.

A total of 39 young librarians have taken part in four IYALI learning experiences held outside of Africa. The librarians came from 13 countries: Algeria, Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

All were in relatively early stages of their careers in public librarianship – with work experience ranging from three to ten years. The majority were employed in specialist positions: children’s librarians, reference librarians, ICT officers and others. About a third of participants occupied middle or top managerial positions in their public libraries; less than a third held assistants’ positions, such as library assistant, ICT assistant. Almost none of the participants had participated in or addressed an international professional event.

##### The four IYALI learning experiences

Since 2017, four groups of young African library professionals have taken part in IYALI learning programmes in Europe, Asia and North America, hosted and supported by international and local partners:

* IYALI 2017 programme in Lithuania and Poland. Partners: African Library and Information Associations and Institutions (AfLIA), International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania, Information Society Development Foundation (FRSI, Poland).
* IYALI 2018 programme in Indonesia and Malaysia. Partners: AfLIA, IFLA, and the National Library of Indonesia
* IYALI 2019 programme in Denmark. Partners: Aarhus Public Libraries (Denmark) and Tactical Tech (Germany)
* IYALI 2020 programme in Nashville, TN, US. Partner: ALA Public Library Association.

IYALI learning programmes were slightly different, but all were built with the following activities to facilitate knowledge sharing and learning, leadership development, inspiration and lasting professional connections:

* Sharing information and experience of innovation in their libraries with fellow IYALI participants during an intensive workshop;
* Visiting libraries in the host country, sharing information and experience of innovation, and discussion on topics mutually agreed by the IYALI participants and their host libraries;
* Participating in an international library conference, for example, by creating a poster, giving ignite talks, joining panels.
* Giving an ignite talk at an African librarians’ conference. About a year after each IYALI programme, EIFL invited participants to compete for scholarships to attend an African librarians’ conference, and to present ignite talks on their experience of introducing IYALI inspired changes into their libraries.

##### Developing a transformative learning agenda

Before the start of each programme, the EIFL-PLIP team, with the help of partner libraries and library associations, worked remotely with both groups of participants - the selected young African librarians and host country librarians - to learn about and align expectations of the two groups. This fed into the IYALI agenda that included:

**Communication about expectations.** The welcoming message to in-person meetings included a bold expectation that participants would be responsible for their own learning. Rules of participation stressed that everyone should contribute by sharing their experiences, and react to contributions by others, take notes and capture new ideas, complement, discuss, debate and share reflections on new learning and insights. We also suggested everyone holding back their inner critic, by substituting a statement ‘it won’t work at my place’ with the questions ‘what could work in my place and how?’.

**Engaging activities**. Fun get to know each other session, participants led energizers, creative and interactive exercises, reflections, round table discussions to facilitate sharing and engage everyone on an equal basis, including young innovators, distinguished guest speakers (e.g. National Librarians), host public librarians, partner representatives, and the EIFL-PLIP team. We made sure that this time was not sacrificed for ‘more important’ presentations and the like formats.

**Short presentations** focused on innovative programmes, achievements, and aspirations or challenges – a super-short (up to five minutes), four-slide presentation, illustrated with photos to share one achievement in addressing community needs; and one aspiration or challenge faced in the library. To encourage discussion and reflection, the agenda included a five-minute Q&A session after each presentation.

**Interactive presentations** in small groups, on innovative service or good practice – total 30-minute sessions that included 15-minute presentations about each library's successful service, programme or good practice, using visuals, such as photos, videos, evidence of results, and 15 minutes for Q&A and discussion.

**Hands-on workshop**s in a small group, on technology-based services or programmes – total 60-minute demonstration sessions held in parallel, consisting of a short introduction to the community, library and service; hands-on demonstration of technology, tools, methodology used in the service.

**Library visits and unconference** discussions – two- to four-hour meetings that included an informal greet-and-meet session, guided walking tour (or unguided wandering around the library and ad hoc chatting), and unconference discussions. During one of the library visits, depending on the time available and number of participants, librarians shared their experiences on 4 to 8 practical on-the-ground issues faced in their libraries.

‘IYALI was an incredibly exciting meeting, because it enabled all sides to share ideas about library innovation as well as provided a new perspective on global library aims. In the un-conference, we not only shared our achievements, but discussed the common problems that we face in our work. All in all, probably the most valuable outcome of this short, yet concentrated unconference meeting was the shared sense of a global library community, building the network to promote the power of libraries and, of course, meeting amazing people’ – **Ieva Gvazdaityte, Senior Librarian of Marijampole Petras Kriauciunas Public Library, Lithuania**.

##### Evaluation and impact

Through reflection sessions during programme activities, and surveys afterwards, EIFL-PLIP collected feedback from participants that was used for overall evaluation of the initiative, and for sharing with partners.

In general, the feedback was extremely positive: the experience surpassed learning expectations of participants and had a transformative effect on their attitudes towards public libraries, the library profession, and themselves as professionals. The programme also built the confidence of young professionals to implement new ideas and solutions in their public libraries, embrace knowledge sharing and peer-to-peer learning in their professional practice, and join national and international librarians’ networks.

Summarized, the key learning from the four IYALI programmes, as noted by the participants shortly after getting back to their libraries, are:

* **Changed perceptions of the library** from being a place to read books, to a multipurpose community center, which listens and responds to information and learning needs of different community groups through targeted services and outreach programmes.
* **Provided practical ideas and new skills for new library services**, such as ICT training for different target groups, supporting farmers and unemployed populations, empowering women, supporting children’s learning and creativity.
* **Demonstrated new methods and approaches for better management of the library**, such as leadership skills, tips for using social media, and knowledge about how to collect and communicate data for advocacy, ideas for partnerships and networking.
* **Created opportunities to establish connections with peers**, ranging from top library leaders, representing IFLA and AfLIA, to fellow librarians from Africa and other regions.
* **Inspired and motivated to implement changes back in their libraries**, such as initiating new services and programmes, improving library marketing, data collection and advocacy, expanding outreach, establishing new partnerships, as well as, encouraging and widely sharing learnings with the library community in their home country[[3]](#footnote-3).

We followed the career paths of the IYALI alumni. The competitions after the IYALI experience for the young African public librarians to apply for scholarships for attending African library conferences, organized by AfLIA, and give a presentation about a service innovation in their libraries, allowed us to follow changes in their professional lives. In addition, in July 2020 we conducted a survey of all IYALI alumni. Twenty-six responded to the online questionnaire and they highlighted three main changes resulting from the IYALI programme:

* **Improvements in their career path**

I was promoted and transferred to take over a new library as the head librarian. - Koi Kazungu, Kenya, IYALI 2018 participant.

The confidence level that my supervisor has in me has greatly improved. - Allan Hagwelele, Zambia, IYALI 2017 participant.

* **Implementation of new library services**

I started a leadership class where we train both youth and women on courses such as Transformational leadership and Effective communication which has yielded major impact to the community. - Josek Olala, Kenya, IYALI 2018 participant.

One of the new services I started is a makerspace where we use recycled materials - Ezze Shipo, Namibia, IYALI 2017 participant.

* **Increased networking and participation in professional groups and events**

I am currently on the American Library Association International Relations Round Table. I am partnered with two others, a Kenyan colleague and a Canadian. The interactions, idea sharing, and comparison of our libraries have broadened my perspective. - Yusuf Ganyana, Kenya, IYALI 2020 participant.

I have joined The International Librarians Networking Program. My partner is Nondumiso from the National Library of South Africa. The main aim of this is to learn about each other, our professions in Kenya and South Africa and hopefully write a paper after it all. - Sarah Ogembo, Kenya, IYALI 2020 participant.

I have joined the INELI-MENA-Egypt program as a team leader to share the INELI-MENA experiences with the Egyptian public librarians. It is a very good experience of managing a team of innovators and engaging mentors from the region. - Mustafa Tufami, Egypt, IYALI 2018 participant.

While the lessons learned in each country and by each participant might be different, the impact of the IYALI led to rather quick adoption of new ideas and development of new programmes, addressing the needs of the community. It is our belief that this successful programme could be replicated at different levels, building a more inclusive, two-way international peer-to-peer learning experience that unlocks the potential of innovation in local contexts.

### Discussion

Conceptually, IYALI as a professional learning experience is best described by a series of key words (or rather action verbs): apply, participate, share, learn, be inspired, network, discuss, reflect, put into practice, assess, and communicate.

Based on EIFL-PLIP experience, we’d like to offer for discussion at the New Librarianship Symposia series several practical principles that might work for fast tracking adoption of innovative practices in the larger public library community, and also for making professional meetings and leadership programmes more inclusive, focused and welcoming to un-represented groups and newcomers:

1. **Creating inclusive opportunities for ongoing learning and professional networking**

Professional conferences and networking at the national and international level play an important role in spreading new ideas and good practice, and in ongoing learning of the library profession. In an ideal world the librarians themselves take initiative for their further learning, support the library's goals, and contribute to professional development. However some groups face barriers in practice for different reasons - age, position, gender, race, etc. Thus the main players according to the IFLA Guidelines for Continuing Professional Development - employers, library associations, LIS educators and Training providers - need to take a closer look at attendance at professional convenings and networks at the national and international level, to identify the missing and under-represented groups.

The first step is to understand the barriers, and then to work on viable opportunities for under-represented groups to become active, for example, through revising the membership and attendance/selection of contributors policies, making a space for diversity, or through targeted scholarships, etc. However, such measures might not be enough to break the power-dynamics of the traditional professional development and networking events and see underrepresented groups claiming the spotlight on equal footing with their peers, and new and different approaches and formats for professional and networking events could be helpful.

1. **Collaborative development of agenda**

We believe the transformative learning in IYALI has happened because the EIFL-PLIP team took time to build agendas that align and address participants’ interests and learning expectations, and also offer new experiences and knowledge that challenge established assumptions and traditional practices. A collaborative approach to planning the IYALI agenda helped to engage young African library innovators, and other invitees, for whom also this was a new experience. We used different ways to get everyone on board before the event, including Skype and phone interviews, using Facebook to foster discussion about successful library services, short surveys to identify cross-cutting areas of interests, online or in-person meetings with library experts, and/or visiting libraries in the host country to understand the public library innovation scene, consulting colleagues from national and international associations, etc.

Participatory processes of agenda development and thorough curation of content and formats of contributions paid off, however it is no doubt much more time-consuming than using more traditional agenda building methods, such as calls for contributions. Nevertheless, it is worth the effort, when diversity and inclusion are as important as the professional development goals. The IYALI programme surpassed learning expectations of the African participants, and ours, and yielded highly positive feedback from librarians in host countries.

1. **Interactive, engaging and fun activities**

All young African library professionals selected to take part in IYALI had prior experience of community outreach and service innovation. On one hand, they were eager to share, participate and contribute, but on the other hand, lacked confidence because they had no, or very little, experience of speaking in professional meetings. Thus the aim of the IYALI programme was through peer-to-peer learning activities to put them on an equal footing with their colleagues, who quite often had more experience. We achieved this by creating an informal, collaborative and non-threatening environment that encouraged open conversations, free discussions, and on the spot reflections and sharing lessons learned.

A warm and informal atmosphere and interaction on social media enabled participants to connect emotionally and build collaborative relationships from the first in-person meeting. This approach helped everyone to deal with stress of an unknown environment, confidence issues regarding presenting, and fear of being criticized. Participants felt safe to consider new ideas, concepts, and approaches, and question their established perceptions and traditional library practices, and international networking. Moreover, dynamic sessions and contributions, followed by discussions, or practical and fun activities helped participants’ to keep attention and focus on learning each day, throughout the intensive one- or two-week programme period.

1. **Practical and hands-on learning**

One of the main objectives of IYALI was to equip participants with innovative ideas, new approaches, and inspiring good practices, potentially replicable in their libraries. In the programme we quite radically discarded academic type and theoretical contributions, formal and long speeches and other traditional conferencing formats that are more suited for academic and scholarly exchanges. Though theories matter a great deal in expanding professional knowledge and horizons, requirements to package good practices in a broader context and theories, from one side, puts an unnecessary pressure on the practitioners, and on the other hand, might impede the take up of the idea by the others. Libraries operate in different contexts, and depackaging practical solutions from the context and theories (that might not in any case work locally) takes intellectual effort, courage and time. So taking into account all this, and the short time available, EIFL-PLIP built an agenda around different types of peer-to-peer learning activities focused on good practice - short and interactive presentations, hands-on workshops, and library visits, coupled with the unconference discussions.

The stakes are high in time and effort, and these strategies might not be relevant for every meeting and occasion. But when fast tracking of service innovation, diversity and inclusion are important, one or several strategies successfully tested in IYALI programmes might make a huge difference. For example, revising the course of traditional library visits to make them a learning activity for both participating sides - the hosts and visitors; also curating professional events agendas to expose diverse experiences and approaches to foster library innovation.

### A bit about EIFL-PLIP

The EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) Public Library Innovation Programme (EIFL-PLIP) was developed with a grant from Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to spark innovation in public libraries in developing and transition economy countries. It is one of four programmes of EIFL ([www.eifl.net](http://www.eifl.net)), which is an international non-profit organisation dedicated to enabling access to knowledge through libraries for education, learning, research and development. EIFL’s vision is of a world in which all people have the knowledge they need to achieve their full potential.

The EIFL-PLIP team is happy to share additional details about IYALI, please contact us at [plip@eifl.net](mailto:plip@eifl.net).

1. The IFLA Guidelines for Continuing Professional Development : Principles & Best Practice. IFLA CPDWL poster. Design: Gillian Hallam & Jana Varlejs. Available online at: https://repository.ifla.org/bitstream/123456789/1145/1/ifla-guidelines-for-continuing-professional-development-poster-en.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Femenía, A. M. G., Sadunisvili, R. & Lipeikaite, U. (2015). What sparks innovation in the public library sector? Evaluation of the take up of PLIP innovation by other libraries. EIFL Public Library Innovation Programme. Available online at: <http://www.eifl.net/resources/what-sparks-innovation-public-library-sector> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Specific lessons learnt and insights right after the programme were shared in blogs published on the EIFL website. Available through <https://www.eifl.net/eifl-in-action/initiative-young-african-library-innovators-iyali> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)