

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Contextualising the Role of Public Library and Information Services in Enhancing Research for Inclusive and Sustainable Development: A Meta-Synthesis of the Literature

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Abstract

Inclusive and sustainable development relies on timely, accessible information, yet libraries' contribution to research underpinning the SDGs remains under-theorised in African LIS literature. This paper synthesises existing literature on how library and information services enable development-oriented research, drawing on a systematic literature review (conducted without a formal PRISMA protocol) of English-language sources from Springer, Wiley, EBSCO, JSTOR35, SAGE, Taylor and Francis, AJOL, and DOAJ. Findings suggest libraries may reduce information asymmetries as knowledge hubs, extend access to marginalised populations, and position librarians as knowledge producers reliant on partnerships with governments, NGOs, and IFLA. Illustrative country- and region-level cases (Uganda, Nigeria, Botswana, Ghana, and East Africa) are tentatively mapped to SDGs 4, 5, 8, and 9. The evidence is predominantly descriptive, drawn partly from grey literature, and does not establish causal effects or the relative magnitude of library contributions. financial performance.

Keywords: Inclusive Development, Sustainable Development, Library and Information Services, Research Support, Sustainable Development Goals, Africa.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive and sustainable development has occupied a central place in global and regional policy agendas since the early 1980s (Ifijeh et al., 2016), and the concept has since attracted sustained attention from researchers, donors, and practitioners across multiple disciplines. Inclusive development is commonly understood as development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to sustain their own livelihoods (Lélé, 1991; Rauniyar & Kanbur, 2010), and it is now widely recognised as a multidimensional construct spanning economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental dimensions (Arts, 2017). Composite measures such as the Human Development Index (HDI), which incorporates income, schooling, and health, and the

more recent Inclusive Development Index (IDI), which adds environmental quality and fiscal sustainability to these three dimensions, have been developed to operationalise and track these outcomes (Dörffel & Schuhmann, 2022).

Sustainable development, closely related but analytically distinct, is generally defined as the organising principle for meeting human development goals while preserving the capacity of natural systems to continue supplying the ecosystem services on which economies and societies depend (Mensah & Casadevall, 2019). (Carley & Christie, 1993) conceptualise sustainable development as a continuing process of mediation among social, economic, and environmental needs that produces positive socioeconomic change without undermining the ecological and social systems on which

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communities depend. Its successful implementation requires integrated policy, planning, and social learning processes, and its political viability depends on the support of governments, social institutions, and private actors alike (Subunya & Gichuki, 2024).

Development research itself is inherently complex, spanning political, economic, social, environmental, and technological dimensions, and is complicated further by the obligation to reconcile the needs of the present generation with those of generations to come (Hunt, 2018). Since 2015, research for inclusive and sustainable development has moved to the centre of the research agenda in both developing and developed countries, propelled in large part by donor and funding-agency priorities tied to the SDGs (Mubofu & Mambo, 2021; UN, 2020). Within the library and information science domain specifically, Shafack (2020) argues that libraries have a responsibility to ensure that scholarship produced on the continent translates into tangible contributions to sustainable development within local communities.

This imperative rests on a simple but consequential premise: twenty-first century development is knowledge-dependent, and libraries are the institutions historically charged with collecting, organising, and disseminating that knowledge. As information and communication technologies continue to grow, access to information has become simultaneously faster, cheaper, and more complex to navigate, placing new demands on the institutions responsible for mediating that access. Libraries occupy multiple, overlapping roles in this landscape: as depositories of the accumulated stock of human, cultural, and scientific knowledge, and as active agents that mobilise this stock toward new applications (Mwanzu & Mwangi, 2025). Researchers rely on libraries to establish and confirm facts, replicate and extend prior work, test emerging paradigms, and develop new theory (Mwanzu & Mwangi, 2025); in doing so, libraries function as a crucial intermediary between communities of scholars and the wider process of inclusive and sustainable development.

Despite this evident significance, the literature on libraries and sustainable development in Africa remains fragmented. Individual studies have documented specific interventions, country cases, or institutional initiatives, but there has been comparatively little effort to synthesise this dispersed body of knowledge into a coherent, holistic account. This paper addresses that gap through a systematic, meta-synthetic review of the existing literature, guided by two research questions:

1. In what ways do libraries facilitate research for inclusive and sustainable development?
2. How can libraries build effective partnerships with governments and other stakeholders to advance the broader Sustainable Development Goals?

The synthesis presented here speaks directly to an audience of public library researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, since much of the evidence reviewed concerns public libraries specifically, rather than academic or special libraries alone. Public libraries occupy a distinctive position within national library systems: unlike academic libraries, whose primary constituency is a bounded institutional community of students and faculty, public libraries are, by mandate, open to the entire population within their jurisdiction, including populations that are not otherwise served by formal research or educational infrastructure. This universality of mandate is what, in the reviewed literature, positions public libraries as central to the inclusive dimension of inclusive and sustainable development: where academic libraries extend the reach of research to registered users, public libraries extend it to citizens, entrepreneurs, farmers, and civil-society actors who might otherwise never encounter the knowledge base that development research produces (Mubofu & Mambo, 2021). The evidence reviewed below, including the Ugandan public library ICT training programme for women farmers and Nigeria's public library-led SDGs Action Group, illustrates this distinctive public-library contribution in tangible terms.

In pursuing these questions, the paper first situates the concepts of inclusive and sustainable development within the LIS literature, then describes the systematic review methodology employed, before presenting a thematic synthesis of findings organised around the library's knowledge-production role, its function in bridging access gaps, the research contribution of library professionals themselves, and the partnership arrangements that sustain these roles. The paper closes with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of these findings, an account of the study's limitations, and recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted a systematic literature review approach appropriate for synthesising a dispersed and largely qualitative body of secondary literature. Systematic review methods offer a transparent and replicable alternative to narrative review by specifying, in advance, the sources to be

searched, the search terms to be applied, and the criteria by which studies are included or excluded (this characterisation reflects the authors' own methodological approach). To ensure methodological rigour, the search drew on six major scholarly databases and indexing platforms: Springer, Wiley Online Library, EBSCO, JSTOR, SAGE Journals, and Taylor and Francis Online. These were supplemented by two platforms with a stronger regional focus on African scholarship, African Journals Online (AJOL) and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), to reduce the risk of omitting locally published work that is under-indexed in the major international databases.

The review was conducted in three sequential phases. In the first phase, the author generated an initial pool of records using combinations of search terms relating to inclusive development, sustainable development, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the roles of libraries and information services, applied across multiple search fields (title, abstract, and keyword). Because of the author's language limitations, the search was restricted to English-language sources; no Kiswahili-language sources were retrieved during the initial search, which should be read as a boundary of the review rather than an indication that no such literature exists. In the second phase, all retrieved records were screened for relevance based on title, keywords, and abstract, and duplicate or clearly off-topic records were removed. In the third phase, the full text of the remaining records was read in detail to confirm substantive relevance to the review's focus; only sources that engaged directly with inclusive or sustainable development within a library or information-services context were retained for synthesis.

Search terms were combined using Boolean operators and included variants and combinations of "library," "public library," "information services," "inclusive development," "sustainable development," "Sustainable Development Goals," "research," and "Africa." Truncation and wildcard characters were used where supported by a given database to capture morphological variants (for example, "librar*" to capture "library," "libraries," and "librarian"). Records were exported to a reference manager and de-duplicated before screening. The numbers of records identified, screened, excluded, and retained were not systematically logged at the time of the search, so a PRISMA-style flow diagram cannot be reconstructed; no formal quality appraisal of the retained sources was undertaken, and retained sources include peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, professional-association reports, and unpublished or repository-

hosted manuscripts. Although the review did not follow a formal PRISMA protocol in the manner of a systematic review of quantitative intervention studies, the three-phase process described above, comprising an initial keyword search, title/abstract screening, and full-text eligibility assessment, mirrors the logical structure of PRISMA-style reporting and was intended to provide an equal degree of procedural transparency, appropriate to a predominantly qualitative and conceptual literature base.

The retained literature was then subjected to a thematic content analysis. Each source was read and coded for its principal claims regarding the mechanisms by which libraries contribute to development-oriented research, the actors and institutions involved, and the geographic or sectoral scope of the evidence presented. Codes were then clustered inductively into broader thematic categories, which form the organising structure of the findings presented below: (a) libraries as knowledge-production and dissemination hubs; (b) libraries as bridges to marginalised and remote communities; (c) library professionals as active researchers; and (d) library partnerships with governments and other stakeholders. This thematic clustering allowed the dispersed evidence base, much of which consists of single-country case studies, conference proceedings, and professional-association reports, to be read cumulatively as a coherent account of the library's contribution to inclusive and sustainable development.

Consistent with the interpretive character of meta-synthesis, no attempt was made to statistically aggregate findings across studies; instead, the review privileges analytic generalisation, in which recurring patterns across heterogeneous sources are treated as indicative of broader dynamics rather than as a representative sample in the statistical sense. This approach is well suited to a field in which rigorous, comparable empirical studies remain scarce, but it also carries limitations, which are addressed later in the paper.

Conceptualising the Library's Development Mandate

Before turning to the substantive findings, it is useful to locate the library's development role within existing theoretical accounts of the information development relationship. A recurring premise across the reviewed literature is that sustainable development is fundamentally a knowledge problem: achieving development outcomes that respect ecological limits and intergenerational equity

requires an immense and continually updated store of scientific knowledge about stresses on ecosystems and the carrying capacity of natural systems (Jain & Jibril, 2018; Kosciejew, 2020). Where this knowledge is unavailable, poorly organised, or inaccessible to the communities and decision-makers who need it, development efforts are correspondingly weakened.

Libraries are theorised in this literature as boundary-spanning institutions that sit between the formal production of knowledge, in universities, research institutes, and government agencies, and its practical application by communities, entrepreneurs, students, and policymakers. Two features of libraries make this boundary-spanning role distinctive relative to other information institutions. First, libraries cut across government administrative jurisdictions in a way that many sectoral agencies do not; they are embedded within large communities but, through mobile and outreach services, also extend into remote areas and reach disadvantaged or disabled populations who cannot easily access centralised services (Cornish, 2018). Second, libraries carry a high degree of institutional trust, which Cornish (2018) argues positions them as a natural vehicle for SDG implementation once governments commit, from both the top down and the bottom up, to reorganising how library services are delivered.

This conceptual framing, of the library as a trusted, jurisdiction-spanning knowledge intermediary, provides the interpretive lens through which the thematic findings below should be read. It also clarifies why the review's second research question, concerning partnerships with governments and other stakeholders, is analytically inseparable from the first: the library's capacity to facilitate development-oriented research is contingent on the institutional relationships that fund, legitimise, and extend its reach.

Synthesis of the Literature

Libraries as Knowledge-Production and Dissemination Hubs

The reviewed literature consistently identifies libraries as critical enablers of knowledge production that directly support inclusive and sustainable development within communities. Kosciejew (2020) and Mubofu & Mambo (2021) argue that sustainable development efforts depend heavily on access to timely and relevant information, and that human development suffers across all its dimensions wherever this access is absent. Public libraries, in

particular, are described as central to the realisation of the SDGs because they provide equitable access to data, research, and knowledge, which in turn supports informed decision-making and public engagement (Jain & Jibril, 2018).

As hubs for lifelong learning, research, and community development, libraries are positioned in the literature as active participants in local knowledge ecosystems rather than passive repositories. Onwubiko (2021) describes libraries as conduits of knowledge that sustain community participation in lifelong learning and research, while Oladokun et al. (2021) similarly underscore the library's instrumental role in the implementation of community development initiatives more broadly. This knowledge-production function is closely tied to inclusive education, which Ezeani et al. (2017) and Choh (2017) identify as one of the core elements of sustainable development; libraries, in this framing, are key partners in ensuring inclusive access to information and knowledge for development in society. Durodolu & Oladokun (2024) extend this argument to environmental justice specifically, contending that equitable information access through library practice is itself a mechanism for redressing the uneven distribution of environmental knowledge and decision-making power across communities.

At a regional level, NgianLekChoh (2017) contends that libraries have critical roles to play across most, if not all, of the SDGs, spanning participation, innovation, infrastructure, and the provision of up-to-date information and data that strengthen research and innovation more broadly. The same source further emphasises the library's advocacy role in embedding access to information as a cross-cutting issue within government policy, a theme recurrent in the sources reviewed, which assert that meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable development depends on access to relevant information and knowledge services, including those that libraries provide; this is an argument advanced by the authors cited rather than an empirically tested finding.

Bridging Access Gaps: Reaching Marginalised, Remote, and Disadvantaged Communities

A second, closely related theme concerns the library's role in extending research and information access beyond the communities that are already well served by formal knowledge institutions. Because libraries cut across government jurisdictions and are embedded within large communities, they are uniquely positioned to reach remote areas, disadvantaged groups, and people with disabilities who cannot access centralised services (Cornish, 2018; Mubofu & Mambo, 2021). This bridging function is not

incidental to the library's development mandate; it is, in the literature's framing, central to it, since inclusive development explicitly requires that the benefits of knowledge production not be confined to already-advantaged populations.

Concrete country-level evidence illustrates how this bridging function operates in practice. In Uganda, a public library technology training and information service has provided information and communication technology (ICT) training to female farmers, who are reported to have gained access to weather forecasts and crop prices and to establish online markets in their local languages (EIFL-PLIP, 2013). This programme report illustrates how library-mediated access to information may support SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and rural livelihoods simultaneously, by combining digital literacy training with locally relevant, actionable content. Academic libraries, according to Bangani, have built community-engagement networks that support students, which is linked to SDG 4 (Quality Education) through the educational foundation on which longer-term development outcomes depend; this example concerns academic rather than public libraries (Bangani, 2023).

A Nigerian proposed model of strategic public library services similarly argues that ICT training can build local capacity to navigate diverse information landscapes and to translate access into social and economic development outcomes; as a proposal rather than an evaluation, it indicates potential rather than demonstrated impact (Adam, 2017). Regional networks such as the Arid Lands Information Network (ALIN), which operates through fifteen Knowledge Centres across Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, extend this model further by providing development information that directly supports research and innovation in rural and pastoralist communities (Mwanzu & Mwangi, 2025).

Library Professionals as Active Researchers and Knowledge Producers

A theme that is comparatively underexplored in the broader development literature, but is well represented in the LIS-specific sources reviewed here, concerns the research role of library professionals themselves. Librarians are trained researchers whose own research output contributes directly to community development, rather than functioning solely as intermediaries who facilitate the research of others (Kumar, 2020). Through their participation in research, library and information professionals generate new knowledge and offer disciplinary perspectives that contribute to addressing community problems.

This research role is complemented by librarians' involvement in building the research capacity of other users. Studies by Mubofu & Mambo (2021); Bangani (2023) document libraries' role in providing digital literacy and information literacy programmes to researchers and learners, alongside training in the soft skills that support effective participation in research across different domains and specialities. Taken together, these findings suggest that the library's contribution to development-oriented research operates on two levels simultaneously: libraries enable the research of others through access provision, and library professionals contribute directly to the research base through their own scholarly output and capacity-building activities.

Library Partnerships with Governments and Other Stakeholders

The fourth theme concerns the institutional arrangements that sustain the library's development contribution. John (2025) identifies collaboration with governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and international agencies as crucial to enhancing library services and integrating them into national development plans. In this framing, governments contribute policy recognition, funding, and infrastructure development; NGOs and global organisations contribute grants, capacity-building programmes, and advocacy support; and public-private partnerships extend libraries' access to technological resources, digital tools, and educational materials that improve service delivery.

Oladokun et al. (2021) similarly identify the cultivation of strong stakeholder partnerships as one of the key pillars enabling libraries to participate effectively in research for inclusive and sustainable development, noting that these partnerships take the form of associations and networks operating locally, regionally, and internationally. Osuchukwu & Ayeni (2019) extend this argument, describing partnerships between libraries and non-governmental organisations, professional associations, and donor agencies as essential to making libraries more effective in fulfilling their societal mandate; Ampadu (2017) frames this collaborative imperative in explicitly normative terms, arguing that libraries worldwide have an obligation to work with other stakeholders in addressing shared human problems such as poverty.

Among international actors, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) occupies a particularly prominent role in the reviewed literature, consistent with Devi et al.'s (2024) review of IFLA's efforts to mobilise the global library sector behind the SDGs. IFLA (2023)

has consistently underscored libraries' capacity to contribute to the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the framework of 17 SDGs and 169 targets spanning economic, environmental, and social development, and has positioned libraries as key institutions for achieving these goals. In 2016, IFLA launched its International Advocacy Programme (IAP), which trains librarians in advocacy skills so that they can support their governments in pursuing the SDGs. Under this programme, a core group of trainers from approximately ten countries per region attended regional workshops before returning home to raise awareness of the SDGs and to form delegations of influential librarians tasked with engaging policymakers directly. The explicit aim of this model is to position librarians and libraries as recognised partners of government in the pursuit of the SDGs, rather than as peripheral service providers.

At the regional level, African libraries have taken a leading role in operationalising several of these partnership models. Beyond the ALIN Knowledge Centres described above, a Nigerian SDGs Action Group intended to coordinate the dissemination of development-relevant information across the

library sector (Adam, 2017). Libraries across the continent have also expanded access to online business information resources, a contribution identified in the literature as directly supporting SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by providing new entrepreneurs with the market and financial information needed to establish and grow small enterprises, and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) more broadly (Ejechi, 2018).

Mapping the Evidence onto the Sustainable Development Goals

Table 1 draws together the country- and region-level evidence discussed above to illustrate how specific library interventions map onto specific SDGs. The mapping is necessarily illustrative rather than exhaustive, reflects the authors' interpretation of each source, and does not imply causal attribution, since few of the reviewed studies were designed explicitly to evaluate SDG-level outcomes; nonetheless, it clarifies the mechanisms through which library-mediated information access is understood, in the literature, to translate into development outcomes.

Table 1: Illustrative Mapping of Library Interventions onto Selected Sustainable Development Goals

SDG	Library Intervention	Evidence Source
SDG 4 – Quality Education	Public library networks supporting student achievement; information and digital literacy training for researchers and learners	Bangani (2023)
SDG 5 – Gender Equality	ICT training enabling female farmers to access market and weather information and establish online markets	EIFL-PLIP (2013)
SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth	Online business information resources supporting new entrepreneurs	Ejechi (2018)
SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	Regional knowledge centres (e.g., ALIN) providing development information to support research and innovation	Mwanzu & Mwangi (2025)
Cross-cutting (multiple SDGs)	National SDGs Action Groups coordinating library-sector information dissemination; IFLA International Advocacy Programme	Adam (2017); IFLA (2023)

This mapping reinforces a point implicit throughout the synthesis: library contributions to the SDGs are rarely confined to a single goal. The Ugandan ICT training programme for women farmers, for example, plausibly advances SDG 5 through its explicit focus on women, but it simultaneously advances SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) by improving farmers' access to market and agronomic information. This cross-cutting character is consistent with the broader claim, developed throughout the reviewed

literature, that access to information functions as an enabling condition for development outcomes across sectors, rather than as a sector-specific intervention in its own right (Jain & Jibril, 2018; Koscijew, 2020).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Read cumulatively, the four themes synthesised above support a central theoretical claim: libraries function as boundary-spanning institutions whose contribution to inclusive and sustainable development operates simultaneously at the level of

access (bridging gaps between knowledge producers and marginalised users), production (through librarians' own research and the knowledge-creation activities they support), and governance (through the partnership arrangements that embed libraries within national and international development architecture). This tripartite framing extends existing accounts, which have tended to treat the library's development role primarily as a matter of access provision (Kosciejew, 2020), by foregrounding the equally significant, but less frequently theorised, contributions that library professionals make as researchers in their own right and as institutional partners within multi-stakeholder development governance.

For library and information science theory, this synthesis suggests that models of the library's societal role should more explicitly incorporate the partnership dimension, since the reviewed evidence indicates that the effectiveness of both the access and production functions is substantially conditioned by the strength and durability of a library's relationships with government, donor, and civil-society partners (John, 2025; Oladokun et al., 2021). A library with strong information resources but weak institutional partnerships may struggle to translate that resource base into development outcomes, while a library with strong partnerships but limited technical capacity may struggle to deliver on the commitments those partnerships create.

For practice, the synthesis points toward several concrete implications. First, library administrators and professional associations should treat capacity building for librarians as researchers, not solely as intermediaries, as a strategic priority, given the evidence that librarians' own scholarly output contributes directly to the development research base and that continuing professional development is needed to sustain such capacity (Kumar, 2020; Oladokun & Mooko, 2022). Second, mobile and outreach services that extend library access to remote, disadvantaged, and disabled populations, as illustrated by the Ugandan and East African cases discussed above, should be understood as core development infrastructure rather than peripheral or supplementary programming (Cornish, 2018; EIFL-PLIP, 2013; Mwanzi & Mwangi, 2025). Third, national governments and library associations should actively pursue structured advocacy and partnership mechanisms of the kind modelled by IFLA's International Advocacy Programme, since the literature suggests that formal recognition as a government development partner, rather than informal or ad hoc collaboration, is described in largely descriptive sources as conducive to more sustained

library contributions to SDG implementation, although this relationship has not been empirically tested (IFLA, 2023).

For policymakers, the synthesis reinforces the case for allocating dedicated development financing to library infrastructure and for embedding libraries explicitly within national SDG implementation strategies, rather than treating them as a residual component of education or culture-sector budgets. Given that libraries are described throughout the literature as institutions that cut across government jurisdictions and enjoy comparatively high public trust (Cornish, 2018), they represent an underused channel for coordinating development communication across sectors that might otherwise operate in isolation from one another.

A further implication concerns measurement. As Table 1 illustrates, the evidence linking specific library interventions to specific SDGs is presently assembled after the fact, from studies designed for other purposes, rather than generated by evaluation frameworks built around the SDGs themselves. For public library administrators, this suggests a practical opportunity: routinely collecting and reporting outcome data, disaggregated by the population segments a service reaches, would allow individual libraries to demonstrate their contribution to specific SDG targets in terms that funders and government partners can act on, rather than relying on the largely descriptive, narrative accounts that dominate the current evidence base. Such data collection need not be resource-intensive; even simple indicators, such as the demographic composition of ICT training participants or the sectors represented among users of business information services, would substantially strengthen the evidentiary basis for the claims this literature currently makes on largely qualitative grounds.

Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations that should inform how its findings are interpreted. First, because the review relies exclusively on secondary literature, it is constrained by the scope, quality, and geographic distribution of the sources indexed within the databases and platforms searched; more extensive access to additional scholarly databases and indexing platforms would likely surface further evidence and refine the thematic categories presented here. Second, the restriction to English-language sources means that the review may under-represent development-relevant library scholarship published in Kiswahili, French, Portuguese, and other languages widely used across the African

continent, which constitutes a meaningful boundary on the generalisability of the findings. Third, much of the underlying evidence base consists of single-country case studies, conference proceedings, and professional-association reports rather than peer-reviewed empirical studies employing comparable methods, which limits the extent to which the review's thematic patterns can be treated as more than illustrative. Finally, as a qualitative meta-synthesis, the review does not permit quantitative claims about the relative magnitude or prevalence of the mechanisms identified; future research employing comparative case-study designs or systematic empirical surveys across library systems would help to establish more definitive claims about which partnership and access models are most effective under which conditions. Relatedly, because the review was conducted by a single researcher, the coding and thematic clustering process, while systematic, was not independently verified by a second coder; a multi-coder design in future work would strengthen the reliability of the thematic categories proposed here and would help to guard against the possibility that the four themes identified reflect the reviewer's prior expectations as much as they reflect patterns inherent in the literature itself. Fifth, the review did not apply a formal quality-appraisal tool, and several retained sources are unpublished manuscripts, repository-hosted papers, conference contributions, or web-based reports whose methods could not be assessed; findings drawn from them (for example, the Nigerian proposed model and the Ugandan programme report) should be read as descriptive indications rather than verified outcomes. Sixth, the records identified, screened, and excluded were not systematically logged, so the selection process cannot be fully replicated. Seventh, although the paper is framed around public libraries, several sources concern academic libraries (for example, [Bangani, 2023](#); [Kumar, 2020](#); [Mwanzu & Mwangi, 2025](#); [Oladokun & Mooko, 2022](#)), and the evidence is geographically concentrated in Nigeria; the findings therefore cannot be assumed to apply uniformly to public libraries or to all African contexts. Finally, the mapping of interventions onto SDGs in Table 1 reflects the authors' interpretation and does not demonstrate causal attribution of SDG outcomes to library activity.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed, which is concentrated in Africa and relies largely on descriptive accounts, suggests that libraries contribute to human development across social, economic, and political dimensions through the management and dissemination of information and knowledge; the

magnitude of this contribution cannot be established from the evidence synthesised here. This review indicates that librarians function not only as information managers who sustain learning processes within academic institutions and knowledge dissemination within public institutions, but also as active participants in the broader development agenda, both through the research they support and the research they themselves produce and publish.

Access to information is widely argued to be an enabling condition for inclusive and sustainable development goals: it is through such access that researchers and innovators are able to engage with, and contribute solutions to, pressing human problems. This review of the literature indicates that the library's capacity to enhance research for sustainable development across different communities depends on the interplay of several factors, including the willingness of policymakers to allocate adequate resources to libraries and to position the library as a central hub within institutional strategic planning, and the sustained investment of libraries themselves in building the research capacity of their professional staff.

Based on these findings, the paper offers three recommendations. First, national governments and higher education institutions should formally recognise libraries as development infrastructure within SDG implementation strategies and allocate financing accordingly, rather than treating library funding as a discretionary component of education budgets. Second, professional library associations should expand structured advocacy and capacity-building programmes, following the model established by IFLA's International Advocacy Programme, to strengthen librarians' ability to engage policymakers as recognised development partners. Third, the LIS research community should prioritise comparative and empirical studies of library-mediated development interventions, since the current evidence base remains dominated by descriptive single-country accounts; more rigorous comparative evidence would strengthen the field's capacity to identify which models of library-based development support are most effective, and under what institutional conditions. With a solid understanding of the Sustainable Development Goals and the outcomes they aim to achieve, libraries may be well placed to identify how their operations can be adapted to support development at every level of the societies in which they operate. Ultimately, this review suggests that equitable access to information and knowledge services, including those provided by libraries, is

an important enabling condition for inclusive and sustainable development, while recognising that the available evidence does not demonstrate that libraries are indispensable or quantify their relative contribution.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced, or appeared to influence, the work reported in this study.

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