GREEN LIBRARIES AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE IFLA GUIDELINES 2026

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Abstract :

The 2026 IFLA Guidelines for Green Libraries offer a solid and effective framework for green libraries. This paper studies the main concepts and the most crucial elements of these guidelines, including ecological, social, and economic aspects of the sustainability concept. The paper provides an overview of the guidelines and explains their concepts and focus areas. It indicates how the guidelines deal with sustainability and emphasizes their importance in terms of library buildings, libraries and their resources, library services, libraries' staff and their users, and communities. The analysis is based on the Comprehensive Descriptive Analysis Method of the IFLA Guidelines for Green Libraries and has the aim of the understanding of its recommendations and their importance for libraries.

Keywords : IFLA Guidelines, Green Libraries, Sustainable Libraries, SDGs.

Introduction :

Library plays and important role in education, access to information, community development, and social inclusion. In the context of climate change and growing environmental concerns, libraries also have responsibility to adopt sustainable practices and encourage environmental awareness. IFLA considers green and sustainable library as the one that considers environmental, economic and social sustainability in its activities and development. This includes areas such as green buildings, sustainable operations, responsible resource use, sustainable library services and others.(IFLA ENSULIB Section, 2022; International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, n.d.)

The IFLA Guidelines for Green Libraries were published on January 27, 2026 by IFLA Environment, Sustainability, and Libraries (ENSULIB) Section. The Guidelines are intended for libraries of different types and sizes and do not impose a single model. Instead, it encourages institutions to identify priorities according to their geographical, institutional, financial and community circumstances.(International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), 2026)

This paper examines the conceptual foundation and practical significance of the 2026

Guidelines and analyses its potential contribution to sustainable library development.

Review of Literature :

The concept of green and sustainable libraries has received increasing attention in Library and Information science research. Earlier approaches frequently emphasised environmentally sustainable buildings and energy conservation; however contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises sustainability as multidimensional concept.

Mathiasson & Jochumsen (2022), in a review of 102 publications concerning libraries, sustainability and sustainable development, found that environmental sustainability received considerable attention, while economic, social, cultural and holistic dimensions were also represented. Findings emphasise the capacity of libraries and librarians to function as the role models and agent of change in the sustainability agenda.(Mathiasson & Jochumsen, 2022)

Khalid et al. (2021) carried out a systematic review of studies conducted from the year 2000 to 2020 in order to uncover the biggest obstacles to the efficient sustainability process in libraries. Their results uncovered several considerable obstacles, such as the lack of a clearly stated sustainability plan, lack of sustainability education and awareness, high levels of energy consumption, bad architectural design and its implementation, constantly changing technologies, and unreceptiveness to change. The authors suggested that libraries must embrace sustainability in their operations as well and adjust their approaches according to the environmental, social, and institutional conditions prevailing in the region under consideration. (Khalid et al., 2021)

Recent studies have focused on the examination of green libraries. Tariq et al. (2025) reported that such factors as institutional goals, technological advances, the green library movement, and sustainable development goals have contributed to the process of implementation of green libraries. On the contrary, lack of financing and technology can be observed as obstacles.(Tariq et al., 2025)

Research in India has shed light on the actions taken by various libraries and the challenges they face in pursuing sustainable activities. Purkayastha and Nath (2026) did a systematic review using the PRISMA approach in order to understand the various green library initiatives in India from the years 2020 to 2025. The analysis covered 87 publications located in OpenAlex and Semantic Scholar and found significant disparity in sustainability practices among the different library sectors. The findings showed that the academic libraries were the most active sector in these efforts. The authors pointed out that the advancement of digital infrastructure thanks to national programs, such as INFLIBNET, N-LIST, and Shodhganga, was among the main sustainability means. However, there is still a shortage of funding, the absence of sustainability indicators, awareness of stakeholders, and infrastructural challenges. The authors emphasize that the alignment of policies with the Sustainable Development Goals, investment in the professional development of librarians, and strategic institutional planning are some of the opportunities for promoting green library

initiatives in India.(Nath & Purkayastha, 2026). Previously conducted studies show that sustainability in libraries is a challenging notion which refers to how practical steps may be taken toward its implementation.

The 2026 IFLA Guidelines for Green Libraries provide a new international framework for understanding all the aspects impacting sustainable libraries, that makes it necessary to study the guidelines and find out how useful they can be in carrying out the sustainable library initiatives.(International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), 2026)

Conceptual Foundation of Green and Sustainable Libraries :

The understanding of the concept of green library goes beyond superficial attributes like solar panels, energy-efficient lighting, and eco-certified buildings. To look at this concept just from this perspective would be limiting since it makes sustainability limited to physical structures and does not consider the wide range of institutional, social, cultural, and educational responsibilities that libraries fulfil (Özdemir & Arslantekin, 2024). The position of the IFLA should be understood as discussing sustainability not as a certain outcome, but as an ongoing process that determines how libraries organize their work. It includes how they develop their strategy for the future, how they allocate their resources, how they form their collections, how they provide their services to users, how they establish connections with communities, and how they assess their results. The idea can be regarded as multi-dimensional. The first dimension is physical sustainability, which concerns buildings, energy consumption, and carbon footprint. Then there comes operational sustainability, which deals with resource-saving applications of administrative functions. The next aspect is economic sustainability, which deals with responsible consumption and reuse. Social sustainability is the next important aspect because it refers to equality, accessibility, and inclusion. Lastly, Service Sustainability is about linking the details of library information resources to environmental education(IFLA ENSULIB Section, 2022). However, it should be noted that the large scope of the idea is important in terms of environmental improvements that may unintentionally lead to negative social and economic consequences. For instance, though switching from physical to digital resources leads to decreased use of some types of materials, digital information products also bring some energy and environmental expenses associated with ICT infrastructure and use(Chowdhury, 2016; Khalid et al., 2021).

IFLA Green Library Guidelines, 2026 :

1. The Guidelines of 2026 offer the international framework flexible enough to cover all aspects of library operation, including governance, construction, equipment, operation, resources, collection, services, professional development, and evaluation. This framework does not impose the same solutions to every library, but gives a chance for libraries to decide on what is going to work in their case.(Hauke et al., 2026)
2. One of the key aspects of this framework is the embedding of sustainability in

governance. Libraries should strive for implementing sustainability in their policies, strategic plans, and decision-making processes instead of treating green measures as something temporary and separate. This strategic approach adds legitimacy to their sustainability efforts and provides assignment of responsibility to the leadership level (Hauke et al., 2026).

3. This framework provides strong ties with the UN 2030 Agenda with its Sustainable Development Goals. Libraries should contribute to sustainable development by means of their educational work, information services, community actions, and work within the organization. Thus, sustainability becomes a goal for management and a tool for libraries to realize societal goals.(Hauke et al., 2026)
4. They are very much valuable as they recognize the existing differences between libraries. A big university library may afford the expenses and technology for introducing the renewable energy systems and advanced monitoring technologies while a small public or rural library may focus on waste management and efficiency within its resources only at the beginning of the implementation.(Hauke et al., 2026)

Chapter	Title	Core Sustainability Dimension	Main Objective
1	Green Library Principles	Environmental, Social and Resource Efficiency	Establish fundamental principles for developing a green library
2	Staff Training and Development	Human Resources	Build staff knowledge, skills and sustainability awareness
3	Operations and Maintenance	Management and Operational Sustainability	Integrate sustainability into everyday library management
4	Library Collections	Resource and Cultural Sustainability	Develop, manage and preserve sustainable, inclusive collections
5	Services and Programmes	Social and Educational Sustainability	Provide inclusive services and promote sustainability education
6	Law, Ethics and Traditions	Legal, Ethical and Cultural Sustainability	Ensure responsible, inclusive and legally compliant practices

7	Library Buildings and Equipment	Infrastructure and Environmental Sustainability	Develop sustainable, energy and resource efficient library facilities
8	Monitoring and Evaluation	Assessment and Continuous Improvement	Measure sustainability performance and improve practices continuously

Table 1. Chapter wise Analytical Interpretation of the IFLA Guidelines for Green Libraries 2026

Practical Implementation Framework :

The IFLA Step-by-Step Implementation Manual published in July 2026 translates the principles of the Guidelines into an eight-step implementation process. The steps cover institutional commitment, staff development, operations, collections, services, ethics, buildings, and monitoring.(IFLA Guidelines for Green Libraries Working Group of the IFLA Environment, 2026)

1. Institutional Commitment :

Implementation begins with leadership commitment. Libraries should establish a sustainability vision, create an appropriate Green Library Team, integrate sustainability into governance documents and align objectives with relevant SDGs. Sustainability objectives should also be incorporated into annual and strategic planning.(IFLA Guidelines for Green Libraries Working Group of the IFLA Environment, 2026)

2. Staff Training and Development :

Sustainability should not be institutionalised without competent personnel. Staff development should address environmental awareness, sustainable resource management, green collections, energy conservation, communication and community education. Training should be adapted to institutional capacity and should incorporate peer learning, online resources and collaborative professional development.(IFLA Guidelines for Green Libraries Working Group of the IFLA Environment, 2026)

3. Operations and Maintenance :

Operational sustainability involves everyday administrative behaviour. Libraries should reduce paper consumption, improve waste management, adopt sustainable procurement, use Green IT, extend equipment lifecycles, encourage sustainable commuting and select environmentally responsible maintenance practices. The objective is to makesustainability part of routine management rather than a separate programme. (IFLA Guidelines for Green Libraries Working Group of the IFLA Environment, 2026)

4. Library Collections :

Sustainable collection management requires consideration of the environmental, economic, cultural and social implications of physical and digital resources. Libraries should assess acquisition, retention, storage, preservation, digitisation and disposal decisions across the entire information-resource lifecycle. Digital collections should not automatically be regarded as environmentally neutral because their creation, storage and access depend upon technological infrastructure and energy.

Collection sustainability also requires preservation of cultural heritage, local knowledge and underrepresented communities. Digitisation will improve access to fragile heritage materials while reducing unnecessary physical handling, provided that copyright, metadata, preservation and long-term digital storage requirements are appropriately addressed.(IFLA Guidelines for Green Libraries Working Group of the IFLA Environment, 2026)

5. Services and Programmes :

Sustainable services translate institutional sustainability into community benefit. Libraries should provide environmental literacy programmes, sustainability workshops, citizen-science activities, green livelihood initiatives and entrepreneurship support. Community needs should be assessed before introducing programmes so that activities correspond to local demographic, educational and informational circumstances.(IFLA Guidelines for Green Libraries Working Group of the IFLA Environment, 2026)

6. Law, Ethics and Traditions :

Sustainability also has an ethical and cultural dimension. Libraries should comply with relevant environmental legislation, maintain transparency, avoid greenwashing and ensure responsible decision-making. Respect for local, traditional and Indigenous knowledge is particularly important because sustainability initiatives should not marginalise community knowledge systems.(IFLA Guidelines for Green Libraries Working Group of the IFLA Environment, 2026)

7. Buildings and Equipment :

Library infrastructure should generate substantial environmental impacts. Sustainable building strategies include energy-efficient lighting and HVAC systems, renewable energy where feasible, water conservation, environmentally responsible materials, accessibility and climate-resilient design. Buildings should also become educational environments in which users visibly encounter sustainable technologies and practices.(IFLA Guidelines for Green Libraries Working Group of the IFLA Environment, 2026)

8. Monitoring and Evaluation :

The final step converts sustainability from an intention into a measurable institutional process. Libraries should monitor energy, water, paper, waste, environmental conditions, programme participation and procurement practices. Smart objectives, audits, stakeholder feedback and benchmarking will provide evidence for modifying strategies.

Transparent reporting is equally important. Sustainability results should be communicated through annual reports, websites, dashboards, charts and infographics, allowing staff, users and external stakeholders to understand institutional progress.(IFLA Guidelines for Green Libraries Working Group of the IFLA Environment, 2026)

Major Implications of Green Library Guidelines by IFLA 2026 :

1. **Community engagement** positions the library as a platform for environmental learning. Exhibitions, lectures, workshops, reading programmes, campaigns and partnerships can encourage users to understand and respond to local environmental challenges.(Hauke et al., 2026)
2. **Accessibility and inclusion** ensure that environmental sustainability does not undermine social sustainability. Universal design, accessible collections, assistive technologies, multilingual resources and inclusive programming enable different population groups to benefit from sustainable library services.(Hauke et al., 2026)
3. **Resource efficiency** applies the principles of reduction, reuse and recycling to procurement, collections, preservation and daily operations. It also requires libraries to evaluate the environmental implications of physical and digital resources rather than assuming that one format is inherently more sustainable.(Hauke et al., 2026)
4. **ICT sustainability** is increasingly important because digital infrastructure consumes energy and generates environmental impacts throughout its lifecycle. Libraries should therefore select appropriate equipment, extend device lifecycles, reuse or refurbish technology and consider the sustainability of data centre infrastructure. The Guidelines further caution that emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence should be adopted purposefully rather than simply because they are technologically available.(Hauke et al., 2026)

Significance in Sustainable Library Development :

1. The most important merit of the Guidelines is their ability to connect various activities of sustainability into one institutional system. Instead of viewing solar energy or reduction of paper usage, the organization of environmental exhibitions, or recycling as individual projects, libraries are able to integrate these programs into the overarching cycle of policy development, planning, implementation, community involvement, measurement, evaluation and continuous improvement.
2. The presented framework also strengthens libraries as agents of development. With the help of environmental information dissemination, sustainable collections curation and implementation of educational projects, libraries gain the power to influence knowledge and behaviour beyond the walls of their libraries. This means that role of libraries changes from being a mere minimizer of its environmental footprint to that of an agent promoting sustainability in communities they serve. The use of the SDGs

is yet another opportunity to link regional libraries' practices to the goals of global development. Libraries can apply the SDG framework when they implement their services, programs and initiatives.

Problems and Prospects :

1. Implementation of the Guidelines is not to be uniform throughout the entire area of application. The draft refers to drops in funding, lack of defined institutional policies, insufficient knowledge of staff regarding the Guidelines, and poor readiness of infrastructure, and poor measurement systems as major problems that can prevent widespread adoption of the Guidelines.
2. Financial restrictions can become a real obstacle for projects which imply high expenses, like implementing renewable energy system, renovation of buildings, or application of advanced environmental monitoring. Therefore, smaller libraries should think of starting with inexpensive solutions before they can afford to apply more expensive ones.
3. Another problem concerns the organizational culture. Sustainability requires a change of behaviour of administrators, employees, and clients. In a situation when there is no leadership support and employees' training, even feasible initiatives will be implemented only for some period of time.
4. Measuring efficiency is another problem to be tackled. Libraries can initiate sustainability measures without implementing means to assess them. Nevertheless, the system of audits, setting the goals, reporting, and benchmarking referred to in the Guidelines offers some ways out of the situation. 5. The most obvious advantage of the framework is its flexibility. Libraries are not obliged to be fully socially responsible at once. They can make gradual changes, starting from the simplest initiatives and ending with the most advanced ones.

Discussion :

The IFLA's new guidelines for green libraries denote a vital transition from the environmentalism of one-off initiatives into an encompassing institutional sustainability model. The significant advantage of the new guidelines is their comprehensive approach. It involves responsibility assignment via governance and staff development through capability-building programs; it affects day-to-day operations via implementation of changes in the workflows of the organizations, sustainability of informational resources via collections; caring for the communities' needs through services; and taking into consideration ethical principles to preserve social and cultural aspects; and managing environmental impacts by means of infrastructure. The sequence proves that the development of green libraries is not a linear process in a strict sense. Monitoring can allow identifying problems related to the organization's operations and training issues, the community's responses can prompt changes in services, collection evaluations can affect procurement decisions, and data on the efficiency of infrastructure can influence the priorities of social institutions. Correlatively, the framework represents the not merely cyclical process of institutional learning. It is important to highlight that it is necessary for sustainability to be flexible on the local level. Although a general checklist is likely to result in superficial obedience, a flexible approach makes it

possible for libraries to define what is most relevant for their resources and region. As a consequence, the main challenge which is faced in the future lies in the formulation of proper metrics, which will enable different libraries to show their achievements without losing the specifics of their context.

Conclusion :

1. The IFLA Guidelines for Green Libraries 2026 outline a comprehensive approach to integrating sustainability aspects into the library's core functions. Sustainability here entails not only energy-efficient buildings but also everything from management, the skills of the employees, and the processing of information to the very structure of collections and libraries' activities, involvement in the community, ethical policies, and evaluation tools. The Guidelines on Green Libraries 2026 have a Manual for Implementation that articulates a step-by-step process of implementation starting from a commitment on the part of an institution to evaluation.
2. The Guidelines also explain how libraries can be involved in achieving Sustainable Development Goals. Libraries are flexible solutions that can be applied to organizations of any financial standing, technological level, and infrastructure. However, to succeed, it needs solid organizational support, training, investment in the organization, identifying measures for managing sustainability initiatives, and continuous management engagement.
3. Green library is understood as an ongoing process rather than a final outcome. Libraries can become socially responsible, environmentally sound, economically feasible, and sustainable by moving from policies to practices, from implementation to evaluation, and from measuring to continuous improvement.

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