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Challenges and Solutions in Cross-Border Resource Sharing

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Abstract:

The results and the findings of a DDRS Committee promoted survey on the difficulties and barriers of cross-border interlibrary exchanges of physical items (custom duties and delays, payment and shipping methods) and possible international resource sharing solutions adopted and strategies proposed by libraries around the world will be presented.

Comments and open responses provided global information from libraries worldwide regarding the challenges faced in cross-border resource sharing and to explore effective approaches that can enhance international cooperation.

Special attention is given to possible alternative strategies to overcome the limitations of physical delivery through the supply of partial or complete copies of books using Controlled Digital Lending (CDL) and the Resource Sharing Collaborative and Voluntary Document Delivery (RSCVD) initiative.

Keywords: resource sharing; international physical items exchange; cross borders limits; controlled digital lending; CDL; digital resource sharing; RSCVD

Purpose and methodology approach

The survey aims to investigate the problems and barriers that libraries encounter when sharing physical items across international borders, as well as to identify potential solutions to overcome these limitations, gathering comprehensive information from libraries worldwide and exploring effective approaches that can enhance international library cooperation.

The survey was conducted using the **Lime Survey** software and was open for responses from June 20 to July 18, 2025. The methodology involved distributing the questionnaire to international library mailing lists, including those dedicated to Resource Sharing, National Library Associations, and the Document Delivery (DD) network, ensuring a diverse and relevant sample of library professionals engaged in international cooperation.

This structured approach allows for a systematic collection and qualitative analysis of data, including free text comments, to better understand the dynamics of international physical item sharing among libraries and to support the development of practical strategies for improving these processes globally.

Structure of the survey

The questionnaire includes a total of 29 questions plus an additional request about participant availability for a follow-up interview. The survey is organized into **four main sections**, each targeting specific aspects related to interlibrary loan (ILL) services of returnable items and operational contexts, setup and capacities to provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the current state, operational challenges, and strategic responses.

1. Institution

- Library name/type
- ISIL code
- Country

2. ILL Service

- ILL lending/borrowing numbers
- Returnable item type
- Shipping area
- ILL Management system/software

3. Customs

- Number delayed and amount of time items held
- Taxes/Fees amount
- Shipping arrangements and costs

4. Strategies and Solutions

- Alternatives suggested (adaptive practices and innovative approaches)
- Controlled Digital Lending (CDL)

A total of **143 complete responses** were received **from 20 countries** (see Figure 1) and **academic libraries** were **86%** of the total respondents (see Figure 2), providing a suitable dataset for analysis.

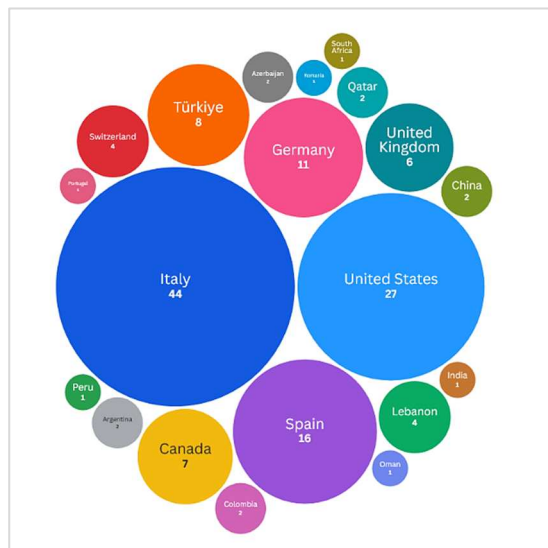


Figure 1. Respondent countries

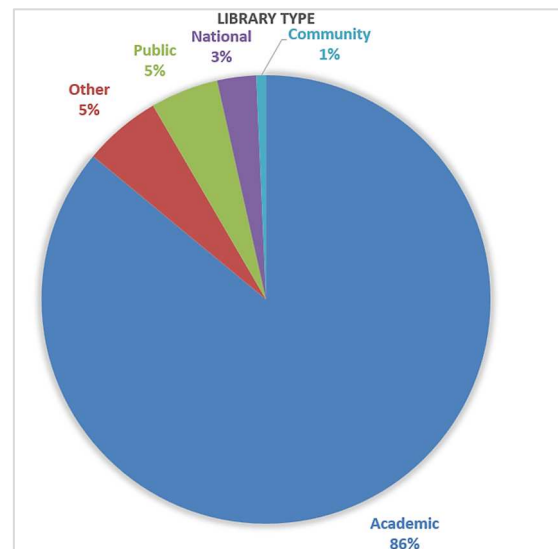


Figure 2. Library types

ILL Service

Geographical areas, item types, exchange volumes, delivery, payment

113 respondents provide international ILL services (79%), while 30 respondents do not offer International ILL (21%) (see Figure 3). According to the comments, the main reasons for not providing International ILL services include high shipping costs, logistical and technical support challenges, limited staff and budgets, customs and transit delays, lack of formal agreements, and prioritization of national services. Some libraries also prefer purchasing materials when borrowing is difficult or costly.

Among those offering international ILL services, **20%** do not charge any fees but guarantee **free of charge services** on a reciprocal basis (see Figure 4).

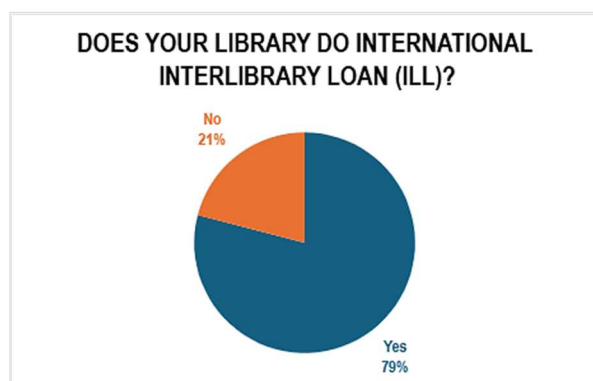


Figure 3. International ILL

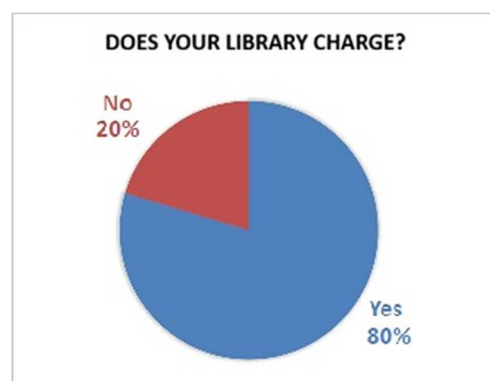


Figure 4. International ILL free/charged

The majority of international ILL exchanges occur within **regional geographical areas**. Among those offering international ILL services, 96 (85%) indicate they carry out the majority of international ILL in the **European Community** geographical area. **North America** follows with 57 respondents (50%). Other regions involved include the Rest of Europe (33 respondents, 29%), Oceania (16 respondents, 14%), Asia (15 respondents, 13%), Latin America/Caribbean (7 respondents, 6%), MENA (5 respondents, 4%), and Sub-Saharan Africa (2 respondents, 2%) (Note: respondents could select more than one option) (see Figure 5).

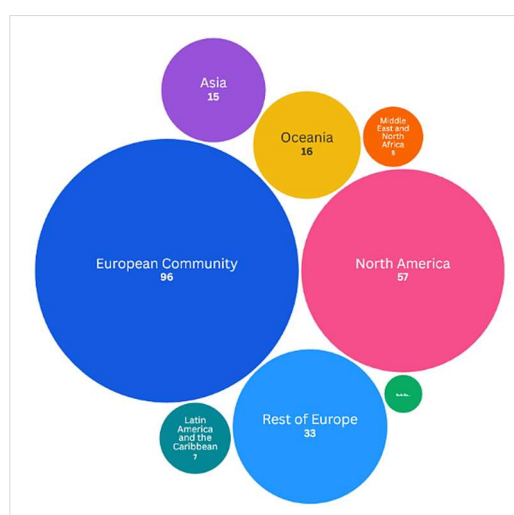


Figure 5. Geographical areas where the majority of international ILL are carried out by those offering international ILL services

In the last 2.5 years, international **borrowing volumes** and **lending volumes** for physical items have seen **similar percentages** and ILL activities have primarily taken place within **regional proximity**.

34% of respondents reported borrowing more than 50 physical items, 49% borrowed fewer than 50 items, and 17% did not borrow any physical items internationally (see Figure 6).

Regarding the international lending of physical items, 38% of respondents reported lending more than 50 items, while 46% lent fewer than 50 items. A smaller portion, 16%, did not lend any physical items (see Figure 7).

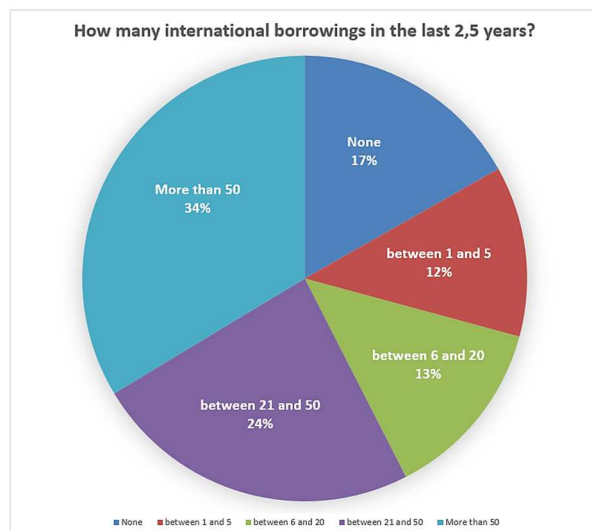


Figure 6. International borrowing volumes

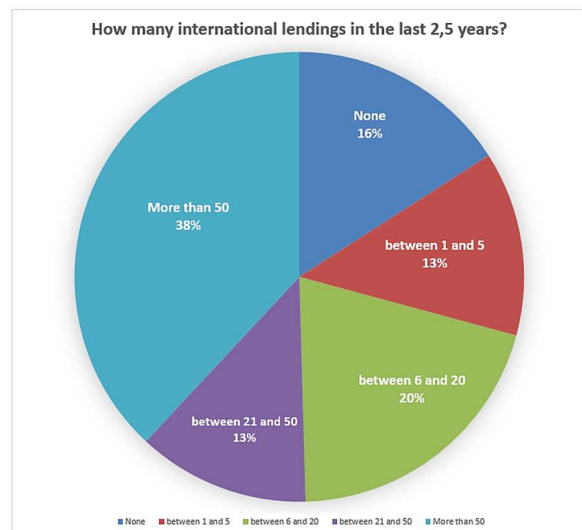


Figure 7. International lending volumes

Most international lending requests are received **via email** (74%), followed by OCLC WorldShare (WS) (35%) and online forms (27%). Other methods include RSCVD and ILLiad (both 16%), RapidILL (8%), and other unspecified options (9%).

Regarding the type of physical materials shipped across borders, **93%** of libraries send **books**, followed by **theses** or **dissertations** (34%), audio-visual materials (24%), maps (7%) and 19% send other items such as microfiches, journals, reports, or manuscripts.

The most commonly used **method** for sending or returning physical items by libraries is the **postal service** (82%), while 30% use couriers and 5% employ other methods.

The most widely adopted payment method for International ILL is **IFLA vouchers** used by **91%** of respondents. Other methods include **OCLC IFM** (46%), **bank transfers** (24%), and **credit cards** (20%). A smaller number use alternatives such as checks, PayPal, or the British Library Scheme (6%) and deposit accounts (4%).

Customs

The survey showed that items held up at customs can cause significant delays and concerns for libraries. The majority of respondents (65%) had some of their returnable items held up at customs: 28% reported average delays of between 3 and 7 days, 27% between 8 and 14 days, while 32% more than two weeks. Such delays raise worries about both the timing and the potential loss of materials, as showed in several comments:

"Mostly for books returned to us from Switzerland, UK or Japan", "We have to pick up the book in person at customs, which means about 3-4 hours of work per pickup (usually per book)" (GERMANY)

"Switzerland is not a member of the European Union. We mainly have problems with shipping to EU countries. Many EU libraries no longer deliver to Switzerland" (SWITZERLAND)

"Shipped books to Italy and Australia seem to get lost in their customs processing" (USA)

"In one case almost two months" (CANADA)

Regarding customs taxes and fees, 59% of shipments are charged additional costs, whereas 41% are not. The amounts charged vary, but typically range from a minimum of 2 euros to a maximum of 35 euros. In other currencies, customs fees can range from 20 to 50 CHF or from 10 to 20 USD. Most respondents (45%) say they pay customs fee in cash (in person), 23% use bank transfer, 27% use other methods (such as: university financial services, broker, credit card, DHL Postcard, etc..), while 27% of libraries answer that they cannot pay customs fee.

Delays and extra charges contribute to libraries' concerns and can impact overall satisfaction with international ILL exchanges.

Only 19% of respondents declared that they have a national model to use as a label for the international shipping of interlibrary loans. However most of libraries add special information text when shipping, such as: Interlibrary loan (73%), No commercial value (49%), Educational or scientific or cultural book (18%).

Strategies and Solutions

The final section, Strategies and Solutions, explores how institutions handle the difficulties encountered in international ILL operations and aims to gather insights on adaptive practices and innovative approaches.

Alternative strategies have been suggested or implemented to overcome challenges, including: using scanned copies of the whole book, when permitted by copyright and licenses (83 respondents, 73%), providing a digital copy of parts of the book, e.g. table of contents, abstract, selected chapters, as non-returnable digital resources (76 respondents, 67%), and Controlled Digital Lending (CDL) (63 respondents, 56%) (see Figure 8).

CDL is defined as the digital equivalent of traditional library lending. A library digitizes a book in its collection and then lends out the digital copy in a secure manner, while taking the physical copy off the shelf, out of circulation. That way, the same number of books remain in circulation. CDL allows users to borrow and return book without having to go to the library.

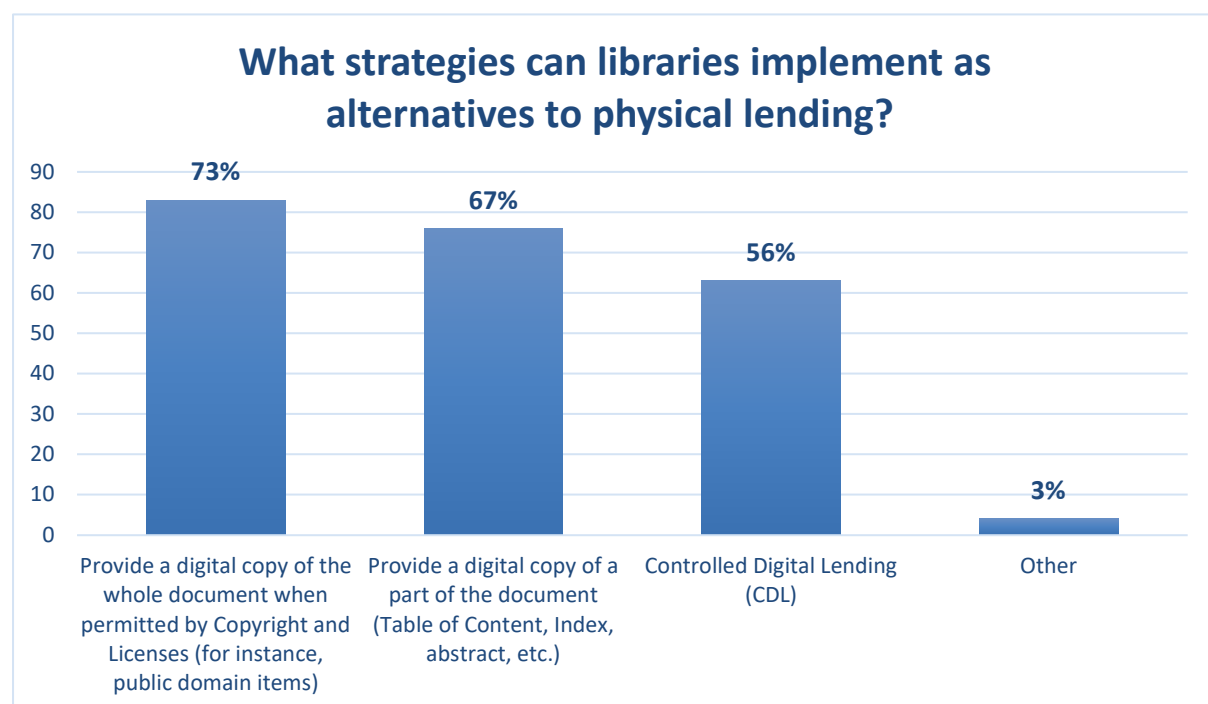


Figure 8. Alternative strategies

The implementation of CDL, which is considered a viable alternative by 56% of respondents, raises several concerns with respect to legal barriers, technical constraints, lack of financial resources, library management and organisational aspects and lack of staff training (see Figure 9).

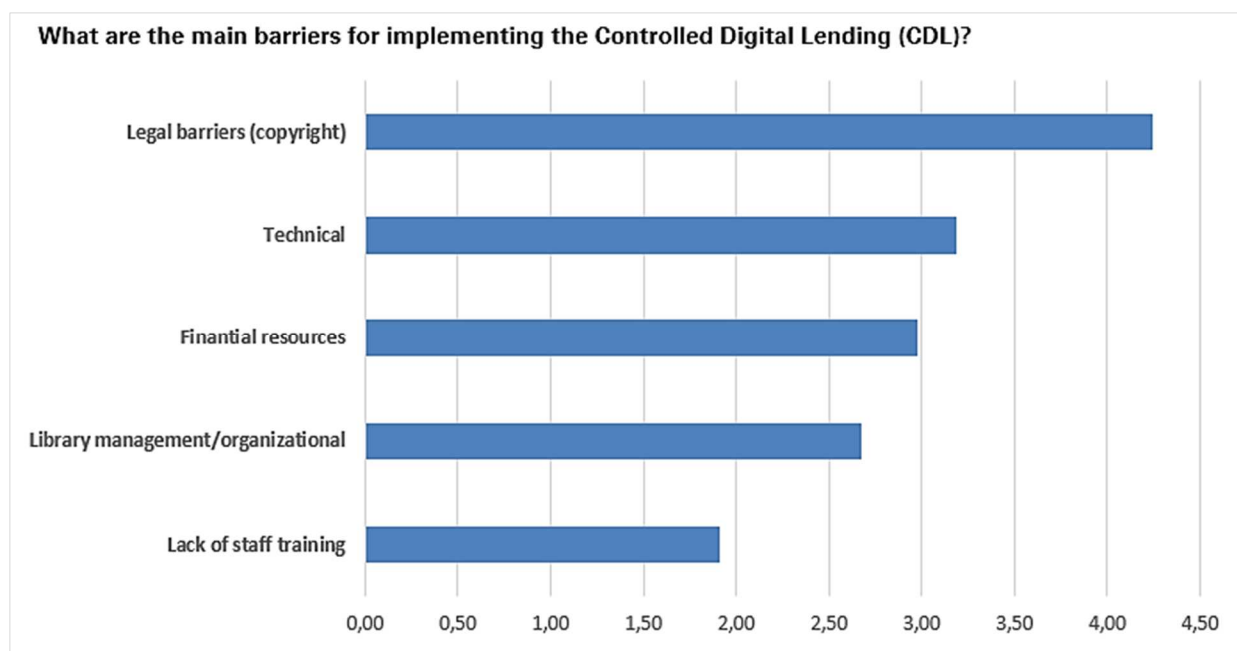


Figure 9. Main barriers to CDL implementation. Answers come from all respondents. The chart shows the weighted average, on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is the least important concern and 5 is the most important concern.

Free text comments are very rich and provide useful insights on the challenges, limits and solutions offered by CDL.

First, a distinction must be made between the opinions of libraries that have studied and/or implemented CDL, those that know this initiative at a theoretical level, and those that have an incomplete or inaccurate understanding.

Among those who know CDL, there are different opinions about whether it is worthwhile or not, given its costs and complexity. Problems are considered through several aspects:

- **Administrative issues**, such as the amount of staff labor and scanning time for entire volumes is perceived by many librarians and administrations as one of the main difficulties; risk-averse administrations; not enough demand to implement this method (the demand is not always encouraged by the library).
- **Technical issues**, such as the unavailability of a software program that allows for easy implementation (USA); location and space of the servers: CDL 'requires a lot of server space to permanently store the works, so there's no duplication of effort during recurring scans' (Germany).
- **Legal aspects** for implementing CDL divide opinions between those who think that the legal barriers are decisive (Germany, Italy, UK) and those who think that this initiative does not infringe copyright (Lebanon, Oman, Portugal, Spain and Canada), and consider it 'a potential way to expand access to our print collections in a controlled and legally responsible manner' (Portugal).

Although CDL is generally widely accepted at a theoretical level, 'libraries need more certainty about the legal framework in order to start to organize the CDL as a library service' (Italy).

Legal uncertainty hinders decision-making: 'Copyright legal issues have gotten in the way of decisions being made and it feels that this subject is discussed with little to no decisions/resolution over the past few years. (Canada). ' I'm not comfortable offering CDL under my countries' laws, as currently interpreted, for items still under copyright' (USA). Therefore, administrations and libraries are risk-averse ... not necessarily because there are current laws against CDL but because there have not yet been precedent making legal decisions.' (USA).

One of the specific doubts mentioned is about storage: 'Is permanent storage a violation of copyright? The copyright law is not clear.' (Germany, Switzerland). A relevant US ruling is mentioned: *Hachette v. Internet Archive*, 'which forbids CDL for in-copyright works which are available for purchase in electronic form. Even though the judgment did not concern in-copyright print titles that are not available for sale in electronic form, libraries can be reluctant to use CDL for this material' (USA).

Some comments propose limiting CDL's scope to international ILL (Italy), or to 'texts that have been out of print for several years even if still protected by copyright' (Italy), 'CDL would be appropriate for copies that amount to slightly more than 10%.' (Germany).

Every country has their national copyright laws. In some countries, like Germany and Italy, the implementation would not be possible at the moment: the 'German copyright law does not allow scans of more than 10 % of a book published within the last 70 years (at least 70 years)' (Germany). 'I think that in Italy the problems related to copyright do not permit the maintenance of this type of service.' (Italy) 'Initiatives such as the Knowledge Rights 21 (KR21) program, a European program focused on achieving changes in European legislation and policies to facilitate access to information through libraries and archives, can help make CDL a legal alternative in the EU and Spain'. (Spain)

Licences of publishers/vendors are also mentioned in some comments: there is a lack of knowledge of the licenses signed by the institutions, and a lack of negotiation with a view to CDL: 'Licenses, knowing what they allow (sometimes we don't have access to the licenses and agreements our larger institution has signed), and not being able to negotiate directly for CDL-favorable terms'. (USA). 'The contract between library or organization and publisher, should be clear the CDL allow with all as it is significant potential to expand and access knowledge throughout the world'. (Oman); So there are not enough 'dedicated vendors that provide ACCESSIBLE CDL options (able to be read by screen readers, etc.)' (USA)

Another opinion is that 'CDL can help address gaps in e-book licensing models, which are often restrictive or cost-prohibitive. As copyright frameworks and digital infrastructure mature, CDL may become a standard mechanism to ensure libraries remain vital, inclusive, and adaptive in the digital age.' (Portugal).

It is suggested to prioritize the lending of ebooks over CDL. 'The mass availability of ebooks for newer works will mean a smaller pool of CDL-eligible materials in the future. We should focus on working with vendors on whole ebook lending (whether through traditional ILL or tokenized URLs)'. (USA).

Some comments also highlight a need for **training on CDL**, 'the concept is relatively new for our library community' (Turkiye) especially in its legal implications. There are important doubts especially about the storage of the copies after the return of the loan. 'And it might be frustrating for the staff to scan a book "for nothing", because the scans will be deleted (I think) as soon as the book "returns". (Switzerland). 'Are required some recommendations about the procedures to implement CDL' (Spain).

Finally, some librarians reflect on the strategic importance of **cooperation**, suggesting action and advocacy role of the large libraries internationally, 'which can also meet at the common denominator, can act jointly in such projects' (Turkiye). 'Most smaller libraries have ...(not)... the resources to successfully implement CDL' (USA). Regional cooperation is also suggested, for example in Latin America 'A regional or Latin American cooperative framework would be helpful to overcome some of these limitation's (Argentina). Others would use a centralized model 'It needs central ownership or guidance regarding CDL in the UK, e.g. from the British Library, so other libraries feel able and justified to take those steps' (UK). 'I also think this needs to be done by consortiums or groups of libraries to avoid duplication of efforts. There is no need for 5 different libraries to scan the same title.' (USA)

Despite all of these limitations, 63% of libraries believe CDL will acquire more **relevance in the future** and show a strong interest in learning more and sharing experiences with other institutions (See Figure 10).

CDL is considered an excellent opportunity to modernize library services, facilitating remote access to valuable materials without infringing copyright. It is a solution that could significantly increase accessibility and inclusion in the use of library resources. (Spain). Many librarians consider digitalization to be the future: 'As everything digitisation is the way forward' (Germany, Spain, USA), and 'as libraries continue to evolve in a digital-first environment, CDL offers a practical and responsible way to expand access to physical collections beyond the constraints of location and time' which 'aligns with the mission of libraries to provide access to knowledge' (Portugal).

'It can be particularly beneficial for users in areas with limited access and support the digital transformation of libraries' (Turkiye), and 'in certain subject areas, where a lot of content may be in print only' (UK).

USA libraries show the threats in the current political and economic climate: 'International travel will likely be more restrictive. International shipments may attract more scrutiny, expense and even government censorship, depending on where they are going', 'I believe as costs increase and difficulties between

nations regarding free trade continue, having a digital alternative to sending physical material will be necessary for most libraries/institutions.’ CDL would imply, therefore, an equitable and sustainable model for access to knowledge within a legal framework. In summary, it is ‘simple, fast, resource-saving’ (Switzerland).

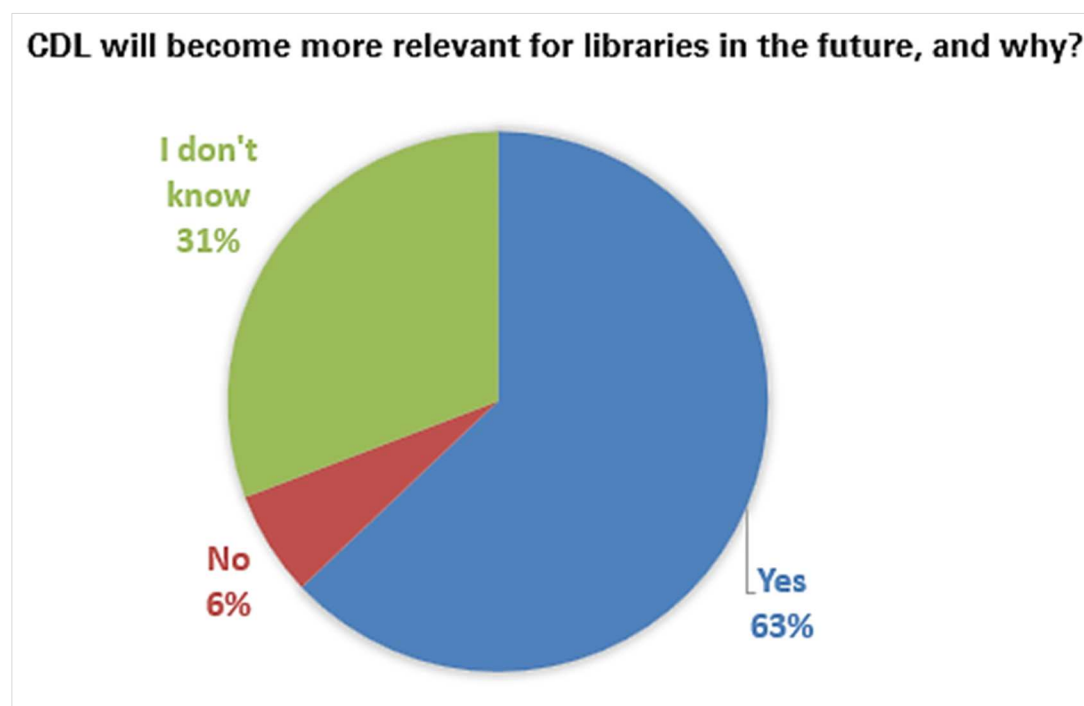


Figure 10. Future relevance of CDL

Conclusions

The survey confirms that logistical and financial barriers persist and discourage libraries from cross border resource sharing, but also that possible solutions and facilities exist.

The different national and regional postal areas, with their corresponding regulations, along with the shipping and customs costs, make physical materials shipping the main problem limiting the international exchange of physical items, especially for libraries with limited resources.

Customs procedures complicate and slow down the international loan process, impacting delivery times and sometimes generating additional costs or bureaucratic problems.

Key findings further highlight that while libraries can take practical steps such as sharing labels and best practices to improve international exchanges, some challenges lie beyond their control. Effective advocacy is needed to clarify and simplify customs procedures within the EU, ensuring that ILL is officially

recognized with dedicated procedures and tools to facilitate smoother international resource sharing.

Shared protocols to simplify the procedures can help reduce delays and complexities in the international transfer of physical materials, making the process smoother and more predictable.

To decrease the dependence on physical shipping in international interlibrary loans, libraries can adopt digital oriented and innovative practices, exploit new technologies and systems, which allow them to replace or integrate the physical transfer of materials and optimize management.

The survey reveals that digital solutions, such as Controlled Digital Lending (CDL), remain challenging and require further development.

In fact, the most commonly perceived obstacles are implementation difficulties due to lack of technological infrastructures, limited financial resources and professional staff, and legal uncertainty due to national rules. To effectively expand access to print collections in a controlled and legally responsible manner, investments are needed in clear legal frameworks, sustainable funding, professional capacity-building, and collaborative infrastructures. Libraries show a strong interest in learning more about these solutions and sharing experiences with institutions that already use these models.

The **RSCVD initiative**, supported by the IFLA DDRS Committee, offers a flexible option to replace physical lending, through its free and voluntary supply of scans of non-returnables via its effective platform for this purpose, the open source Talaria software. Key benefits of RSCVD are:

- Already utilized by 16% of respondents for receiving lending requests.
- Simplifies identification of lending providers.
- Integrates with other international tools, such as the International ILL toolkit.
- Enables a shorter and more reliable fulfillment process, with a 92% fill rate and an average turnaround time of 1.36 days.
- Operates on a voluntary, reciprocal, and free-of-charge basis, governed by the RSCVD Articles of Governance.

Collaborative networks designed to optimize the libraries resources exchange, shared practices, innovative digital tools could be the possible solutions to increase and simplify international services.

In conclusion, quoting Dennis Massie's words: "ILL practitioners all over the world recognize the value in sharing research materials across borders and tend to be extremely patient and helpful in sorting out difficulties"

See <https://hangingtogether.org/ill-across-borders-insights-from-shares-on-sharing-physical-materials-internationally/>

Acknowledgments

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Document Delivery and Resource Sharing (DDRS) Section and Standing Committee

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Resource Sharing Collaborative and Voluntary Document Delivery (RSCVD) Steering Committee

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RSCVD - Resource Sharing Collaborative and Voluntary Document Delivery Initiative website and app

<https://rscvd.ifla.org/>

<https://app.rscvd.ifla.org/>