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Lifelong learning in libraries with limited resources

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First I would like to comment the concept of lifelong learning. The concept has been frequently used in connection with public libraries during the last few years. It would perhaps be a good idea to recall the fact that lifelong learning and public libraries has a long tradition.

The foundation for public libraries in Britain and in the Scandinavian countries, for instance, is education and this formed for very long a platform for the public library movement. The public library concept has gradually been extended and the services are supposed to include:

- education
- information
- recreation
- culture

For very long the element of education was dominating. The reminiscent of the public library collections from the first part of the 20th century prove that the learning element was strong. Public libraries were definitely not distributors of light fiction and other recreational reading. In the 1949 Public Library Manifesto, focus is on learning and public libraries should be “the people’s university”. Gradually the focus moved. Public libraries did of course still offer learning material, but since the 1950s they became more concerned about reading promotion, how to succeed to get more people

interested in reading. (Reading often was equivalent to fiction reading) Reading itself was regarded as intrinsically good. At the same time public libraries also extended their service and offered exhibitions, different cultural programmes, outreach activities etc.

With the ICT development public libraries became aware of the importance of information. Information technology offered new possibilities for libraries, a new role, and there was a fear that libraries should be lagged behind if they didn't jump on the IT-train. It was of course also a principle of equal access. Public libraries ought to offer ICT tools for the general public which otherwise might not have access to the facilities.

It seems as if we are now going round in circles, or rather recycling the concept of education, this time under the stage-name of lifelong learning.

What I am not quite certain about is what the driving force really is. Evidently the market forces behind the ICT development are not completely passive. Of course libraries are an interesting market for learning products, edutainment and infotainment, hardware as well as software.

Having said that I would like to stress that public libraries play an important role in the learning process and that technology used in a sensible way offers new opportunities. New technology offers new ways of learning, whether lifelong or not.

And I would now focus on the role of public libraries in the learning process in four Central American countries where libraries are facing a severe lack of resources and where ICT-based services are far beyond reach. And I will start with a brief presentation of the library development project in Central America.

A long term library project

The library project in Central America started in Nicaragua in the late 1980s. In the 1990s the project was extended when Honduras was included in 1993 and Guatemala and El Salvador in 1998. The programme has recently been prolonged and funding is allocated for the period 2003 – 2005. This means that the project has been on for some 15 years.

The project is supervised by the Royal Library in Stockholm in close co-operation with the National Libraries in Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. The national libraries in Belize, Costa Rica and Panama also take part, mainly in the regional activities.

The Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) has been funding the project from the beginning.

SIDA is a governmental institution that executes the development co-operation policy adopted by the Swedish Parliament. The overall goal of the Swedish development co-operation is to raise the standard of living of poor people in the world. SIDA's task is to create conditions conducive to change and to socially, economically and environmentally sustainable development. The overall goal for this library project is poverty reduction and democracy development, from which follows that libraries are regarded an important factor in the efforts to reach these goals.

Funding for the library project in Central America is allocated for three specific areas, namely:

- development of national libraries 30%
- development of public libraries 70%
- regional activities

It should be emphasized that the national libraries are responsible for co-ordination and development for the public library sector. And they are supposed to support and promote the public library development.

The overall objective for the national library part of the project is to strengthen and develop the specific national library tasks and to create

conditions for them to fulfil their function as national libraries. The programme has focused on development of national bibliographies, legal deposit legislation, implementation of the ISBN system, library automation, cataloguing, preservation, conservation and staff training.

The aims and objectives for the public library part are to develop a solid infrastructure as a platform for a diversified library service. This is a heavy, and above all a long term task.

Conditions are not entirely favourable. I will just mention some facts.

Literacy rates are low, even if not disastrous. The national average figures for Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador, varies between 66 % and 78%. We should keep in mind that these are average figures which means that there are differences between men and women, between different age groups and between cities and rural areas. Local illiteracy rates might be far above the average figures. Another fact is that part of the indigenous population in Guatemala does not speak Spanish. It goes without saying that there is a severe lack of reading material in the native languages.

The education system is not only insufficient it is also petrified. In for instance Guatemala the majority of children leave school at the age of twelve. Even if the school system theoretically offers the opportunity to continue until 18.

In addition to that already mentioned this geographic area is invaded by natural disasters, earthquakes, hurricanes and floods. Corruption is a severe problem. The political system is not very stable. And: libraries are definitely not top priority on the political agenda.

In spite of all these negative components the library project has managed. It would not be an overstatement to say that it has been successful. The national library respectively has been a driving force to build up a library structure and to create an enthusiasm.

Library premises have been built or refurbished. Training of library staff has been undertaken. Reading promotion programmes have been set up. Automation has started. Which is not equivalent to internet

access for the general public. The extension of broadband and fibre optic is a battlefield for the private telecom sector. There are no strategies for a national information infrastructure. Those two factors in combination counteracts effectively in preventing libraries access to the new technology.

The national library has also taken responsibility for co-ordination of acquisition and collection development. This includes establishing channels for selection and acquisition. The problem is not that there is a severe lack of books in Spanish. The problem is rather how to find and select the adequate books.

And here I would like to make a few remarks on the phenomena of book donations.

Libraries in Central America like other inadequately funded libraries serve as target for all sorts of charity contributions. There are a number of book donation programmes, initiated by prosperous libraries, NGO's, publishing houses or private persons, with libraries in the developing world as target group. Many book donations are very helpful when adequate books are offered the less well off libraries. But, to be frank, too many book donations are to be regarded as mere pollution. That is when inadequate books are distributed, and when the receiving library is too poor to have the courage to say NO THANK YOU. The result is that many poor libraries are overloaded with inadequate trash that is space consuming, that has to be looked after and that hides the relevant books.

The collected works of Ibsen, even if it is a good translation, is probably not the most urgent need for the population in the outskirts of Managua or in the rural areas in Guatemala. This statement is not meant to indicate any contempt whatsoever for the library users literary taste.

I would here like to take the opportunity to urge IFLA to set up a policy on book donations to advice the donors, but above all in order to encourage colleagues in receiving libraries to say No thank you, to inadequate books.

Lifelong learning is not equivalent to new technology

In spite of lack of technical equipment, Internet access and all facilities normal in libraries in the prosperous part of the world, the public library system in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua play a very important role in the learning process. A decentralised public library system in combination with book mobiles covers large parts of the countries. There are weak spots and even empty spots. Still where it works it works.

The public libraries function primarily as a tool for school children and students. Libraries are often overcrowded with children doing their homework. These are children from underprivileged families with small resources. They can't afford to buy their own school books and learning material. Here the library offers school books, dictionaries etc. as well as reading tables and electrical light. In addition to that they have an enthusiastic librarian to their disposal.

Thousands and thousands of children and young people have been helped by their small local library. We should not underestimate the role of these small libraries offering very elementary service. Lifelong learning starts in early life.

Hopefully we will be able within the present programme to make progress and improve the services, to develop book collections, to offer computer based services and to give more libraries a badly needed make up.

One conclusion from this project is: it takes decades to develop a solid library infrastructure. When you start you should be aware that it is an undertaking for at least 15 or rather 20 years time.

For most donors flashy short term projects are more attractive. The Swedish International Development Agency is an exception to the rule.