

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR SOCIAL INTEGRATION

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It is a pleasure and honour for me to be here among colleagues as we seek to explore the role of the public library as an instrument for social integration. I particularly wish to congratulate the organizers for this initiative in bringing together professionals to discuss one of the key issues of today concerning the public library and its impact on society.

As you know, UNESCO has long been interested in the development of libraries and the public library in particular. Its involvement goes back to the 1950s soon after its creation with the establishment of model public libraries in Colombia, India and Nigeria symbolizing the Organization's conviction that the public library is «a living force for education, culture and information¹» and as such, is a major force contributing to the Organization's mandate to provide education for all, foster the exchange of ideas and knowledge and promote dialogue among peoples.

Since then, UNESCO has provided assistance in establishing and/or developing libraries in most, if not all, countries of the world. Perhaps its most spectacular achievement comes with the scheduled reopening of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina on 23 April 2002, International Copyright Day, almost two thousand years after its destruction by fire. According to Mrs. Suzanne Mubarak, the new library will be: the world's window on Egyptian civilization, Egypt's window to the world, a library for the new digital age and a centre of learning and dialogue.²

These are very worthy objectives and exemplify the model public library. But not all countries can boast of similar purpose built facilities. In many places, even today, the state of public libraries is deplorable, without adequate legislation or policies on which to establish the basis for their community action and outreach. The acknowledged purpose of public library is to meet the development needs of both individuals and the community and permit informed participation in the democratic

1. UNESCO Public Library Manifesto. 1994.

2. Mrs. Suzanne Mubarak press conference. May 2001

http://www.bibalex.gov.eg/News_Speech_May%202001.htm

process. It is a tool providing access to one of the most basic human rights, that of the right to information.

The right to information can only be achieved if there is an outlet for exchanging wisdom, experience and ideas; a place where all can freely participate by contributing and learning from others.

The public library is a meeting place of minds allowing all to share experiences and ideas sometimes without actually meeting physically. It is a forum for cultural development where one can learn tolerance and respect for others and that differences should not be a source of conflict. It also provides the means of obtaining basic education and extending ones knowledge. Where else can one have free access to all the world's knowledge? In short, the library is an integral part of society and several prominent personalities quite openly acknowledge their debt to the public library as it opened their eyes to the possibilities that awaited.

To achieve its goals, it must first ask itself, for whom is the public library intended? And how can it serve the various groups in the community? The fact that three Manifestos for the Public Library have been issued by UNESCO in less than fifty years testifies to the strength and versatility of the library as an institution constantly adapting to the changes and developments that surround us.

Now more than ever, libraries are essential to the development of society. The challenges of globalization and the development of the Information Society will strongly influence the way the public library fulfils its mission. Much of world's educational, cultural and scientific information is increasingly being produced, distributed and accessed in digital form and is leading to a re evaluation of the public service mission of the library to ensure that it preserves its core functions of providing information for scholastic, recreational and cultural ends in order to complement, rather than compete with, services offered by commercial providers.

There may be a need to elaborate new national information policies defining the code of ethics and the legal framework regarding access to information, as well the development of methodologies for a democratic use of information. In this way, state or national institutions can expand their function as universal resources providers. Part of their role is to bridge the digital divide and to enable those who are without the technical means to access the information highway are not completely isolated from the information society.

Libraries are about content, not the format of information. Books are simply a very convenient –and pleasurable– way of packaging information and as such are no different from other media like television programmes, CD-Roms or films in providing information. The library as an information provider should have the capacity to provide information in any form and from any source and at any time. This will ultimately involve allowing access to its collections outside of opening hours, thereby moving on to the next step: libraries without walls.

Part of this process must entail strengthening the public library as a gateway to the information highway to guarantee access to information and to assist national development. UNESCO contributes to this through a strategy of capacity-building in its Member States by an ongoing improvement of information infrastructures and content. The development of the information society requires libraries, and UNESCO, to concentrate increasingly on ensuring universal and equitable access to information while maintaining confidentiality of access and security of information, among other issues.

As the global society develops, it is of vital and strategic importance to recognize and promote access to cultural and informational products as a means of reaffirming cultural identity and diversity. In this respect, greater attention must be given to the development of content that reflects the culture, values, history and language of the community at large.

Through its Information for All Programme, the Organization seeks to «promote and widen access to information in the public domain through the organization, digitization and preservation of information.³» One of the five areas of activity of the Programme is strengthening institutions as gateways for information access. This includes:

- Development of a UNESCO portal to information institutions worldwide;
- Establishment of national public gateways to information;
- Establishment of national digitization policies;
- Promotion of standards for the management and preservation of recorded knowledge.

Development of a global gateway to knowledge has been initiated through the UNESCO Libraries Portal⁴ which has been created to provide to resources on information management and to international co operation in the library field. It is being developed as a focal point or concentration of experiences, for both specialists and the public.

Colleagues

I now turn to the theme of this meeting and how adoption of the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto can help to achieve social integration. The Manifesto defines the public library as a local gateway to knowledge. It permits members to participate knowledgeably in the public arena, which is a fundamental condition to building a sound democracy. Incapacity of any individual to play his or her role in society leads to marginalization and disenfranchisement to the detriment of the community. No

3. Information for All Programme: Shaping a just information society with universal benefits.
<http://www.unesco.org/webworld/ifap/>

4. http://www.unesco.org/webworld/portal_bib/

society can be fully effective if any section is marginalized or prevented from adding its own contribution to the collective experience.

The public library is one of the greatest forces for democracy and as the Manifesto clearly states there should be equality of access «regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status». This is an important clause especially today where the effects of globalization are creating turmoil and upheaval in many countries. This has led an unprecedented level of refugees in different regions of the world. According to UNHCR statistics⁵, there are an estimated 22 million refugees in the world, the greater proportion of whom are children in need of information for education and recreation.

Communities that have welcomed displaced persons often provide reading material in their local language as an outreach service to the new population group. In addition to refugees and displaced persons, there are also those who may be excluded from visiting the library because of disability, illness or imprisonment, but who have the same right to knowledge and self-improvement as others who do not suffer from these constraints. Without access to information, they will be deprived of the ability to master the conditions under which they live and try to create a better world not only for themselves but for others around them. It is incumbent on the library to meet their needs equally.

The sharing of information and knowledge at the broadest possible level has enormous public benefit and as UNESCO has been advocating for some time, information resources produced with public funding should be made publicly available. This is particularly true of information related to rights, laws, entitlements, health and government's obligations to its citizens especially where migrant, minority or marginalized groups are concerned.

The Manifesto accepts the principle that the public library service is free with funding provided by the government at national, regional or local level depending on the administrative context. Funding tends to be a major source of concern. We are all familiar with the limited and inadequate budgets granted to libraries in most countries and know that this is often the first area cut when there is an economic downturn. In this, the Manifesto clearly recognizes the benefits that can be had from closely cooperating with colleagues. Through nationwide networking and agreed standards of service, information can freely flow among participating members and minimize, if necessary, the costs that each will have to pay, thereby avoiding unnecessary dispersion of scarce resources.

In an age where commercial concerns dominate, the public service mission of the library is being called into question. With the advent of digital technology, copyright

5. The Refugee Story in Statistics. <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi bin/texis/vtx/home?page=statistics>

has become a particularly burning issue and has led to a global debate on exemptions to fair-use. Any solution must balance the equally legitimate interests of rights holders and users. The outcome may considerably impact on libraries in their quest to provide access to information for all. UNESCO is examining this issue as part of its ongoing debate on INFOethics and the establishment of a framework for the information society defining the mission of the public library.

The Public Library Manifesto also sets out the missions of the library. It identifies concepts, objectives related information, literacy, education and culture as the core of public library service. It stresses cultural diversity, access for citizens to community information as well as inclusion activities for all.

Finally, the Manifesto outlines the operation and management policies of the library. It implicitly recommends that it serve the community no matter their location. Many countries have identified unique ways of meeting this duty. There have been travelling libraries in various forms: boxes, bags, vans and even a well-established Camel Library Service in Kenya since 1996. The development of the Internet and its expansion into household use will facilitate the task of meeting the needs of several people at once. No longer will access to information depend solely on the return of a book or material by a borrower. One item can be accessed by several patrons at the same time. The library will, in effect, become open to all.

I have spoken at great length about the library and what is expected of it. But the true strength of the library service lies in the professionals who manage it. Without the librarian, no library no matter how well-funded, can fully meet the aspirations of its patrons. Librarians have always been adept at finding solutions and in interpreting the sometimes oddly phrased requests to produce the exact information required. They are the ones who bring the library to life and determine how best to make the library an enjoyable and rewarding experience for all.

In closing, I can think of no better slogan to describe the library but the words of the American humanist Henry Ward Beecher: «A library is not a luxury but one of the necessities of life».