

Public Libraries and their Contribution towards Economic Development: a discussion

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Abstract

This paper discusses the public library's role in society as a focal point for local economic development, adapted to the countries in the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR - composed of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay). It proposes a re-focussing of public libraries towards the idea of an information centre, to contribute towards local economic development by satisfying the information needs of citizens, small businesses, new entrepreneurs and community institutions. This new vision of the public library as an information centre creates greater links and integration between the public library and its local community. Public libraries and economic development would seem like an unlikely combination, especially in the Latin American context. However, what does seem more realistic is the setting up of an information service in public libraries to provide added value information; this will be of great importance in justifying the existence of the public library within its surroundings.

Introduction

A larger debate regarding the new model of the public library needed by our society has been taking place over the last few years in international and national meetings in an effort to define the public library's role and to integrate it into the information sector as a main component.

Public libraries and economic development seem an unlikely topic, especially when seen in the Latin American context. Some question whether public libraries have a role to play in the economic development of their community, regions or even countries. At the same time, there are many views regarding how a public library can contribute towards economic development. Some believe its role is to serve as a lifelong learning institution (Mackenzie (2000)). Others (McClure, Bertot & Beachboard (1996)) believe that its role is to provide information literacy. Lozano (2002) believes that the library's role is to provide information about its community. This article will discuss the public library's role as a centre for economic development according to McClure, Robbins & Fraser (2000), tailoring it to the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) countries, and reorienting the public library as an information centre designed to contribute to local economic development by anticipating needs for specific information. In this way, the public library satisfies the needs of citizens, small businesses, entrepreneurs and the community's organisations and institutions, therefore achieving greater integration into the local

¹ The designations employed and the presentation of material in this text do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

community.

Background

The public library historically has had four functions (Andrade & Magalhães, 1979): informative, educational, recreational and cultural. This study will discuss the informative role of public libraries. The first attempt to define the role of public libraries regarding their informative function was in the Kenyon Commission (Great Britain, 1927, p.16) report in Great Britain. The report referred to public libraries as an indispensable element in community life, stating that “it would seem that in our large commercial and manufacturing towns, as well as in our agricultural districts, such libraries would naturally spring up, illustrative of the peculiar trade, manufacture, and agriculture of the place, and greatly favourable to the practical development of the science of political economy” (p. 16). Another document which supports this belief was published by the American Library Association (ALA) in 1943 which states: “public libraries [...] transmit information and ideas that are necessary for a community’s current well-being and future progress” (p.9). In 1994, section ten of the third version of UNESCO’s Manifesto on public libraries highlights the public library’s mission in providing information services adapted to local businesses, associations and groups of interest (Abid, 1996). In 2001, the new IFLA/UNESCO directives for public libraries were published. According to the directives, public libraries should work within the following areas: information access, training schemes, reading promotion schemes, personal development, and services aimed at children and young people, increasing in this way the value of the services they provide targeted to specific groups of citizens, taking into consideration the reality of their specific environment and situation (FIAB, UNESCO, 2001).

The origin of public libraries providing information services to business is based on the Community Information Service (CIS). There is reference to the CIS origins in both Great Britain and the United States in the nineteenth century. There is also reference to them during the Second World War in England, with the Citizen Advice Bureau which aimed to solve community problems generated by the war, (Ferreira dos Santos, 2007 p.85). This service later directed its attention towards other informative activities not related to the war. At almost the same time, the United States Department of Labor created the Veteran’s Information Center which provided rehabilitation and social readapting activities for people who participated in the Second World War. Others developed as neighbourhood information centers (Ferreira dos Santos, 2007 p.85).

The service, in its present sense, appeared in the United States in the 1960s and is based on the British model (Kahn,1971) describes how the Citizen Advice Bureau in Great Britain inspired the creation of the Social Responsibilities Round Table and the Office of Library Service to the Disadvantaged by ALA. This period produced changes throughout the country in many institutions, including libraries, with a greater emphasis on self-assessment and social responsibility. This new development was mainly a result of the need of American public libraries to obtain funds at that time. As Almeida Junior (1997 p.83) makes clear, public libraries needed to demonstrate their social usefulness in order to increase their share in the distribution of funds set aside for culture, which for economic and political reasons, were not growing at the same rate as cultural institutions’ needs. The

role of the information provider to the public has been the resulting solution to the problem, with libraries aiming to prove themselves as vital, necessary and important providers of services.

Businesses and organisations also need information. Most large businesses have their own libraries while small businesses often do not. Public libraries are rarely used for this purpose in the MERCOSUR region (see the following section for a description of MERCOSUR). Such work is being developed mainly in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, the Netherlands and Canada, where the dissemination of information to businesses and the community has become a traditional task of public libraries. On the other hand, public libraries within the MERCOSUR area “should transcend that mere ‘existing’ within a community and not just ‘open’ their doors to occasional users” (Betancur 1998, p.4). Re-directing public libraries towards the function of centres for local economic development would steer them away from the passive attitude or, at least, not sufficiently active one. In many cases, their services have taken on an almost exclusive function of assisting with schoolwork only, which has taken them further away from their other functions.

MERCOSUR

The Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) composed of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, was created with the Asunción Treaty on 26 March 1991, and came into being on 1 January 1992 (Sena Correa, 2003). Chile and Bolivia became associate members in 1996. MERCOSUR makes up the third largest world commercial block after the European Union, taking into account 12 million square kilometres, 60 percent of Latin American territory, a population of 206 million, and a Gross National Product (GNP) of \$75,000 million. This group of countries constitutes nearly 45 percent of the Latin American population. Brazil alone represents 36 percent of the population and 40 percent of the Gross National Product (GNP) (Sena Correa, 2003).

MERCOSUR aims to increase efficiency and competitiveness in the economies involved by widening their current markets and accelerating their economic development through efficient capitalising of available resources, environmental conservation, communications improvement, coordinating macroeconomic policies, and complementing different sectors of their economies. The creation of a common market constitutes an adequate response for the consolidation of large economic areas of the world to respond to the need to achieve adequate international insertion. It is, for the time being, the formal and predominantly economic side of an integration process which, like a polyhedron, has other sides to it. Those sides are a nodal side: the political one; and other sides are the social, educational and cultural aspects and also, an information policy side which includes the public library.

According to the results of a study carried out by the Regional Centre for Reading Promotion in Latin America and the Caribbean (CERLALC) on public library systems in Latin America, “the lack of national legislation on public libraries takes away decision, negotiation and co-ordination power from the national body responsible for them.” (Betancur, Alvarez & Didier, 2001 p.10).

According to this, the countries in the region could be classified into three groups:

- Those which have a law specifically for public libraries of a national character (as is the case of Venezuela and Mexico).
- Those which have legislation relating to information services, within which specific reference is made to public libraries (as is the case of Colombia and Brazil).
- Those which do not have any type of legislation for public libraries (Betancur, Alvarez & Didier, 2001 p.10)

Public Libraries and Economic Development

The public library's role in economic development played through its informative function, is widely quoted by Anglo-Saxon writers, particularly North Americans. Its function as an information provider for businesses and industries shows great acceptance on behalf of information professionals as a means to justify their existence. In those countries such a point of view has prevailed over the opinion that offering this type of service is a role better suited to other municipal areas. In the Latin American context it is hoped that the scepticism plaguing some efforts on the public library's role in supporting businesses can be overcome just as happened in countries where it was implemented.

The amount and exact nature of the services provided to contribute towards the community's economic development vary depending on the community itself and the library. They could be as Bleiweis (1997, p.37) suggests:

1. City Business Directory: Newington (Connecticut) Public Library began its association with economic development beginning with the compilation of the city's business directory.
2. Information alert service for businesses: applying information relevant to businesses, for example, highlights problems that have already been solved in other businesses and that would be of general interest to the community.
3. Information about the community: a guide containing relevant information on the city, such as restaurants, banks, hospitals, chemists' and laundries, etc. This type of information has many users: new residents, visitors and entrepreneurs themselves who use the information to analyse markets and new business opportunities.
4. Job and career information: information which helps the unemployed or people looking for new job opportunities. They can provide annual business reports, books on job interviews or on how to write a curriculum vitae, etc.
5. Book lists: the library could select books to assist business people to be successful in their businesses; lists of the most sold books in the

business field, etc.

6. Computers for the use of businesses and the community in general: some businesses still are not automated. The library could provide computers for business people and the public in general.
7. Advice service for businesses: the library could promote talks, meetings between business people and business specialists, as well as having professional specialised librarians to attend to the users.
8. Other services that the library may identify as being necessary for its users.

Two examples of the services listed above can be found in England and Denmark and are briefly described below.

England

The Croydon library service (Croydon, 2004) in England, offers the Electronic Business Record; it works in co-operation with the Local Council's Economic and Strategy Development Unit. It has compiled a record of businesses in the area which is openly available on its web page, has more than 2,000 registered businesses and is developed and promoted as a free information source which will contribute significantly towards the community's economic revival.

It also offers the *Croydon Online* which provides:

1. Community information in collaboration with clubs, societies and local services;
2. Health information with links to other suppliers in hospitals and health centres;
3. Educational links with schools that use it for interactive projects;
4. Local Council information including a facility enabling anyone to contact public employees by e-mail;
5. Business information with access to special search and advisory organisations;
6. Leisure and tourist information;
7. Library service together with its online catalogue.

According to those supporting this idea, the changes and benefits that these services have on the library could be considered as cooperation within the community, promoting the community's businesses, developing business networks, services and product marketing, as well as continuing education possibilities, among others (Thorhauge, Larsen, Thun, & Albrechtsen, 1998).

Denmark

Silkeborg Library in Denmark offers the Business Information Service for local small enterprise businesses (Silkeborg Library, 2004). This service has a full-time librarian assigned to it. It is essentially a reference service providing information on businesses, contact addresses with overseas businesses, legal statutes and regulations referring to imports/exports and patent information. Online searches on remote data bases are provided on demand for a fee. If necessary, the library links with the business information department at the Aarhus provincial library which has a larger collection, directories of and access to more on-line database providers.

Redefining public libraries in Latin America

In the MERCOSUR region, currently there are many small businesses that are responsible for creating the majority of new jobs and business opportunities. This perception is sustained by examining indicators such as, for example, between 1996 and 2002, increase from 2.956.749 small business in Brazil to 4.605.607million. They account for 36.2 percent of the total job market, 40 percent of salaries paid, 21 percent of the Gross National Product, 96.6 percent of the number of establishments (SEBRAE, 2005). This data demonstrates that small businesses are essential to the development of a country like Brazil. However, they face considerable survival problems due to lack of information and support. The public library's interaction and association with that area of the community, as has been identified in the examples given above, would make it an extremely important and essential institution for the community.

The concept of public libraries is being redefined and therefore it is the ideal time to introduce added value to the services and target them to specific groups of citizens, small businesses, entrepreneurs and local organisations, with the aim of contributing towards economic development in its area. Provided that this interaction with the community is efficient, its image would be improved particularly in the eyes of local authorities which would no longer see it as a mere source of expenditure, but as a resource to strengthen the region.

The analysis of a public library's community needs and the users it serves is of great importance before designing the service. The public library as a centre for economic development requires planning and definition, above all seen as a project for the city. This planning should be just as much of a local as a national nature.

Implementing this service will involve networking between the public library, other libraries, information centres, as well as other agents of interest to the aims of the service.

Final considerations

It has been noted that the provision of information services for businesses is already well established in the United States, England, Denmark, Australia and Canada. There is no unique model to follow, nor any clear reference. Each country experience points towards different models, particularly the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs.)

A more thorough study of the characteristics of these institutions in the countries concerned and an analysis of its specific application to each situation are required prior to implementing this model in the MERCOSUR countries. There is no doubt whatsoever that the setting up of an information service in public libraries, so that the libraries act as Economic Development Centres, would justify enormously the public library's existence in its community.

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