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Public Libraries and their Contribution towards Economic Development: Real or an impossible Dream?

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Abstract

This paper discusses the public library's role in society as a focal point for local economic development according to the idea developed by Charles McClure – a centre providing information about job offers, grants for small businesses and entrepreneurs and encouraging collaboration between local community services – adapting it to the particular situation the countries in the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR, made up of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay,) find themselves in. It proposes a re-focussing of public libraries towards the idea of an information centre set up to contribute towards local economic development by satisfying the information needs of citizens, small businesses, new entrepreneurs and community institutions, in a way that anticipates those needs for specific kinds of information and in turn creating greater links and integration between the public library and its local community. Public libraries and economic development seems like an impossible subject, especially when considered in the Latin American context. On the other hand, what does not leave us with any doubts is that setting up an information service in public libraries, providing added value information, will be of great importance in justifying the existence of the public library within its environment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

During these last few years an ever larger debate on the new model of public library our society needs is being witnessed. In international and national fora the effort to define the public library's role and to attempt to integrate it into the information sector as a main component has been discussed continuously.

Public libraries and economic development seem an impossible subject, especially when seen in the Latin American context. Some question whether public libraries have a role to play in the economic development of their environments, regions or even country. At the same time there are a variety of views as to how a public library can contribute towards economic development. Some are of the view that its role is that of being a lifelong learning institution², others believe that it is to be found in information literacy³, others that it is in the information provided about its community⁴. Our aim is to discuss the public library's role as a centre for economic development according to the proposal made by McClure⁵, tailoring it to the particular situation in the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) countries, re-orienting the public library as an information centre designed to contribute to local economic development by anticipating needs for specific information, providing that information and in this way, satisfying the needs of citizens, small businesses, new entrepreneurs and the community's organisations and institutions, achieving a greater integration of the public library into the local community.

2. BACKGROUND

The public library has historically had four functions⁶: informative, educational, recreational and cultural. For the purposes of this study our aim is to research the informative role of public libraries. The first attempt to define the role of public libraries as far as their informative function is concerned was in the Kenyon Commission⁷ report in Great Britain which dates back to 1927, and which after referring to public libraries as an indispensable element in community life, says that "they provide vital information for the progress of commerce and industry." Another document which upholds this belief are the standards published by the American Library Association (ALA) in 1943⁸: "public libraries [...] transmit information and ideas that are necessary for a community's current well-being and future progress." 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. In 2001, the new IFLA/UNESCO⁹ directives for public libraries were published. According to these, public libraries should work within areas such as: information access, training schemes, reading promotion schemes,

² MACKENZIE, C. Urban public libraries: helping Brisbane to become a smart city. **Australian Public Libraries and Information Services**, v. 13, n. 4, p. 166-169, 2000.

³ MCCLURE, C. R. ; BERTOT, J. C; BEACHBOARD, J. C. Enhancing the role of public libraries in the National Information Infrastructure. **Public Libraries**, p. 232-238, jul. /aug, 1996.

⁴ LOZANO, R. La Informació local a les biblioteques publiques: una eina per al desenvolupament de la comunitat. **Métodos de Información**, v. 9, n. 51, p. 44-51, jul. 2002.

⁵ MCCLURE, C. R. ; ROBBINS, J. B; FRASER, B. T. Op. cit.

⁶ ANDRADE, Ana Maria Cardoso de; MAGALHÃES, Maria Helena de Andrade. Objetivos e funções da biblioteca pública. *Revista da Escola da Biblioteconomia da UFMG, Belo Horizonte*, v. 8, n. 1, p. 48-59, 1979

⁷ GREAT BRITAIN. Board of Education. Public Libraries Committee. **Report on public libraries in England and Wales presented by the President of the Board of Education to Parliament** [Chairman Sir. F. G. Kenyon]. London: H.M.S.O., 1927. p. 127-140.

⁸ AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION. **Post-war standards for public libraries**. Chicago, 1943. 93p.

⁹ FIAB, UNESCO. Directrices IFLA/UNESCO para el desarrollo del servicio de bibliotecas públicas 2001. Disponible en: <<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001246/124654s.pdf>> Acceso en: 20 abr. 2003.

personal development and services aimed at children and young people, increasing in this way the value of the services they provide and aiming them at specific groups of citizens, taking into consideration the reality of their specific environment and situation.

These services are to be based on *Community Information Services*. There is slight reference to the service origins in both Great Britain and The United States together in the 19th Century. There is also reference to them during the Second World War in England, with the *Citizen Advice Bureau*, which aimed to solve problems in the community generated by the war. Later on this service directed its attention towards other informative activities not generated by the war and, almost at the same time, in the United States, the *Department of Labor* created the *Veteran's Information Center*, places where they carried out rehabilitation and social readaptation activities for people who had taken part in the Second World War and others developed as neighbourhood Information Centres.

The service, in its present sense, appeared in The United States in the sixties based on the British model made known by Kahn's¹⁰ study which described the experience of the *Citizen Advice Bureau*¹¹ in Great Britain and gave rise to the creation of the *Social Responsibilities Round Table* and the *Office of Library Service to the Disadvantaged* by the ALA. This period caused changes throughout the country and in many institutions, including libraries, having to assess themselves and create changes accordingly, applying greater emphasis on their social responsibility to serve everyone. This new development was mainly a result of American public libraries' need to obtain funds at the time. As Almeida Júnior¹² makes clear, by fighting their case with other cultural institutions for a part of the funds set aside for culture and which because of economic-political reasons did not grow at the same rate as those institutions' needs, public libraries needed to demonstrate their social usefulness in order to increase their share in the distribution of funds. The role of provider of information to the public has been the resulting solution to the problem, aiming to prove themselves as being vital, necessary and important providers of services.

Businesses and organisations need information. Most large businesses have their own library. On the other hand, most small businesses do not. Usually, these businesses fail in this way and look towards their peers in order to solve problems. Public libraries are used very little for this purpose. Such work is being developed mainly in The United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, countries where the dissemination of information to businesses and the community have 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"¹³. It is our belief that the re-directing of public libraries towards the function of centres for local economic development would steer them away from the passive attitude or, at least, the not sufficiently active one, with which their services have been, in many cases, taking on an almost exclusive

¹⁰ KAHN, A. J. Neighbourhood information centers: a study and some proposals. New York, Columbia University School of Social Work, 1966. Reprint ed. Brooklyn, N.Y. University Book Service, 1971. 150 p.

¹¹ It has become a national institution with offices throughout the country and run by unpaid volunteer staff. They provide general help with the aim to assist people in need by giving free confidential, impartial and independent information on any subject they may require.

¹² ALMEIDA JÚNIOR, O.F. de. **Bibliotecas públicas e bibliotecas alternativas**. Londrina: UEL, 1997. p. 83.

¹³ BETANCUR B, A.M. La biblioteca pública en la perspectiva del desarrollo local: una estrategia para la democracia. **68 IFLA Council and General Conference** August 18-24, 1998. Disponible en: <<http://www.ifla.org/>> Acceso en: 15 feb. 2003.

function to schoolwork only and which has taken them further away from their other functions.

3. MERCOSUR

The Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR) made up of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, was created with the Asunción Treaty on the 26th of March, 1991, and came into being on the 1st of January, 1992. Chile and Bolivia became associate members in 1996. MERCOSUR makes up the third largest world commercial block after the European Union taking into account its 12 million square kilometres, 60% of Latin American territory, its population of 206 million and its Gross National Product (GNP) of \$75, 000 million. This group of countries constitutes nearly 45% of the Latin American population. Brazil alone represents 36% of the population and 40% of the Gross National Product (GNP)¹⁴.

Its aim is 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, co-ordinating macroeconomic policies and complementing different sectors of their economies. On the other hand, the creation of a common market constitutes an adequate response for the consolidation of large economic areas of the world and 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. A nodal side: the political one; and other sides which show the social, educational and cultural aspects¹⁵ and also, we believe, an information policy side which includes the public library.

According to the results of the 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.” According to this, the countries in the region could be classified into three groups¹⁶:

- 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.

4. 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, especially 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. Such a point of view has prevailed over the opinion that offering this type of service is a job more suited to

¹⁴ SENA CORREA, E.N. El MERCOSUR hacia la sociedad de la información **Ciência da Informação**, Brasília, 2003, v.36, n. 2, p. 36-47.

¹⁵ HEKIMIÁN, L.P. Aspectos Estratégicos en el Mercosur. Available at: <<http://www.cari1.org.ar/spanish/mercosur/defensa.htm>>. Accessed on 29 nov. 2003.

¹⁶ AGUDO GUEVARA, A. **Sistemas de bibliotecas públicas en América Latina**. Bogotá: CERLALC, 1990. p. 6-7.

other municipal areas. It is our hope that the scepticism plaguing some works 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 that can be offered in order to contribute towards the economic development of the community would vary depending on the community itself and the library. They could be as Bleiweis¹⁷ suggests:

- ❑ City Business Directory: Newington (Connecticut) Public Library began its association with economic development with the compilation of the business directory for the city.
- ❑ Information alert service for businesses: with small pieces of information relevant to businesses, for example, problems that have already been solved in other businesses and that would be of general interest.
- ❑ Information about the community: a guide containing relevant information on the city, such as restaurants, banks, hospitals, chemists' and laundries, amongst others. This type of information has many users: new residents, visitors and entrepreneurs themselves who use the information to analyse markets and new business opportunities.
- ❑ Job and Career Information: information which helps the unemployed or people looking for new job opportunities, such as students who still have not chosen their careers. They can provide annual business reports, books on job interviews or on how to write a curriculum vitae, among others.
- ❑ Book lists: the library could select books that business people should read in order to be successful in their businesses; lists of the most sold books in the business field.
- ❑ Computers for the use of businesses and the community in general: some businesses have still not become automated, the library could offer them to business people and the public in general.
- ❑ Laser printer
- ❑ Colour printer
- ❑ Scanners
- ❑ Desktop publishing software
- ❑ Other services that the library may identify as being necessary for its users.

¹⁷ BLEIWEIS, M. *Helping business: the library's role in community economic development*. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc., 1997.

- Advice service for businesses: the library could promote talks, meetings between business people and business specialists, as well as having a professional specialised librarians to attend the users.

4. 1 Examples

4. 1. 1 England

The Croydon library service, 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 the web page¹⁸, 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 among its available services provides:

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

According to those supporting this idea, the changes and benefits these services have on the library could be considered the following: co-operation within the community, the community's businesses' promotion, developing business networks, service and product marketing, as well as continuing education possibilities, among others¹⁹.

4. 1. 2. Denmark

Silkeborg Library in Denmark offers the *Business Information Service for Local PYMES*. 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. On-line searches on remote data bases are carried out 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 providers²⁰.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The concept of public libraries is experiencing a period of redefinition and therefore is living the ideal time to introduce added value to the services it offers and to direct them towards specific groups of citizens, small businesses, new entrepreneurs and local organisations, with the aim of contributing towards economic development in its area. Such action would imprint greater dynamism on the public library. Provided this interaction with

¹⁸ <http://www.croydon.gov.uk/>

¹⁹ THORHAUGE, J. et al. **Las bibliotecas públicas y la sociedad de la información**. Madrid: Comisión Europea; DG XIII/E.4, 1998. p. 292-293.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 324.

the community is efficient, its image would be improved in all aspects and especially in the eyes of local authorities which would no longer see it as a mere source of expenditure, but as a source of resources to strengthen the region.

At the moment there are many small businesses and they are responsible for creating the majority of new jobs and business opportunities. This perception is sustained by examining indicators such as, for example, between 1990 and 1999, 4.9 million businesses were created in Brazil, 2.7 million of which were small ones. They account for for: 60% of the total job market, for 40% of salaries paid, for 21% of the Gross National Product, for 96.3% of the number of establishments and for 56.32% of businesses²¹. With this data it can be seen that the competition of small businesses is essential to the development of a country like Brazil.

However, they face considerable survival problems due to the 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 made it an indispensable institution for the community.

Nevertheless, to implement this model in the MERCOSUR countries requires a more thorough study of the characteristics of these institutions in the countries concerned and an analysis of its specific application to each reality. What leaves us with no doubt is that establishing an information service in public libraries, so that the libraries act as *Economic Development Centres*, providing information of great value, would justify enormously the public library's existence in its community. As has already been pointed out, it is our belief that redirecting public libraries towards the function of information centre would remove them from the passive attitude or, at least, the not sufficiently active one, that their services have been acquiring, in many cases taking on an almost exclusive role of attending to schoolwork only, diverting them from their informative role.

It has been identified here that the provision of information services for businesses are already well-established in the United States, England, Denmark, Australia and Canada, but that we necessarily must adapt to our reality. There is no unique model to follow, nor any clear reference. Every experience in every different country points towards different models, especially because of the use of information and communication technologies (ICT's.)

The public library's community and users it serves are of great importance and their analysis are absolutely necessary prior to 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.

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²¹ Source: SEBRAE. Available at: www.sebrae.com.br

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