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How statistics and indicators can help improve the libraries: the case of the libraries network of the province of Barcelona

Toni Feliu

*Diputació de Barcelona. Libraries Service. Statistics
Barcelona. Spain*

Jordi Permanyer

*Diputació de Barcelona. Libraries Service. Head of Service
Barcelona. Spain*

Abstract:

The use of statistics and performance indicators are presented as amongst the basic techniques for the evaluation and subsequent implementation of library services in the municipal library network of the province of Barcelona (Spain), both at the local and the supramunicipal levels. The role of the Diputació de Barcelona Library Service in the production of statistics and indicators, and in evaluation and implementation of library services is described.

Introduction

There are three stages in the life of any public policy: planning, management and evaluation.¹ We believe that it is necessary to evaluate services in order to re-plan them periodically, thus ensuring that the service suits the real needs of the citizens and that it is provided in a sustainable way.

To make evaluation possible, public bodies need to adopt information systems that will make the necessary data available to them, as a basis for analysis prior to decision-making.

Normally, evaluation takes place in the public library sphere to report results to citizens

¹ H.D. Lasswell (1970) reproduced in: *Understanding Information Policy*, p. 50

through the political organs that represent them, to orientate or re-orientate ongoing processes, to make the present visible and to plan the future.

This communication presents the chief characteristics of the Information System deployed by the Library Service of the Diputació de Barcelona and some examples of ways in which it has been useful. First there is a description of who is responsible for public libraries in our country and the territorial and institutional context in which library policy is implemented.

By ‘evaluation’ we understand the process that leads up to the issue of a value-judgement regarding the object of the evaluation – in this case the service. Generically, the aim of the evaluation is to make the provision of the service suit its users in accordance with the mission that has been entrusted to it.

The public library: a double dimension (local, supramunicipal)

In our country the public libraries belong to local authorities: both the basic general laws and more specific legislation recognise the powers of local authorities for the provision of the public library service. According to the law, municipalities with over 5,000 inhabitants are obliged to provide a public library service. There are a number of advantages to this local dimension:

- It enables the implementation of a service that is closer to the citizens in a way that is suited to them and to the environment in which the service is provided.
- It makes it possible to formulate integrated local policies for training, information and culture.
- It enables the library to network with other local agencies.

Hence, town councils in the province of Barcelona have regarded the extension and improvement of library services as a determining, core factor for the implementation of well-founded, high-quality cultural policies, and are beginning to position the service as an active agent in local training and information policies.

Alongside the advantages offered by the local dimension of the service, it must also be borne in mind that management exclusively at the municipal level would have certain limitations. These limitations can be overcome by a supramunicipal approach and by networking.

The **supramunicipal dimension** improves the service, adding value that an exclusively municipal management would not be able to achieve.

The supramunicipal dimension must ensure:

- territorial balance in the implementation of the service and its infrastructures
- specialised networking, which will allow, amongst other things, the joint generation of services (for example, the creation of collective catalogues, shared subscriptions to databases and electronic publications or the organisation of Web resources)
- economies of scale, and improved services in general.

This supramunicipal dimension is the *raison d'être* of the Library Service of the Diputació de Barcelona.

Territorial and governmental organisation: the province of Barcelona. The Diputació de Barcelona

The province of Barcelona

With its 5,052,666 inhabitants, the province of Barcelona is the most populous of the four provinces of Catalonia, and the second most populous in Spain, after Madrid. Its area of 7,719 square kilometres contains 311 municipalities, 119 of which have over 5,000 inhabitants, while one, the city of Barcelona, has a population of 1,500,000. It is important to stress that 191 municipalities have fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, from which we may conclude that the population is concentrated in certain municipalities and that the municipal structure of the province is highly fragmented.

The Diputació de Barcelona and the Library Service

The Diputació de Barcelona is a local government body at the provincial level, whose area of activity is the province of Barcelona and whose aim is to provide support and services for local councils to ensure adequate planning and implementation of the services which they are empowered to provide, as well as acting as a factor for territorial balance. It is important to note that in Spain local councils manage only 13% of the budget, while they possess almost 30% of the competencies, and that there is a high degree of fragmentation of the territory into small municipalities. Both these factors weaken local autonomy.

This is the setting for the mission, aims and functions of the Library Service of the Diputació de Barcelona: it provides support and services for municipalities in the province for the implementation of their library services, whether it be through helping them with the financing, planning and assessment of the service, or through direct provision of resources for libraries in the network, acting as a central provider, through coordination and unification of the network, or indeed through the direct provision of certain services to the end user on-line, at the same time as ensuring that certain minimum quality criteria are attained.

In order to put this support into practice and formalise relations, local councils and the Diputació sign an agreement setting out the conditions for cooperation, without the councils' losing responsibility for the service or its management; this agreement includes the incorporation of the library in the Municipal Libraries Network.

The libraries network in the province of Barcelona

In recent years the public libraries in the province of Barcelona have undergone rapid growth, both qualitatively and quantitatively: more and better libraries offering more and better services to the citizens. This has been made possible by a number of factors which we will not analyse here, but which can be summed up as the political commitment of the Diputació de Barcelona to this service.

Nonetheless, an important factor in this improvement has been the existence of reliable data since the early days of these policies, which have made possible – and continue to make possible – improvements to the network, not merely recording the process, but enabling it to be evaluated or re-designed, according to the circumstances.

At the present time the network consists of 164 libraries and nine mobile libraries, which provide the service for 208 municipalities in the province, which between them are home to 95% of the population. All the libraries in the network are equipped with computing facilities and offer a public Internet access service. The (single) database of users contains the records of 1 million members, a very high proportion of whom are active users, since the records of

those who have been inactive for more than five years are discarded.

In 2003 the network's libraries and mobile libraries received 12.5 million visits and made more than 8.6 million loans.

In the last decade, since 1995, the network has undergone rapid growth, both qualitatively and quantitatively: from 106 libraries and mobile libraries to 173; a greater area devoted to services – from 34,000 square metres to 137,000 – and more services: audio media have been introduced (126 with music departments), video and multimedia, free public access to the Internet, on-line services... And the forecast is for continued growth: 200 libraries by the end of 2007.

The Library Service and evaluation: statistics and indicators

The Diputació's Library Service promotes and effects evaluation of the public library service in both its local and its supramunicipal dimensions. This consists of:

- Maintaining a library information system at network level.
- Equipping local library systems with the tools and facilities for data collection, registration and analysis.
- Providing data at the local level for those systems whose management is totally or partially centralised.
- Analysis of the service in conjunction with those responsible for it at the local level, through the tracking committees, the improvement circles, etc.
- Provide and/or finance user satisfaction surveys at the local and supramunicipal levels.
- Train librarians and local government officers responsible for local libraries in systems and techniques to evaluate services, as part of broader training actions.

For many years, the libraries that make up what is now the Municipal Library Network of the province of Barcelona have been collecting data regarding their characteristics, services and activity. Almost uninterruptedly since 1922, under various political regimes – from democracy to dictatorship – the network's yearbooks have been published with data from the libraries in the province of Barcelona. This has been possible thanks to the existence of a central body, one that has evolved from the point of view of its organisational structure, its political dependence and relationship with the network, but which has always acted as a central provider of support and services for libraries in the network. This body, now clearly differentiated from the coordination of the library network, takes the form of the Library Service of the Diputació de Barcelona, and continues to collect – and help the libraries to collect – certain data.

But above and beyond the collection and accumulation of data, the political and technical heads of the library service, at both the municipal and the provincial levels, have always sought not merely to accumulate data, but also to analyse it – more or less exhaustively, more or less in depth – as a referent for the evaluation of the service.

In order to respond to certain demands in this regard, and to stimulate demand where it did not previously exist, the Library Service undertook a series of actions to seek and obtain reliable data regarding the library service and to provide tools for its analysis, as well as to promote and stimulate such an analysis, the evaluation of the service and the adoption of policies, plans and actions deriving from such analysis and considerations.

Thus, little by little a network information system has been built up, on the basis of the systematic collection and accumulation of a series of data:

- **Territorial data:** These are data referring to the area in which the library operates, the nature of the area and its population.
- **Infrastructural data:** These are data regarding the basic characteristics of local library systems: number of libraries, useful area available for service and other general information about library buildings. Such data are quite stable over time. This category also includes data identifying the library or enabling it to be located.
- **Technical equipment and staffing data:** These are data concerning the material and human resources available to the libraries to carry out their task: staff, collection, subscriptions, IT equipment, audiovisual equipment, telephone lines. Such data are collected annually as they change rapidly over time.
- **Financial data:** These data reflect the costs borne by the various public administrations and bodies involved in the operation of the libraries. They include personnel costs, building maintenance, documentary stock and activities. These are data that are sometimes hard to obtain, since local government analytical accounting systems vary from one local council to another, some do not allow for the segregation of costs by service, or such costs may be regarded as indirect ones, the attribution of which to the library service is not always easy.
- **Service data:** These data refer to the availability of the service – days and times of service – as well as to the service itself: number of visits, usage of the different library services – loans, public Internet access, and in some libraries, information service or office software service. Many of the figures for this usage are broken down by type of user or other variables, or in the case of loans, by media or subject.

As we have already noted, the service data were collated and published in the yearbooks. It was from 1994 that the possibility was considered of combining the service data collected with other data, most of which we did not formerly to collect, in order to progress with the evaluation of services on the basis of a number of indicators. Over time, we have gradually increased the number of indicators calculated.

At the present time we calculate 40 indicators for each of the libraries. The definitions and values of these indicators are described in a document specifically individualised for each library. Furthermore, the document establishes a comparison between libraries serving similar towns indicator by indicator in the form of tables and graphics.

As we have just noted, we group the libraries in the network according to the size of the town they serve and in this way we obtain around 10 comparison groups with between 7 and 20 libraries in each group.

Thus, as a consequence of having the data for one library compared to that of others, we have been able to establish reference indicators.

It is important to point out that this document is not, and is not intended to be, a closed system of indicators or a management guide for a quality control system, it is simply the ordered listing of 40 indicators with the added value of comparison so that each local library service may find those indicators which are most suited to the evaluation system it employs, whatever it may be, and find some reference data. In line with this aim, traditional classification on the basis of efficacy, efficiency, impact and so forth has been avoided and a more functional

classification has been adopted based on uses per unit of time, uses per capita, uses per visit, the importance of the various uses, economic indicators and structural indicators.

This report, together with the annual service report, therefore serves as a basis for evaluation prior to the implementation of policies, plans and/or actions intended to improve the service.

Other evaluation initiatives

Additionally, the Library Service promotes and encourages:

- **Improvement circles** in which municipal officers responsible for departments of culture and library directors from the various municipalities exchange experiences on the basis of the establishment of commonly agreed indicators for the identification of good practice and, in the end, the drafting of improvement plans. This is greatly facilitated by the information system which contains a good deal of the data required for devising these indicators. At the present time, technical staff from 13 town councils are involved in the first Circle. These Circles should represent a qualitative leap in the systems for considering statistical data and indicators since they are very much focussed on establishing plans for improving the service and evaluating it on the basis of these indicators.
- On the other hand, the Library Service has commissioned and promoted library **user surveys** with the aim of determining data about the users' **profiles**, the **use** of the services – apart from those registered in the data base – and the level of **satisfaction** with the libraries and the services they provide. At the present time, we have the results of surveys at the network and local levels for most municipalities with more than 30,000 inhabitants and those served by the mobile library service. The surveys consist of a telephone interview with registered library users who have used the loan service during the twelve months prior to the interview or who have joined the service during this period. This ensures that the person being interviewed has up-to-date knowledge about the current nature and level of services provided. It is fair to point out that, besides more specific results concerning the various aspects of the service that are also covered in the interview, libraries score 8 out of 10 with regard to user satisfaction and this score does not vary significantly even amongst localities with different characteristics.

The application of indicators and statistics

The public library must evolve alongside the society it serves while at the same time promoting this evolution. It should be an institution that feeds into and stimulates the life of the community, it should stand as the representative of its users and should reflect the society it serves.

The data collection and computer systems should allow changes to be registered and should have as their final aim the constant improvement of the library service, its administration and adaptability to changing needs. Here we present some examples of the use of evaluation.

- **Evaluation linked to target plans.** Having the relevant data available enables libraries and their directors to work on target-based plans whatever the service and/or facility administration system. One of the most important challenges for the Library Service of the Diputació de Barcelona is precisely to provide the data that are relevant to each and every one of the libraries and this implies efficiently making available a great variety of data to the directors of each service in such a way that they can easily find and select the information that is relevant to them at all times and in all circumstances. This is true for data that are directly linked to the library's activities or local library service as well as for

data that are for reference purposes.

- **Promoting the service.** When determining the advantages indicators and statistics represent for the service, an aspect that must be considered is the basis upon which a presence is maintained in the media above and beyond the newsworthiness of any particular library activity or its collaboration with the media. If reliable information is at hand about the service and this information can be presented to the media in a suitable manner in a regular and systematic way, an impact is achieved amongst citizens that is greater than the information itself would otherwise achieve. This is true at the local level, but the same also holds true at the supramunicipal level. Having aggregate data for the whole network makes it possible to visualise networking and to have a presence in the non-local media that would otherwise be unimaginable. This not only bolsters the network itself, but also each of its constituent parts.
- **The identification of strong and weak points.** Having indicators for each library and having as a reference the values for this indicator for other libraries serving towns with similar characteristics, makes it possible to identify the service's strong and weak points such as the absence of a local library policy, the insufficiency of resources, poor service planning or unsuitable administration and this is true whatever the level of the evaluation.
- **The identification of users and non-users.** Data on user profiles and comparison with those for the town served by the library enables groups of non-users to be detected and identified by a variable such as age, profession, place of residence, level of education and degree to which they are familiar with Communications and Information Technologies (CITs). On the basis of this information, work can commence on devising and implementing policies, plans and actions aimed at capturing them as users. The same data are used to identify those groups that use library services intensively and this helps to devise and implement policies, plans and actions aimed at achieving the loyalty of such users.

Information about the network and each of the libraries is available from our Web site:

<http://www.diba.es/biblioteques>