



68th IFLA Council and General Conference

August 18-24, 2002

Code Number: 101-129-E
Division Number: V
Professional Group: Government Information and Official Publications
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 129
Simultaneous Interpretation: Yes

New government of change in Mexico: a new information policy?

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Abstract:

This presentation has the intention of describing what has been the information policy in Mexico during the last years, but it focuses on the changes that the present governmental regime has tried to implement. The author will describe the main projects, putting special attention in the e-Mexico project, with which the Federal Government is attempting to create a national infrastructure for the information and that will necessarily involve the effort of institutions of several sectors, including some of the United States. A wide range of factors will determine the possible success of the governmental policy and of the new projects: the country has a greater participation in an open economy, and the rearrangement of political forces has invigorated democratic life but, at the same time, it has made the approval of new laws more difficult. The author will also try to analyze the role that professional librarians have played or that are playing within these contexts.

INTRODUCTION

The aspects hereby mentioned represent the point of view of a professional librarian that works in an academic library. In the analysis of the Mexican National Information Policy, I have tried to distinguish, as recommended by Bender, Kadec and Morton (2) between what could be called national policies in matter of information and what constitutes the policy of the Federal Government. This last policy is part of the first while the national policies are, or should be, the joint responsibility of the federal government, the state government, public and private organizations and of individuals.

According to Almada (1), an information policy can be defined as: “. . . the orientations and guidelines that rule the behavior of the different sectors of groups of the society and as well as the transference of information, its availability, its access and its retrieval . . .”

1. THAT MOSAIC WHICH IS CALLED MEXICO

Mexico is a huge country, as huge as its geographic, economic, cultural and social differences. Within the few elements that keep it together, the strongest may be religion, history, [also] a strong nationalism and soccer. Table 1 shows some general data in order to help the reader to understand the situation.

Table 1
Mexico. Its main indicators

- 100 million inhabitants.
- 32 States and 2447 municipalities.
- 11th world place by population.
- 11th world place by the size of its economy.
- Per capita earned income near US \$4 500.00.
- 9.5 percent are illiterate persons.
- 40% of the population lives in poverty.

Created with data from the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics

The economic development that Mexico has reached has not been accompanied by a homogenous social or cultural development. Mexico occupies place number 44 in the world with regard to the use of technology of information; place number 51 with regard to human development rate according the UN and 107th place with regard to book reading. There is one computer for every 20 persons. (3,13)

2. LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS IN MEXICO

2.1. Libraries

There are more than 11,200 libraries of all kinds in Mexico, which means that there is one library for every 8,700 inhabitants. The number of libraries tripled in 1987 when the National Network of Public Libraries was created, but the number is still not enough, as well as their collections and other resources.

The poorest libraries are the school libraries which in many ways explains the poor reading habits acquired by the population. From almost 120,000 public schools at the Elementary, Middle and High School levels, which are the responsibility of the Secretary of Public Education, less than 5,000 have their own library.

With regard to their collections, the network of public libraries holds near 60 million books which are consulted more than 194 million times a year. This means that there is one book for each two inhabitants, while the average of consulting hardly reaches two books per year per patron. Another serious problem is that more than 90 per cent of the patrons that visit the public libraries are students or faculty; an ordinary citizen hardly ever visits these places.

Moreover, an important problem that exists in many areas, and that also exists in Libraries is centralization. The libraries located in the capital of the country are the ones that count with the best resources and the greater influx of patrons as well. Table 2 shows some basic data in order to understand the development of libraries in the country.

Table 2
Mexico. General library development data

- 11,200 libraries of all types.
- 6,100 Public libraries.
- 90% of the municipalities of the country have public libraries .
- Around 3,000 professional librarians.
- 6 Colleges with a bachelor in librarianship.
- 2 Colleges with masters degree in Information Science.
- 1 College with Ph D. Program.

Data from Fernandez Valverde

On the other hand, academic libraries or university libraries are the ones that have reached a greater development, especially from the year 1990, when special funds were provided by the federal government in order to modernize college education. In many cases, the academic libraries encourage library development.

2.2. Librarians

There is no reliable data with regard to the number of professional librarians in Mexico; however, the estimation of Fernandez Valverde (5) is that it probably does not exceed 3,000 librarians. This means that more than 8,000 new librarians will be needed in order to have at least one professional of them at each of the existing libraries. But some of the authorities consider that the deficit of professional librarians surpasses 20,000, a deficit that will never be covered with the 120 professional librarians graduating each year from the six colleges offering that major.

3. POLITICAL TRANSITION

In July of 2000 a historic event took place in Mexico when, for the first time in more than 70 years, the candidate of one of the opposition parties won the presidency of the country. During his campaign, the new President, President Fox had called himself the candidate of change, which

caused the population to have strong expectations of radical transformation in several aspects of national life.

In reality, it is not true that the 70 years of government of the previous political party were all the same. Probably, one of the reasons of its permanency was its capacity of renovation. Each new president tried to imprint his personal taste on his own government; the country was reinvented each six years.

Many of the changes promised by Vicente Fox, after 18 months of presidency, have not been accomplished. Within the reasons we find the adverse economic world context. Moreover, Fox does not have the Congress on his side. We could say that there is not even clear support from the political party that brought him to the presidency.

4. GOVERNMENTAL INFORMATION POLICY

4.1 Background

Through the years, there have been some advances in Mexico in matter of information. The following table mentions some of the key moments.

Table 3
Key moments in the development of information policies

1867 The National Library is established.
1932 The National Library of Periodicals is created.
1965 Establishment of Legal Deposit.
1970 Creation of the National Council of Science and Technology.
1976 CONACYT [National Council of Science and Technology] defines the creation of a National System of Scientific and Technological Information.
1983 Establishment of the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics.
1987 By presidential decree the National Network of Public Libraries is established.
1987 Seminar in National Information Policies for Research and Development takes place.
1988 Publication for the first time a General Libraries Law.
1998 Updating of the Legislation in matter of Authorship (copyright).
2002 The Federal Act of Transparency and Access to Public Governmental Information is approved.

Data provided by Lau.

4.2 Education Policy

This is one of the areas in which the population had greater expectations from President Fox. The National Plan of Development for his term establishes that “The government of the Republic considers Education as the first and the highest priority for the development of the country.”(9)

Today, it could be said that a noticeable increase in educational resources have not taken place; however, programs have been established to increase the quality of education as well as scholarships in order to ease access to the population with fewer resources.

4.3 Cultural Policy

The Governmental Cultural Policy is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, and libraries are still seen as tools to integrate the national culture. This is the reason why the National Network of Public Libraries reports to the same governmental structure that promotes nationwide cultural activities. It will still be necessary to analyze the cultural policy in order to have an idea of the support that the public libraries will have. In this sense, the expectations seem good, the government established that the cultural policy will turn around reading promotion, which does not imply any innovation because the previous president named year 2000 as Reading Year.

4.4 The National Network of Public Libraries.

The current government has plans to create around 1,100 libraries within the next five years. One of the new trends consists in “ciudadanizar” [promoting citizen participation] in its operation through the foundation of associations’ pro-public libraries. This is certainly positive as a way of attracting a greater attention for the development of libraries and for seeking alternative resources, but, on the other hand, it could also constitute a way to stop receiving financial governmental support. The formation of a Council of the National Network of Public Libraries is also foreseen that was never created although it was mentioned in the General Library Law. This consultative body would constitute an important support for the Network’s functions.

4.5 The National Mega Library

One of the most polemic projects has been the possible construction of a mega library that would be located in the capital of the country. From there, it would offer services to the Network of Public Libraries. This mega library would also be one of the main instruments for the Reading Promotion project.

The mega library project has been the object of a lot of criticism. One of the reasons is that the delegate of the National Council of Culture has traveled to far-off countries in order to find the best model for this library. Mexican librarians believe that they could save resources by consulting experts. Recently, the Council’s delegate informed that she has found that model in Northern European countries, like Finland, Sweden and Denmark, as the most suitable to emulate in Mexico, which in turn generated a lot of comments. (10) Moreover, mentioning her intention to call for an international contest for the construction of the facilities upset the nationalists that believe that there are good architects in Mexico.

4.6 Scientific and Technological Information

A recent change was the recently approved modification of the judicial status of the CONACYT, which will no longer report to the Secretary of Public Education and will enjoy more autonomy. New legislation relating to Science and Technology was also approved. The trend will be, according to some analysts, the possible creation of a separate Secretary that will promote the scientific and technological development.

4.7 Statistical and Technological Information

The National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics, INEGI, is the largest processor of official data in Mexico. It has the responsibility to conduct the census of population and housing, the economic, and the agricultural and livestock census that generates a great deal of information that this institute publishes afterward. The INEGI website is one of the most visited in the country.

During the past six-year periods [of government], this institute, which has a strong dependency upon the Ministry of Finance and Public Credit, received substantial funding. The expectation was that the new government would support this institute because Fox was considered to be a person

who appreciated the value of information. However, some delays in important programs have been observed which may be translated as a non-compliance with some international commitments, for example, the 2001 Agricultural and Livestock Census was not conducted.

4.8 The e-Mexico project

The e-Mexico project constitutes the most ambitious project of the Federal Government in the matter of access to Information, not only because with this project the government plans to implement a network with all regions of the country, but also because it will help to modernize public administration. Therefore, it will allow access to information by all the population. This project objective is to implement by the year 2006 a national Network for the 2447 municipalities, in order to serve nearly 60 million of Mexicans.

Among the services that will find support in this infrastructure will be academic, health and governmental services. This is a very ambitious project and its limits are expanding along with the incorporation of new businesses. The Mexican government intends that the benefits derived from this project will reach the nearly 20 million Mexicans that live in the United States, who will thus have access to services and important information as if they were in Mexico.

It is possible that the creators of the e-Mexico project found inspiration in the e-Europe project, which was launched by the European Commission on December of 1999 whose one of its main objectives was “to connect each citizen, each home, each school, each business and administration to the Digital Era.” (4)

The e-Mexico project has received support from the Belinda and Bill Gates Foundation, which caused controversy. Through this agreement, Microsoft will provide the equipment, software and training for the persons in charge of the nodes of access to the macro net. Some people believe that the participation of Microsoft will generate a dependency of our country upon this giant of software business.

4.9 Transparency and Access to Information Law

During the last days of April of 2002, the Congress approved a Law that forces the State Organisms to make all the information related to their activities available to the citizens. The approval of this law is just a first step that will need a long time to prepare the mechanisms and procedures to provide this service. On the other hand, the Congress will be discussing a law to protect the publishing of private information. Some people believe in Mexico that this law was promoted by the media, which have an increasing power in the country.

5. PRESENCE AND PARTICIPATION OF LIBRARIANS

In none of these new projects of the current government is there perceived to be a high participation of professional librarians; at least that participation is not taking place in a direct manner or at the highest levels. This is happening in spite of the efforts of Library Associations to be close to most important governmental projects and to get its opinions heard. The number of professional librarians that work in governmental institutions is small and they lack effective communication among them. As mentioned before, academic libraries are the ones that have succeeded in greater development. Therefore, they offer the best salaries and have a greater concentration of professional personnel. However, these factors present barriers that makes librarians from this sector avoid getting involved in problems or matters of public libraries.

The lack of continuity constitutes a serious problem for all the institutions of the country, especially for those that depend upon Public Funding. The main positions in public libraries or at governmental information centers often present sudden changes that make them undesirable for professional librarians.

6. COLLABORATION BETWEEN MEXICO AND THE U.S.

Academic libraries are where collaboration between American and Mexican librarians has been more visible. This collaboration is expected to increase within the next years because of the implementation of Internet2.

There are three or four forums or collaborative networks where both American and Mexican libraries participate. There are also several projects supported by institutions like the Benjamin Franklin Library, the Library of Congress and other associations like the American Library Association, the SALALM (Seminar on Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials) and some state associations, usually located along the border region.

It is important to highlight that the last presidents of the American Library Association, the Special Librarian Association and of the Association of College and Research Libraries have made special efforts to approach Mexican associations. This has been visible in their visits to Mexico, and was also the origin of a project that attracted a large number of Mexican librarians to the Midwinter Conference of ALA in San Antonio, Texas on January of 2000.

However, communication between Mexican librarians and those working in the United States to provide library services to the Hispanic community, is limited. This is probably because personnel from public libraries in the United States mainly form this association, a weak sector in its counterpart in Mexico.

Among the problems that make collaboration between Mexico and the United States difficult we can name language, the differences in rules and regulations, the lack of continuity of the Mexican libraries, the differences in resources and infrastructure, as well as the cultural expectations in relation to collaboration. (12)

7. CONCLUSIONS

If there has been any change in several aspects, originated by the change of government in Mexico, it has not reached the governmental policy in matter of information. There are just a few signs of improvement. Therefore, the national policy in matter of information, if it could be called that, is the result of the forces and inertias of different sectors of society. It is urgent to analyze and to think about this topic; the elements presented allow one to say that national policy keeps acting as a dispersed system, just like the one described by Lau (7) 10 years ago. Apparently there is a minor presence and participation of librarians in concerns that affects national policies, in comparison to the participation they used to have two decades ago.

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