

When the knowledge ditch is dug by our own hands: libraries, indigenous peoples, and strategic information

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Introduction: ditches and divides

It is a scene that repeats itself over and over in Latin America, especially in the context of indigenous populations. Statistics and international organisations echo political discourses and claim a number of good practices aimed at reducing the social, cultural and economic differences that exist in our world. At the same time, reality says the true numbers show situations of illiteracy, misunderstanding, lack of education, shortage of information, loss of identity and nonexistent training.

Digital divides and informative ditches are realities that cannot be denied: they are palpable, and easily noted not only in the “Global South” always taken as an example of “poverty” but also in the “Global North”, which is also populated by many dispossessed people. Inequalities, far from disappearing, are getting bigger day after day. The question is, *why do they exist?*

Digital divides and informative ditches do not only consist of unfair differences where some have more economic resources than others, or historical distances between those who “have” and those who do not, or an imbalance in social or political power. Obviously, these are the general roots of the problem but there is something else. Information divides and ditches do not appear suddenly: they are raised and dug day after day, step by step, and we as a society are the ones who, with our attitudes and our practices (or their absence), make their (re)production and perpetuation possible.

Box 11.1 Chapter overview**Highlights**

- Information (and other) divides and ditches are not just the product of external forces or the outcomes of historical processes. They may also be understood as socioeconomical phenomena supported by the daily attitude of every member of society as a whole.
- A (radical) change in our attitudes and practices (both professional and personal) could lead to important variations in the conditions that perpetuate and (re)produce these barriers.

Implications

- Changes in LIS programs and actions could improve the conditions of access to information for disadvantaged social sectors, such as (Latin American) indigenous populations.
- Equality in the management of local/external information by these sectors could help improve their living conditions and/or solve some of their more important problems (health, human rights, etc.).

When we speak about differences and barriers, about their analysis and the likely solutions to these problematic situations, the voice of the end user, his/her opinion or his/her interest, is rarely taken into account. If we want to build bridges over the deep trenches that divide humankind in all aspects of life, we should first understand and accept that *dialogue* should be the basis for any kind of approach. In the specific case of the current differences concerning access, the comprehension and the use of information by diverse social sectors, we should start by identifying the origin and the nature of the imbalance, the difference, or the inequality. That is why the first step in the design of any proposal to be aimed at promoting a change within a particular sector of society should be to *listen to the interested party*, pay

attention to it, get to know it, and get close to it and its daily circumstances. Grassroots development, action/research, and the popular and critical methodology exactly set up such circumstances: that change should stem from the participative opinion of the end user.

To listen to implies a number of things. It means to come near to a person, to place yourself next to him/her, to ask him/her and wait for his/her answer, to pay attention to his/her voice, each single word and the silences between them, and to listen to whatever s/he has to say and tell. It also means to be able to understand what the words say (and the silences), and the language and the culture in which we can find the ideas or structure that form its background.

To listen to implies to think carefully of the “other”, recognising and valuing their existence. It teaches how to put yourself in another person’s shoes, especially when his/her situation is an unpleasant and difficult one. When this is done it will be at that very moment when we will take the first step towards real approaches: ditches, divides, and walls that separate us from one other will be scheduled for demolition, and we will be laying the first planks of the bridge.

Listening allows us to know. Once we know a bit about something we can learn much more about it, we can understand it better. It is by exercising our ability to understand that our comprehension will continue developing as much as the dialogue that should guide and produce it. It will be a remarkable achievement in the sense of suggesting solutions worthy of success. Thanks to dialogue, we can build bridges: we can recognise the points of either shore where foundations will be laid. In addition, it allows us to know which tools are available for going forward with construction. Most importantly, it permits us to know the reason why bridges are going to be built.

There are a good number of cases of professionals (from different disciplines) who work with disadvantaged populations or communities in order to show solidarity with them and offer their help, which can be seen as a (temporary) solution to the problems by using budgets, elements, and tools coming from outside of the end user group. The solution also has to do with providing training for particular end users to be able to respond – with an answer *of their own*, taking into account both the time and the form *they* consider to be appropriate for the needs that they have identified. In such situations, the mission of any professional is to provide his/her know-how: to train the addressee and enable them to do the rest, in the frame of their own context, in a way that is appropriate for them, and at a suitable moment, while always assisting them during the process.

With regard to information barriers and ditches, the fences that prevent people from accessing knowledge and having the right to education or expressing themselves freely are particularly noticeable in our society. Considering the fact that the impossibility of accessing strategic and up-to-date information keeps entire groups in the shade with respect to diseases, gross violations of human rights, political affairs, labour exploitation, environmental dangers, lootings, cultural and religious oppression and a huge incapacity to answer back to external aggressions, it is not difficult to see how most of the current social and economical inequalities are sustained when there is a lack of information on the part of a great mass of people.

When we establish a connection between the concepts of “knowledge” or “information” with “indigenous peoples”, two different associations are made. On the one hand, we are speaking about “indigenous knowledge”, which is the knowledge that is managed by native cultures within their particular intangible heritage, which possesses a richness that is the result of their experiences and reflections built up over the centuries. On the other hand, we are referring to the relationship between native societies and present-day information in the context of the modern “Information Society” paradigm. Putting aside the first association, this text will give its attention to the second, which establishes the main ditches and barriers at an information level. Barriers can also be found in other social sectors of the Latin American continent: rural communities, marginalised neighbourhoods and urban surroundings. Below, information divides and information ditches in the indigenous case will be examined.

Background: information divides in the indigenous case

Native peoples of Latin America have been decimated by diseases, aggressions, slavery and wars, and have been subdued on every imaginable front: political, social, religious, cultural, linguistic and educational. Presently, Latin America has more than 40 million people from groups considered to be the old “owners of the land”, who nowadays cannot always exhibit such a title (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, 2004; Del Popolo and Oyarce, 2005). The importance of their cultures, among other valuable things, has its roots in constituting a very high percentage of global cultural diversity. Both at

Latin American and global levels, indigenous peoples possess an immense mosaic of languages and cultural features, of philosophies and literatures (oral and written), of uses and daily customs. Their cultural history has an intimate relationship with the environment that they inhabited (which usually is not the one that they occupy at present) and provides a very interesting spectrum of knowledge about the world and its ways, very different from the range of ideas shown by the global dominant culture. In Latin America, many of their words and attitudes have been added to the *mestizo* heritage of each nation, enriching their unique and indisputable identity. Their traditions, sounds, and sense of time have been acknowledged, in the most general terms, through the entire world. Nevertheless, official and social oppressions have directed them towards the voluntary abandonment of their traditional ways of life in an attempt to “integrate” with the dominant society in order in order to be accepted; something that, regretfully, continues being the principal reason for their exclusion in Latin America.

A closer look at information divides

Information has been, from the beginning of the human societies’ history, a powerful and influential tool. It made human group organisation possible and allowed the creation of estates and empires that were managed thanks to the efficiency with which knowledge was organised. It established the grounds for the principal legal and religious system(s) in the world, for the sciences and the arts, for both the most basic and the most complex methodologies. Without strategic information about how to deal with all the facets of daily life, people would not have managed to survive with any level of success. The existence of a particular and modern socioeconomic model that was born in the light of information provides the best example of its interest and its importance in the development, the welfare and the progress of humankind.

Unequal access to information resources violates a series of rights that have been agreed, over the centuries, by legislative, (inter)national organisations, and powerful social and humanistic movements. It limits the freedom of accessing knowledge as well as the freedom of expression, the right to education, the right to actively participate in a democratic system as citizens, and the right to get the necessary information in order to decide what will be your well-grounded opinions and attitudes towards issues of interest. In addition, it limits the right to a healthy life,

the right to decent employment, and the right to use your particular language to communicate with others and learn. Solving the issue of unequal access to information is one of the biggest challenges that the world faces today: information divides are one of the most regretful injustices and inequalities that are present on our planet at this moment.

In a very general outline of the situation, the native Latin American peoples are “at the other side” of the information divide in two senses. They do not have access to the same opportunities as their more advantaged fellow citizens: information and communications technologies (ICTs), education, training, up-to-date information about interesting issues and learning processes. Furthermore, they may not have access to resources and materials that reflect their particular cultural models, their possibilities, and their own needs. This situation happens in a very critical context itself: indigenous societies face a progressive loss of identity, growing acculturation, and a strong shortage of both their possibilities for progress and their opportunities to enjoy basic welfare services. Their claims do not only insist on the opening of sustainable development channels and on getting their lands back, but also on the recovery of their cultural rights. They are conscious that no solution to their problems will be found without information (suitable for their particular traits and needs). However, it is noticeable that the answers to those problems are not limited to the implementation of literacy programs or the diffusion (generally, in a very irregular and uneven manner) of technologies that make it possible the access to the digital universe. Although such elements are necessary and useful, there are other movements that should be developed and supported in order to achieve fair access to and distribution of information goods.

Possible solutions

First, “Open Access” models should be encouraged for breaking the chains that lock up strategic knowledge with commercial keys that do not permit its use by those who are on a tight budget. A second step would be to review the harsh international copyright policies, which drastically restrict the diffusion of certain categories of strategic documents. Thirdly, the importance of creating information materials in all the languages used in a particular region should be considered in order to support their survival and to allow the people who use them to maintain their cultural identity. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the development of solution strategies that include not only information channels and

models, but also the particular characteristics and possibilities of each region, people, and group should be encouraged. This point consists of a considerable number of complex actions that might include the supply of radios and the creation of oral archives, the re-formulation of library and information science programs, and the publishing of materials (audiovisual and printed) in native languages that have strategic information related to health care, human rights, environmental management, techniques and technologies, and family planning.

For example, to believe that the IFLA/UNESCO "Manifesto on Public Libraries" (UNESCO, 1994) would be successfully applied in rural areas of northeastern Argentina, is something impossible, not only taking into account the resources shortage, but also considering that this "manifesto" was written without thinking carefully about the particular circumstances and needs of their final users. In fact, it might be the case that we would be providing the users with elements that they do not want at all. However, the idea behind this document is good and can be put into practice if we know how to adapt its postulations to a particular situation, to a population of flesh and blood, with needs, emotions and weaknesses, and to a complex social, political and economic context. If we want to shape reality into an ideal model, we will only achieve failures: we will be widening a divide that is deep enough at the present. Even worse, we will be doing it with our own hands.

Profiles of libraries in indigenous communities

From 1996 onwards, across different points of Latin America, many experiences related to the creation of libraries in indigenous communities, both rural and urban, have been implemented. The aim of such undertakings was to shorten the educational and information distances that existed between the native groups and the dominant society, providing spaces and opportunities that would minimise differences, and creating intercultural areas for new approaches and interchanges. Many projects only worked for a short period of time and were mainly based on the common public library as a model and its insertion in the aboriginal reality. The failure of those efforts can be explained in the light of the previous points raised in this chapter: the indigenous universe is, in general, reticent about (or even contrary to) institutions that come from the dominant society, since they have been

tools of acculturation, oppression and denial of basic rights in the past. It also should be noted that elements such as the library have, in the native imagination (and in many others), a sort of “intellectual” and “elitist” aura. The perception is, consequently, that the library does not have anything to offer to the community, nor can it provide a solution to their most urgent needs.

However, when the library structure adapts itself with enough flexibility to the requirements and characteristics of the final users group, it is able to achieve excellent results. In such cases, noticeable experiences and outcomes have responded to information needs in particular situations. As a result, these ventures have provided a solid (small, but real) foundation for narrowing the divide. Next, library initiatives in Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Brazil, Columbia, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela will be discussed.

Argentina

In Argentina, the Universidad Nacional del Comahue (National University of the Comahue, General Roca, Río Negro province) inaugurated the “Biblioteca Mapuche y Pueblos Originarios Ñimi Quimün” (Mapuche and Native Peoples *Ñimi Quimün* Library) in June 2007. This centre links the University with the local Mapuche indigenous community. The project stands out, in the first place, as succeeding in establishing a strong connection between scholarly practices and the needs of a community not always bonded to them. This point is an enormous step forward in a territory (Patagonia) with a heavy indigenous presence and a very sad history of destruction, genocide, abuse, human rights violations and discrimination that dates back to the establishment of the National Estate (1810) and continues to the present day.

The ethnic group that is present in this area, the Mapuche, predominate in Argentinean Patagonia and southern Chile and have been characterised for their resistance and combative attitude against social exclusion and acculturation pressures. Their actions in this respect can be followed through a number of websites and news reports. Their culture, though under pressure, has stayed alive. For example, written materials in their language have been produced. The work of the “Ñimi Quimün” Library is just beginning: their first step had to do with oral memory. In response, library tools were put at the service of the community in order to respond to their real needs in their particular cultural frame (e.g. building of library catalogues and collections respecting the Mapuche culture and language).

Overall, these tools show respect for their identity and consider their circumstances at the moment. Such tools also make it possible to overcome the existing social and cultural barriers.

In the northern part of Argentina, next to the Paraguayan border, I set up the project known as "Indigenous Libraries" between 2001–2006 (Civallero, 2004). I worked with the Qom, Moqoit, Wichi and Pit'laxá ethnic groups in the provinces of Chaco and Formosa, both areas affected by sanitary problems, with people living below the poverty line, malnutrition, high levels of unemployment, and loss of identity. The communities of this region, as the Mapuche in the south, organised themselves into movements that claim both the right to own the land where they stand and the right to have an education according to their particular cultural model. In this last aspect, their achievements have included the initial normalisation of their alphabets, a number of important experiences of bilingual and intercultural education, and the diffusion of their languages. However, the pressures on the part of the official dominant systems (school, religion, mass media, etc.) and the social exclusion continue to be powerful.

Starting from an initial evaluation of the situation and using imagination with the very few resources at hand, a number of activities were created from a grassroots perspective following an action/research methodology. Among these activities was a review of the well-known documental languages (Civallero, 2005a), the collection of oral tradition (Civallero, 2007a), and the creation of sound collections (Civallero, 2005b). An emphasis was put upon identity and social inclusion issues (Civallero, 2007b). Of special interest were those activities concerning strategic knowledge diffusion such as biomedical information (Civallero, 2007d). In addition, the availability of games and music (Civallero, 2007c), as well as literacy programs, bilingual education, and family reading (Civallero, 2006) were important activities.

This venture has demonstrated the possibility of combining successful library and information science tools with the specific knowledge and particular characteristics of the end user population. It is worth mentioning that those "libraries" were small collections located in schools through which valuable knowledge (from the users' perspective) was spread and their collective memory recovered. The traditional library models were dramatically changed and adapted in order to better serve the community. It can also be said that those changes were very important in order to eliminate the first barrier: the fine line that separates potential users from public libraries. Furthermore, this experience showed that strategic information can be provided while respecting the ethnic and cultural concerns of the end users.

Chile

At the other side of the Andean range, in Chile, the *Universidad de la Frontera* (University of the Frontier or UFro, Temuco, V Region) houses the “Centro de Documentación Indígena del Instituto de Estudios Indígenas” (Indigenous Documentation Center of the Indigenous Studies Institute). This is a specialised library dedicated to Mapuche culture and to the diffusion of educational materials both among students and researchers and within the community itself. The library is physically located in the middle of the Araucania, the heart of the Mapuche people in Chile. Its structure and services make (as their library colleagues in Argentina do) communication between the scholarly sectors and the native communities in the area possible. Thus, this library initiative challenges and overcomes the divides that separate academic from non-academic worlds, rural from urban spaces, and indigenous from non-indigenous areas.

From the University of the Frontier, and in collaboration with the DIBAM (*Dirección de Bibliotecas, Archivos y Museos de Chile*, Libraries, Archives and Museums of Chile Management), an extension activity was carried out from 1998 onwards (Catrilaf, 2001). This extension activity consisted of a mobile unit that travelled around from one place to the other in a rural area with a heavy indigenous presence. The scope of its journey included 14 points in four communes of the Araucania region at the beginning and was widened later in 2000. The activities included the creation of a sound library in the Mapuche language (cassette recordings according to the community's requirements, with the help of a translator) and a large and complex amount of information and educational work with the community, especially with women, elders and children. The collection was mainly focused on children's literature and peasant production and its infrastructure took advantage of all the elements that Chilean librarianship was able to provide in the area of mobile units. The project was launched with the active participation of a Mapuche librarian, Fresia Catrilaf.

This particular mobile unit was a very good solution for isolated rural locations that found it difficult to have access to libraries. In addition, by using bilingual materials it also recovered Mapuche traditional knowledge. It is worth noting that this unit focused a good number of its activities upon very fragile social sectors such as children and women. The efforts put into this mobile library were aimed at being successful in dealing with the many walls and ditches that exist, not only in Chile but also across the entire continent.

These experiences show how it is possible to apply the best professional techniques in particular situations, many times removed from the standardised models and the most common environments. It also makes clear the imperative necessity of building new (and strengthening existing) bonds between non-indigenous scholarly spaces and the places where native groups have a heavy presence. In addition, it indicates how a good definition of both the information requirements and of the existing resources makes it possible to develop a successful project.

Bolivia

Organisations such as *Apoyo para el Campesino Indígena del Oriente Boliviano* (APCOB; Support to the Indigenous Peasant from Eastern Bolivia), and some others belonging to the *Red de Información Etnológica de Bolivia* (REDETBO; Ethnological Information Network of Bolivia) do similar tasks in Bolivia, a nation with a high percentage of indigenous population. Nevertheless, rural libraries addressing the needs of native peoples are still at a developmental stage. The existence of books and written materials in the principal indigenous languages of the country (quechua, aymara and guaraní), along with the presence of strong indigenous identity, will allow libraries and the native communities they serve to take a step toward attaining their goals in a near future. In the meantime, institutions such as the ones mentioned above, are helping with the recovery of memory and culture by utilising multimedia resources and the diffusion of information products through the entire society (indigenous and non-indigenous), creating spaces and experiences of communication and intercultural learning, and creating bridges between shores that had been distant.

In addition, digital technologies have been used efficiently to succeed in the achievement of these goals. The case of Bolivian undertakings such as *Aymara Uta* ("The Aymara house", a website dedicated to this culture and its language) and ventures such as the *Taller de Historia Oral Andina* (THOA; Workshop of Andean Oral History), confirm the advantage of using ICTs in the recovery and revitalisation of native cultural practices. Additionally, channels of interchange, growth, and discussion are created which permit a continued outlook for new action and progress paths.

Costa Rica

An example of a project focusing on the use of ICTs in the aboriginal context is exemplified in the undertaking *Centro de Conocimiento*

sobre/de Grupos Étnicos Indígenas Centroamericanos (Central American Ethnic Groups Knowledge Centre, GEIC Project) of the National University of Costa Rica Library and Information Science School, started in 2004 (Miranda Arguedas, 2001). They have identified the libraries with material on the subject of native peoples, made an inventory of material related to the indigenous knowledge in the country, developed very interesting Internet portals, and designed library models for native communities. Presently, the project seeks the implementation of information units in the indigenous communities of the Costa Rican Talamanca region (populated with Cabecar and Bribri ethnics groups).

This set of examples shows how the digital divide can be overcome in indigenous contexts, using new technologies (were available) to encourage and support the development of native groups and their social inclusion. At the same time, these tools allow indigenous communities to disseminate their knowledge within the (inter)national society and to introduce their culture in a global space.

Brazil

One of the most noticeable experiences is the Magüta Library, housed in the homonymous Museum, which is part of the Documentation and Research Center of Alto Solimões in Brazil (Paoli Farias, 1996; Bessa Freire, 2001). It works for the Tikuna, a people who live in about 100 villages placed in eight municipalities of the Amazonas state. The library is situated in the confluence of the Javari and Alto Solimões rivers and was organised between 1988 and 1991. It is a specialised unit, with supporting duties for the Tikuna Bilingual Teacher Training Center. Its collection is, mainly, in the Portuguese language but there is also a section in the native one. The users are both indigenous and non-indigenous people. The library provides a framework for the production of material and allows aboriginal storytellers to register their tales by writing them down.

These experiences show how certain information and educational divides can be overcome, slowly, hand in hand with the library and the technologies associated with it without going against the behaviour patterns and the culture of the end users.

Columbia

In Colombia, six municipal libraries (in the cities of Manaure, Maico, Uribia and Riohacha) are situated within the territory of the Wayuu

people, in the Guajira region. They are excellent examples of units with intercultural services. One of the three libraries situated in Riohacha (capital city of the Guajira region) belongs to the Bank of the Republic (Gómez Ruiz, 2001) and provides services both for Wayuu and for Alijuna (non-indigenous) patrons. The Wayuu librarian Ignacio Epinayu has developed projects aimed at the recovery of orality (Epinayu Pushaina, 2007) and currently works in the organisation of the Documentation Center "Anatolio Quira Arama" of the *Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia* (Colombian Indigenous National Organization) from his own cultural framework but using the most modern library and information science techniques as well.

Other Colombian examples are the libraries that work in the region of the Santa Marta range, with the inclusion of indigenous users in them (Kogui, Kankuama, Ika and Wiwa peoples) showing respect for their traditional patterns and supporting the revitalisation of their cultural practices. The Guanacas Library is another outstanding example, in the Yaquívá area, Inza municipality. It is an indigenous undertaking that won the First Architecture Award of Guada for its structural design adapted to the native tradition. It received, for its construction, the support of the "Tierradentro" program of the European Commission in the year 2005 and, at the moment, provides specific services to the needs of its community. This unit is, as has been said, an excellent example of use of financial resources in objectives that correspond with the local circumstances. This is something that has also happened with the venues set up in the Mayan area of Guatemala, especially with the mobile libraries of the Project PROBIGUA in the region of Antigua (Zamora, 2001).

Mexico

Mexico is another nation with a high percentage of indigenous population and with more than fifty native languages spoken today. It is worth noting, among others, the experience of the communitarian information rooms launched in 2001 in four locations in the municipality of Zautla (Puebla state, Náhuat people region in the Mexican Central Range) (Márquez Nava, 2001). Such units were led by CESDER (*Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Rural*; Studies Center for Rural Development) and its Documentation and Information Center "Lorenzo Servije". The services were specifically based on the recovery and the diffusion of local and traditional wisdom and providing spaces for learning and sharing knowledge which had never existed before.

Peru

Something similar in progress is the project "Biblioteca Quechua" (Quechua Library) of Ayaviri (Puno department, Peru), which is being developed at the present by the Ayaviri government and the *Colegio de Bibliotecarios de Perú* (Peruvian Librarian Union) (Soto Coronel and Gamarra, 2003). This undertaking is supported by IFLA/Action for Development through Libraries Programme (ALP) and includes, among other direct actions, the collection of local oral tradition. An emphasis is on the recovery of the regional knowledge. Local resources have hardly been used in Latin American rural libraries, and this has resulted in the creation of a divide: one that separates people from their own cultural reality and their intellectual produce.

Venezuela

The last series of examples comes from the most northern part of South America. The *Sistema Nacional de Bibliotecas Públicas* (National Public Libraries System) of Venezuela maintains a mobile libraries service (boat libraries and travel boxes) along the rivers of the high Orinoco basin with services to indigenous groups (above all, Piaroa groups) (Medina de Silva, 2001). The activity is organised from the Central Public Library "Simón Rodríguez" in Puerto Ayacucho, Amazonas State. The Venezuelan Public Libraries Network has a lot of experience in giving attention to indigenous communities, especially in the Amazonas State. Between 1990 and 1996, a project on attending to indigenous communities through librarian public services was set up in this corner of Latin America (Medina de Silva and Zapata, 1998). Finally, the *Sistema de Escuelas Bolivarianas en Red* (Network of Bolivarian Schools System) was an experimental undertaking born at the Zulia State, where the Venezuelan Wayuu ethnic group lives. Such a venue included libraries and the participation of "living books" (i.e. expert narrators of oral tradition that enclose, in their memories, the contents of never-written books on community knowledge, history, and customs).

Discussion

The smallest experiences are numerous and they are not always reflected in the written testimonies or in professional literature. Activities in Paraguay,

in the northwestern part of Argentina, in northern Chile, in the Ecuadorian and Peruvian range and western forest regions, or in the Brazilian *Matto Grosso* make it clear the intense necessity of an answer on the part of librarians, teachers, sociologists, communicators and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It has now become evident that this answer is possible and likely to be achieved. In addition, a wide range of opportunities can be provided and adapted to the environmental characteristics, the population, and their resources. The common and key elements that can be identified in all of the experiences are imagination and commitment. Imagination to know how to deal with situations that are not always expected, and commitment in order to have a reason for dealing with them.

Library projects for aboriginal populations have not pulled down the information barriers that separate them from the (inter)national dominant currents. A long journey still remains ahead before this will happen, which we will have to travel on with tenacity, determined not to give up easily. It will be necessary to multiply efforts in order to respond to the enormous population of end users. However, all the projects mentioned show that it is possible if we tackle the problem from a different perspective, not with the same mechanisms, but in search of a common objective.

Conclusions

The spoken and written production of brilliant discourses and policies, declarations, meetings and congresses, international working groups and many other movements as well as sociopolitical and professional phenomena, have demonstrated their capacity to collect isolated individual experiences and turn them into general guidelines or recommendations. However, their usefulness is limited as it is manifested when we study how very few times these documents have been put into practice with successful or, at least, inspiring outcomes. There is little doubt about the praiseworthy ideas and goals and desirable outcomes, but, despite this, they are far from reality. In the meantime, the divides, the differences and the imbalances keep on growing, at different levels, in different and diverse spaces, but always in a continuous manner, putting aside more and more people.

By contrast, the experiences on a small scale (those that respect the old maxim "think globally, act locally") have been proven to be viable tools for achieving some sort of change, however minimal it might seem. They propose a sort of action in direct contact with the environment as well

as the commitment with a situation and a group of people in defiance of adversity as a way of winning the struggle against it.

Obviously, each perspective complements the other, for they go along the same path. However, if the actions are limited to the first one, we will be moving away, making distances longer and allowing differences to grow and to reproduce themselves. By showing a more active attitude, more solidarity, and more comprehension of what is involved, we will succeed in contributing in some small part to the change that we think is possible to achieve. If we assume the responsibility that is needed at a local level, the global context would probably, though slowly, also begin to change.

In conclusion, information professionals have a social role to play in a society where the raw materials that they manage (the knowledge, a good that is common to all human beings) is a decisive factor of development and welfare. By having the capacity for managing that good, they automatically assume an ethical duty: to guarantee egalitarian access to everybody who needs it. It will be by their committed steps and movements, at academic, personal, political or educational levels, that they will attain the major goal of closing those ditches. Deprived people (naming them as you want to) are not individuals or groups that live in a world different from ours. They live next to us, by our side, with us and, perhaps because of us. To respond to their demands in a realistic and humane way is the only manner of preventing them from being where they are, at the base of the social pyramid where they neither chose to be nor wished to be placed. Whether they are indigenous peoples or *favelas* inhabitants, peasants or excluded by the way they feel or act, all of them must have the same opportunities, for the skin they wear on the body is the same as ours. They also suffer from the same pains and share the same dreams. A different way might exist and that possibility is in our hands. It depends on whether we decide to use them in digging the ditch and making it deeper and deeper, or to collaborate in removing it from the map of our memories.

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