Library services for indigenous societies in Latin America

A summary of two decades of experiences

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> Whatever you do for me but without me, you do against me.
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> Proverb from Central Africa. Quoted by David van Reybrouck.

Introduction

Library services for indigenous societies in Latin America have been timidly explored and implemented since the late 90s of the past century.

A few of them have been documented, most of them have gone mostly unnoticed or are yet to be reported, and all of them, their approaches and their results should be thoroughly identified, described and studied in the near future. LIS theory and methodology regarding this kind of work (currently scarce) could be built and developed after systematizing all the local experiences and extracting conclusions from them — a task for which the work already done on this topic in other parts of the world (e.g. Oceania and North America) may serve as a reference.

There is a huge amount of pending research and fieldwork to be done. Nonetheless, the importance of these library services in the continent's LIS scenario has already been recognized — a big step for the high number of users that could benefit from them, particularly in countries like Mexico, Guatemala, Peru or Bolivia.

Although the initial goal of these experiences was to provide basic, day-to-day services to populations facing a variety of hardships, early approaches and attempts to do so soon made librarians aware that there were other potential objectives to be accomplished, especially after considering the reality of indigenous peoples in Latin

America. They realized that library services —and the information they manage— should be aimed at reducing the huge gap still existing between civil society at large and the aboriginal groups, as well as at facing the many inequalities and issues the latter have to face and endure. They should promote basic literacy and disseminate relevant information and strategic knowledge while at the same time focusing on indigenous cultures and their current situation in order to raise awareness within each country and foster social inclusion. Also, libraries' structures, staff and techniques should be used to restore oral tradition and history, to support endangered languages and intangible heritages, and to promote bilingual education.

From the (small and mostly undocumented, but still important) joint work of Latin American librarians and native communities during the last two decades trying to develop a set of interesting and insightful library experiences, a number of basic, valuable lessons have been extracted. This paper attempts to organize them around five core ideas — ideas that should guide future actions or, at least, become the ground for the research and the work of incoming generations of LIS professionals, both inside and outside Latin America.

01. Libraries for all

IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1994) states: "The services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status. Specific services and materials must be provided for those users who cannot, for whatever reason, use the regular services and materials, for example linguistic minorities, people with disabilities or people in hospital or prison."

Libraries are *for all*. In plural societies —and few in today's world are not— this implies, among many other things, responding to the requirements of people with very different cultural traits.

However, for a number of reasons (ranging from economy of means to plain and simple discrimination), libraries seldom meet the needs of particular groups, e.g. indigenous societies and others labeled as "minorities" (social, linguistic, economic, racial, ethnic, etc., not necessarily demographic) — groups that have not been neglected or forgotten about by libraries only.

It is necessary to design, develop and *implement* (i.e. to go beyond good intentions and eloquent words) relevant library services for all potential users, including those who have been systematically under-served, ignored or directly excluded so far.

When working in this direction, it is best advised to take small steps at first: simple projects and actions for startups with a limited budget and staff, but which should demonstrate (a) how LIS acknowledges a remarkable absence in its theory and practice regarding indigenous/minority populations; (b) libraries' respect towards a particular category of users, their needs and their problems; and (c) libraries' commitment to keeping core professional values central to their practice (e.g. the ones included in IFLA/UNESCO Manifesto) as well as to supporting human and citizens' rights.

02. We and the others

When designing or putting into practice library services for indigenous populations... do we really need to speak about "indigenous" services?

Library activities, initiatives and projects for multicultural, indigenous, rural and/or "minority" communities all around the world (sprang up in response to the problems mentioned in the previous point) have been named by using a number of labels. Such labeling might have led to exclusion rather than inclusion, and to further marginalize already disadvantaged individuals and groups: several forms of domination revolve around the construction of "the Other". And labels are an essential part of that process.

Having this is mind, is it always necessary to add adjectives as "indigenous", "rural" or "minority" to the words "libraries" or "services" when addressing the needs of these users? Except for highly specialized institutions, is it necessary to create separate spaces or services for specific socio-cultural groups? Could that be considered as a way of "framing the Other"? May it be a way of widening instead of bridging gaps? Building instead of breaking down barriers? What does it really mean to put one group of people under the weight of a label?

It is worth noting that libraries in indigenous, rural or afro-descendant contexts are not called "indigenous libraries", "rural libraries" or "afro libraries" by their users, but just "libraries". From the LIS perspective, they may be seen as "special" units that need to be examined and discussed to assess how LIS theory and practice converged in a

particular situation to solve a number of particular requirements. But from the user's point of view, these libraries do not substantially differ from any other library: the collections, the structures and the services are (or, at least, should be) tailored to the community's needs — and that includes the collection and dissemination of languages and cultural heritages, a work of great importance and relevance in some geographical/cultural contexts (not only indigenous).

Hence, except for those cases where labels are useful for/used by the community itself to address the identity issues of its members and support their claims and struggles, differences should not be highlighted in library spaces and services, neither by labeling nor by any other mean. That is not the same as ignoring or negating them — they exist and should be considered. But they should not be used as "marks".

Libraries should be as open and inclusive as possible, and will therefore have to make an effort to minimize inequalities, which in some cases will mean carrying out preventive, corrective or compensatory measures.

03. The exoticism of the difference

Library services are designed to better address and meet users' needs. For user groups with "particular" traits —that is, different from the user profile considered "standard"—, those particularities are (or should be) taken into account to develop library programs and activities.

But, when it comes to the identification of such particularities... who decides what features and traits make a community unique or "different from the standard"?

Are different criteria used to evaluate "minority" needs? To what extent does the exoticism of difference and otherness influence those criteria? Are stereotypes and prejudices embedded in them?

Stereotypes and prejudices are present within all plural societies, especially regarding minority groups. They are an undesirable byproduct of maintaining and reinforcing identity within complex human groups, as well as a consequence of the attempt to establish boundaries between different identities (something hard to do, since they merge, overlap and shift rather than becoming more homogeneous and static). When designing libraries and planning their services, it is necessary to undertake a critical

self-assessment to recognize and unlearn any existing mis- and preconceptions. And this works in both directions: "minority" groups also hold stereotyped views about "majority", hegemonic groups.

While it is essential to consider relevant cultural factors in the design of libraries and library services, old and new prejudices and preconceptions (and the love for exotic features) must be subjected to critical scrutiny and overcome.

04. Library colonialism

The library and the school (understood as an institution that provides basic formal education) are two powerful tools for spreading a certain set of knowledge, cultural traits and values. They have been and still are used to promote and impose dominant cultures. And not just in former colonies.

To what extent the creation of library services may be seen as a form of "neo-colonialism", favoring/imposing certain contents, customs, stories, habits or technologies in a certain language and format, while ignoring/diminishing others? To what extent do library services' designers assume that what is good for them is good for everyone else?

When designing library services (but not only), acculturation processes and socio-cultural pressures need to be carefully examined, addressed and challenged. Commitment to local knowledge sourcing and content production, sustainable practices, and community art and crafts, among many other strategies, allows counteracting the negative effects of cultural globalization.

It is also necessary to challenge/counteract the Western-centrism inherent to libraries (particularly evident in classification systems), as well as the supremacy of the written and printed word. One of the many solutions is to mix and match "conventional" library structures with local schemes for storing and organizing knowledge (e.g. oral tradition), as well as with other information formats and cultural expressions.

Users, knowledge and libraries are pieces of a larger and more complex puzzle, where all parts are equally necessary. Knowledge is not encapsulated in watertight modules: it flows, easily crossing identity/cultural borders; it changes, transforms, evolves...

05. Respect and sustainability

The design of libraries and library services should be respectful of the final users' needs *and possibilities*, and led to sustainable results over time.

To what extent is this taken into account in current librarianship? In a world with increasing inequalities, in a consumer culture where marketing has become too powerful, pervasive and insidious and "sustainability" has turned out into an integral part of doing business, what does it mean sustainable and culturally respectful library policies?

A community's library-related requirements should be met by mobilizing support at grassroots level; that is, communities need to be involved in identifying problems, suggesting solutions and improvements, and developing strategies.

Besides being "appropriated" by the community, the library and its services need to be sustainable over time. Novelties can be a pleasant surprise for users; however, a library should not continuously keep reinventing itself, but focus its efforts on maintaining and improving its services.

Conclusions

When facing the work with indigenous communities —as a matter of fact, with *any* community—, an important idea to keep in mind is to speak first with the final users of libraries and their services from the very beginning.

Talking about what is needed, what is expected, what can be offered and supported, and what can be afforded and maintained, always leads to avoid potential colonialism, to put aside prejudices and stereotypes, to develop respectful relationships, and to build sustainable projects.

Maybe final users need a library supporting their claims for social justice and human rights, as happens in Guatemala with Maya communities, in Colombia with displaced peoples, in northern Peru and southern Chile with rural communities fighting against mining and timbering multi-nationals...

Maybe they need help to recover their endangered languages and cultures, as happens in the Delta Amacuro in Venezuela or in Brazilian Amazonia, or in even northeastern Argentina and eastern Paraguay.

Maybe they don't need —or don't want— anything.

Whatever the initial requirement, whatever the final result, close collaboration between both parts —the librarians and the users— is required to achieve good results. And, in doing that, librarians should be as open-minded and as committed as possible. Because reality happens to be quite more complicated than the textbooks and official guidelines show it to be.

And also more exciting, full of challenges and lessons.

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Notes

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