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THE MEXICAN LIBRARY INFRAESTRUCTURE

by

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General Background

For a country close to 70 million people the Supplement to the 6th ed. of the Directory of Libraries¹ lists 2,130 libraries with collections of at least 500 volumes. According to the statistical data given in this source, these libraries can roughly be divided as follows: 670 are public, 554 are located in schools, (from the primary to the pre-university levels), 559 belong to institutions of higher education, and 347 are government or privately supported, belong to foreign governments or have been established by international organizations - although by their kind of collections, most of them, could be classified as special.

The level of development of these libraries is uneven. In general it can be said that those located in research and special institutes or in institutions of higher education, show the greatest development, and some of them are already offering very valuable services, whereas, the infrastructure: public or school library services, neglected for years, is rather weak.

On the other hand our country does not have yet a national library development program, nor there is a government entity responsible either for library services for all the sectors, or for a particular one.

In this respect it will be interesting to mention the existence of the Division of Publications and Libraries within the Ministry of Education, created in 1978, which supports some 140 libraries; public, school and even some special. Although this is the only single entity directly responsible for the support and development of libraries, only a small percentage of them belong to it.

This panorama clearly shows the rather anarchic situation existing in terms of planning and operation of libraries.

Facing the need for improving information services in the country, and considering their role within our socio-economic development, some important efforts have been carried out in recent years, either by the professional library community, as well as by the Ministry of Education itself. Valuable studies have been undertaken or sponsored by both groups. In the first instance there is an interesting document² which compiles various articles about, for instance, library legislation or the need of integrating a national information system.

As to studies sponsored by the Ministry itself, worthwhile mentioning is the one known by the acronym PRODENASBI³ which offers a --- deep analysis of the present public library sector and forecasts - the resources needed to lower down the existing deficit. The interest for defining the characteristics and needs of our library --- infrastructure and the means to strenghten it was the reason for - starting a study like this on this sector.

The public library sector

The statistical data given in the Directory of libraries...just -- referred to, is considerably expanded for public libraries in the PRODENASBI study.

Out of the 670 libraries of this nature, some 110 belong to the -- Division of Publications and Libraries. The rest of them are ----- supported by state or municipal funds, and even by private organizations.

The actions undertaken for the realization of the study, were the following:

- 1) inventory of public libraries

- 2) random analysis of the demand (user study)
- 3) formulation of parameters or - so called in the study - "indicators" - in order to determine the deficit.

These were worked out for the following aspects: library capacity, collections, land, physical facilities, furniture and equipment; personnel and maintenance.

- 4) diagnosis of the information gathered
- 5) survey of the editorial industry, so as to define its possibilities for coping with the eventual demand of printed material.

This action was not completed.

The survey was carried out by means of a questionnaire applied *in situ* by a visiting interviewer.

In the present document emphasis will be made on the results of the study on collections and personnel, being this the main topic of interest in this Seminar.

Out of the total number of public libraries, 654 were surveyed. The results on the items just indicated are the following: The total number of volumes is of 3,345,057, and there are 2,005 persons working for public libraries, out of whom 28% hold a professional degree either in library science or other disciplines.

at a licenciante level, 66.6% have had ~~4~~ training courses or have -- followed a technical program, regardless of its length, 1 week to -- 3 months, or specific content, and 25.6% do have only primary educa-
tion.

If compared with the indicators specially developed for this ---- survey the deficit for 1980, was as follows, 9'790,997 volumes, -- and 10,931 persons.

Just as a point of comparison in terms of volumes, IFLA⁴ considers 1.3 books per capita. Given the Mexican situation, this ratio was lowered down to 0.02 for 1982 just to start up in the public libra-
ry sector with the same ratio between the total number of volumes and the total population ~~in the country~~.

The figures just given show the weak situation, which places our -- country way behind IFLA standards.

But probably the most important aspect to consider here is not so much how close or far we are in respect to those international -- standards.

The main concern should be first to determine the convenience ---- and the benefit of preparing a library development plan which properly backed up by our government on a permanent and continuous --

basis, would guarantee the necessary resources to implement the -- programs that would respond to the needs of our user population.

In this respect the PRODENASBI study can be a valuable point of -- departure to determine priorities, resources required and the span time which will be taken for the implementation of the services.

Public libraries and the community served. The present situation

Public libraries in Mexico are the almost unique setting for serving children and young adults, due to the very few school libraries, which lack, most of the them, the basic elements to provide a minimum adequate service. On the other hand library services devoted solely to children are probably no more than a dozen in the country, about half of them located in the capital.

Under these circumstances, the public library is taking the place - of school libraries. As such it has certainly an important role to play but much more has to be done, in terms of promoting services to the adult population not yet reached. In fact, adults, in general have rarely been users of these libraries, since their collections, not to say a thing about their services, are far from responding to the needs or interests of the society: The adult Mexican -

population has not been trained or geared towards them.

In general, ours is a non library oriented population. This state---
ment applies to urban settings and more so to the rural ones, ----
where the percentage of illiterate people is high, and thus other
needs seem to demand a greater attention to be ^{cope with} solved.

There is a simple explanation to this problem: when children, they
were never trained for library services. The PRODENASBI study in -
this respect shows the results of a pilot analysis on users attending
two public libraries in Mexico City: 96% of the users are high
school students, and only 1.3% of the total population make any --
use of them.

Public libraries. On going programs

The situation described is already changing. If it is true that --
there is not a national program, and that, as stated, there is not
a single government unit responsible for the coordination or operation
of all the public libraries, the mere creation of the Divi---
sion of Education and Libraries within the Ministry of Education -
was a definite improvement, since the support given to them was --
considerably raised compared to the resources available in previous
years.

It will be interesting to mention three main lines of action promoted by this Division:

- a) improvement of collection
- b) development of library education programs
- c) services

a) Concerning the first aspect, collections were selected according to kind of materials: educational, recreational and of general nature; according to ages: in this respect a special effort has been done to select material specially relevant for children and young adults; and, finally, according to the socio-economic characteristics of the community to be served.

b) As to educational programs, two main actions have been stressed. One by means of workshops offered to people already working in the libraries sponsored by the Ministry. Some of them have been especially devoted to children. On the other hand, a training course of some 480 hours has been offered, so far 3 times, to people working, or that would eventually be hired for these libraries. Again, an important component of services to children is considered into the program.

Not yet done, but of great importance, is the convenience of considering the training of school teachers as potential

library promoters and agents, within the existing school libraries or the public libraries in the various communities. A pilot project was elaborated for the consideration of the competent authorities.

- c) In respect to services, a great emphasis has been done in terms of implementing those which would appeal more to children: story hours, contests, besides such as the one of lending, which is of a great demand.

When the physical conditions of the buildings do permit, special areas devoted to the kids have been properly arranged in terms, mostly, of decoration and furniture so as to set an inviting and comfortable area.

A practical example of some of the activities recently promoted, is the one carried out last Christmas at the Biblioteca de México⁵, the largest public library in the country: it offered an interesting program for their children users around this leit-motif, which attracted very much their attention. They were invited to a workshop which lasted for 6 weeks. Cooking and manual activities were promoted and in parallel books on these hobbies were heavily demanded. This is a nice example as to how the ----

library can become a place where other recreational activities, besides reading, can be appealing to the young minds which are in the interesting process of forming themselves.

Just as a couple of more examples it will be interesting to mention other efforts undertaken, one by another official entity -- which does not belong to the Division of Publications and Libraries. This is a public library located within the Museum of Cultures where the librarian in charge has done the greatest effort to serve children from 8-17 years of age, despite the very light budget assigned to it.

The other example comes from a private university which has been supporting, for the last three years a library for children aged 4 to 12, with a collection of some 1,800 volumes⁶. A good number of con and pro arguments could be discussed about the convenience for a university library to support a library serving a completely different clientele. But, undoubtedly, the deficit of --- these services and the lack of a planning library entity, have lead institutions like this, to set up services of this sort with a social goal in mind.

Aware of the need of trained personnel for these kind of libraries, this institution offered early this year a 30 hours course

for people already working or that would eventually work in ---- school or children's libraries. Among the various topics dealt with, there were the following : the school as a learning laboratory; the children's library and the community, and services in these kind of libraries.

This brief panorama of our public libraries has shown the present situation and the on going activities which are starting to change its phase. The challenge is enormous. It is a challenge for the government authorities and for the library profession as well. Our government is realizing the importance and the need of library services -- and undoubtedly more resources must be allocated under the frame of reference of a national library plan.

On the other hand, it is a challenge for the profession, which must accept the responsibility for setting up the services required in -- our country, in accordance with the Mexican present and future reality. Other elements have to be taken ^{closely} into consideration in the planning process. The characteristics of the community served - or to be served - and the editorial industry.

Useful planning studies and surveys are already available. PRODENAS-BI is one of them. But patience is needed. All the entities involved

in and committed to the process of planning of library services in general, or for a particular sector, have to be fully aware that the results will only be felt after a period of very hard work.

Conclusions.

1. Government decision is a must for the establishment of a national entity responsible for library planning, both a national and sectorial levels.
2. Optimum advantage of plans, studies and programs of action already in existence, with possibly some adaptations, or deeper analysis, should be taken into consideration, in order to act^{upon} as soon as possible and avoid duplications.
3. Given the conditions of the country, in particular the lack of -- school libraries, it will be convenient to devote more attention to services for children and young adults within public libraries.
4. Services must respond to the interests and needs of the population served and they must be continuously promoted.
5. Special emphasis must be made on educational programs at various levels (technical and professional) for people working in public libraries.

6. In particular, training programs for librarians working with children and young adults have to be increased and reinforced.
7. Collections have to be augmented, but a careful selection has to be made to make sure that they respond to the needs and interests of particular user sectors.

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