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Library services for indigenous societies in Latin America

Experiences and lessons

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Introduction

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."

Nevertheless, for a number of reasons —ranging from economy of means to plain and simple discrimination—, public 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) — which have not been neglected or forgotten about by libraries only.

Historically, most Latin American First Nations have been subjugated, subjected to all kinds of pressures, injustices and mistreatment. The socio-economic conditions in which they subsist are often far from acceptable, and the problems they face on a daily basis can hardly be imagined by the rest of their fellow citizens. They were victims of the colonial powers, and their dispossession continued under the independent governments: they suffered their genocidal destruction and after that, their policies of pacification, acculturation and assimilation. Aboriginal peoples that survived to this day have done so with their intangible heritage significantly diminished. Although

damaged here and there, some of these peoples still have solid social fabrics which have allowed them to overcome many difficulties and to experience important changes without renouncing their identities and cultures. They have preserved their languages, values, memories, and ideas, and have incorporated new elements and modified some of the old ones to better respond to their current needs. However, the situation of most of the indigenous societies in Latin America is quite the opposite: the collapse of their social structures, the stripping of their native identities and the deliberate attacks against their cultures are alarming processes leading, almost inevitably, to their disappearance as societies, as well as to the loss of their languages and their knowledge. The latter implies a rapid decline in cultural diversity, and the subsequent impoverishment of our increasingly homogeneous and monochrome world heritage.

In this complex and difficult context, library services for indigenous societies have been timidly explored and implemented in Latin America since the late 90s of the past century. A few of them have been documented; unfortunately, most of them have gone mostly unnoticed or are yet to be reported.

Generally speaking, the initial goal of these experiences was to provide basic, day-to-day information services to populations traditionally neglected by public libraries. However, early attempts to do so soon made librarians aware of the importance of broadening objectives, especially after witnessing the reality of indigenous peoples in Latin America. They realized that library services —and the information they manage— could play a significant role in reducing the huge gap between civil society at large and

aboriginal groups, as well as in addressing the many inequalities, challenges and barriers the latter have to face and endure. It soon became clear that library services for indigenous societies should fight against exclusion, encourage literacy and disseminate relevant information and strategic knowledge, promote lifelong learning and inclusive education, reduce inequalities, promote inclusive societies... In addition, libraries' structures, strategies and techniques could be used, among many other things, to restore oral tradition and history, to support endangered languages and intangible heritages, and to foster bilingual education.

Since the late 80s and the early 90s of the past century, urgent information needs have been detected and identified among indigenous communities in all Latin American countries with native populations. The solutions proposed and adopted were limited and transitional, and were implemented at a local level and on a small scale. In many ways those solutions were exploratory, since there was no previous research and knowledge librarians could refer to. Unfortunately, most of them lacked proper funding and official support; they were hindered by unclear definition of problems and inappropriate approaches; and most of them were not properly documented. Nevertheless, they happened to be quite useful to evaluate potential responses to indigenous information needs and, most importantly, to realize how much is still to be learnt and done within Library and Information Sciences regarding "non-standard" users and services.

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A short selection of experiences

Up to this day, the experiences with library services for indigenous populations in Latin America may be roughly divided into two groups. On the one hand, libraries working in indigenous areas which do not provide specific services to their users. On the other, libraries which do provide specific services to native populations according to their particular needs and traits, inside or outside indigenous areas.

Within the first group, there are libraries that have materials or develop activities somehow related to the culture and the language of the community they serve. One of them is the library of Paxixil, a community of the Maya Kaqchikel people located in the municipality of Tecpán, in the department of Chimaltenango, in the highlands of southern Guatemala. It is part of a network of 3 rural libraries supported by an NGO, which are run by young people from the communities themselves. It provides both books/documents and space for educational and cultural projects, e.g. those related to public health. The Paxixil library building designs, intended to imitate the colorful textile patterns of the Mayan, were drafted by a famous Guatemalan architect who donated them to the NGO; the library itself provides service to 200 people.

Another example is La Casa del Pueblo (The People's House), in the community of Guanacas, municipality of Inzá, department of Cauca, in southern Colombia. It serves several rural communities, some of them belonging to the Paez or Nasa people; however, as the previous one, the services are not indigenous-oriented. The building

designs were also donated by a couple of young architects, and the library was built by local people in one year.

Both buildings were awarded architecture prizes and have been mentioned in a number of specialized publications on architecture because of their particular designs.

Worth mentioning is the Network of Rural Libraries in the department of Cajamarca, in the Andes of northern Peru. This network —one of the best examples of socially committed work in the continent— has made a huge change for peasants by supporting small libraries in rural, mostly indigenous communities, since 1971. Even if their services are not primarily focused on indigenous societies, their users belong mostly to the Quechua people — making it necessary for these small libraries to know their users' language and culture.

In the second group, maybe one of the finest examples is the library at CIFMA, in the outskirts of the city of Presidencia Roque Sáenz Peña, province of Chaco, in north-eastern Argentina. CIFMA is a center committed to training young teachers of the Qom, Wichi, Moqoit and Pitlaqa peoples, so they can perform a key role in intercultural bilingual education programs in primary schools in Chaco. The library collects everything published in the native languages, and is open to both the people studying there, and the community. In the same province, the so-called "Bibliotecas del Monte" (Forest libraries) provide services to Wichi people that continue to live in small, isolated communities in the middle of the woods.

Another excellent example is the Magüta Library of the Tikuna people, in the village of Benjamin Constant, where the Javari and Solimões rivers meet, in the state of Amazonas, western Brazil. Since 1998 this center has been managed by the General Council of the Tikuna People, and serves both as a museum and a space for recovering memory, and as a training center for teachers (as CIFMA does in Argentina). Other experiences worth mentioning in this second group are the small libraries created in the "Escolas da floresta" (Forest schools) in the states of Acre and Amazonas, western Brazil, and the Guarani School Library in the state of Santa Catarina, in southern Brazil.

Old or discontinued projects include, among many others, the Popular Ethnic Library Qomlaqtaq in Rosario (province of Santa Fe, eastern Argentina), which served Qom people that migrated from Chaco to the poverty belt of a big city; the Ñimi Quimün Mapuche and Indigenous Library in General Roca (province of Rio Negro, southern Argentina), a joint initiative between an urban indigenous community of the Mapuche people and a local university; the libraries of indigenous organizations in Bolivia, which, with a wide geographic spread, provided strong support to indigenous social and political movements; the ten libraries of the Wayuu people in the Guajira region, in northern Colombia; the Mapuche mobile library supported by the DIBAM (Direction of Libraries, Archives and Museums) and the Universidad de la Frontera, which travelled through several indigenous, rural communities in southern Chile; the Center of Indigenous Documentation in the Universidad de La Frontera in Temuco, also in southern Chile, and also related to the Mapuche people; a large number of poorly documented experiences in Mexico and Guatemala, with Mayan and Nahuan peoples; the "river libraries" created to serve forest indigenous peoples in eastern Peru, and the

remarkable boat libraries in Venezuela, which worked in the Orinoco basin during the 90s; the many libraries collecting indigenous materials in Ecuadorian eastern lowlands, and a long etcetera.

Learnt lessons

From the joint work of Latin American librarians and native communities during the last two decades trying to carry out and sustain a number of library initiatives, several important, valuable lessons can be extracted. They might be structured around five core ideas or principles— ideas that should guide future actions or, at least, become the ground for next generations of LIS professionals to continue researching, learning, and moving forward in the development of strategies both inside and outside Latin America.

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

02. Labels may be dangerous. Library activities, initiatives and projects for multicultural, indigenous, rural and/or "minority" communities all around the world 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, vulnerable 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, except for those cases where labels are used by the community itself to address the identity issues of its members and to support their claims and struggles, differences should not be highlighted in library spaces and services, neither by labeling nor by any other means. That is not the same as ignoring or negating them — they exist and should be taken into account. But they should not be used as "marks".

03. Let us beware of stereotypes and prejudices. They 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. When designing libraries and planning their services, it is necessary to undertake a critical self-assessment to recognize and unlearn any existing misconceptions and preconceptions. While it is essential to consider relevant cultural factors in the design of libraries and library services, old and new prejudices and stereotypes must be subjected to critical scrutiny and overcome.

04. Let us beware of cultural colonialism. Libraries and schools are two powerful tools for spreading a certain set of knowledge, cultural traits and values. As librarians, we should not forget that both institutions are heavily influenced by the dominant culture, which has its own narratives and models and tends to subordinate the stories and voices that collide with that particular worldview. When designing library services, acculturation processes and socio-cultural pressures need to be carefully examined, addressed and challenged. Commitment to local knowledge production and support to community art and crafts, among many other strategies, allows counteracting the

negative effects of cultural globalization. It is also necessary to challenge and counteract the Western-centrism inherent to libraries, 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 frameworks for storing, organizing and sharing knowledge, as well as with other information formats and cultural expressions.

05. Inclusiveness, trust, respect and sustainability should be core elements. The design of libraries and library services should be respectful of the final users' needs and possibilities, and lead to sustainable results over time. The 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: a library should not continuously keep reinventing itself, but focus its efforts on maintaining and improving its services.

Conclusions

Despite varying widely in scope and approach, and despite having been unevenly implemented and developed over time, the Latin American library projects with indigenous societies have become a sort of reference, a milestone in the local history of Library and Information Sciences. They allowed new horizons to be explored, and exposed what is lacking in public libraries regarding aboriginal groups and their needs.

They also brought out the need for developing LIS theory and methodological tools in order to better serve those groups. Systematizing all the local experiences and drawing lessons from them is another pending task, which might be built on the work already done in other latitudes (e.g. Oceania and North America).

There is a huge amount of research and fieldwork still to be done, and continued dialogue is essential to move forward. Dialogue between librarians, dialogue between library and community, dialogue between librarians and users.

Maybe those final users need a library to support 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 even in northeastern Argentina and eastern Paraguay.

Maybe they don't need —or don't want— anything a library can provide them.

Whatever the initial requirements, whatever the final result, close collaboration has to be set up from the start, and librarians should be as open-minded and as committed as possible. Reality happens to be messier and far more complex than textbooks and official guidelines make it out to be.

And also much more exciting, full of challenges and lessons, as the work undertaken thus far in Latin America already suggests.

Author's bibliography

This presentation is just a basic introduction to a very complex (and still mostly undocumented) issue. The bibliography provided below (in Spanish and English), written by the author and uploaded to an open access archive, allows those interested in library services for indigenous peoples in Latin America to further explore this topic.

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