

LET US REALLY PROMOTE THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MEXICAN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

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"Books are the key to understand the world and participate in a democratic society. (...) Literacy is the way that leads from slavery to freedom. There are many types of slavery and many types of freedom. But reading keeps being the way." -- Carl Sagan. (1)

Introduction

We must warn our reader that this paper is not the result of a parametric research, it is rather based on a bibliographic review in order to synthesize concepts and ideas in a clear, simple and critical proposal that really tries to collaborate in the development of the Mexican public libraries.

This work deals with the social and economical inequality and how it is automatically traduced in a inequality of who has and has not information and the technologies to access it. The fact that we recognize the problem from its roots, that is, that we state it as it is, it gives us a clear vision to look for fundamental solutions and not superficial ones.

A fundamental transformation has to take place in the way that librarians:

- Conceive libraries.
- Act within and in favor of them.
- Commit ourselves in benefit of its patrons.

Therefore, this work presents a proposal to show alternatives toward the research and implementation

of a policy socially equitable of the development of the Mexican public libraries.

Current situation

- A total of 11, 200 libraries serve 97 million of people, the total of México's population. (2) That is 1 library --academic, or public, or corporate, or school-- per each 8, 700 inhabitants.
- The National Network of Public Libraries (Red Nacional de Bibliotecas Públicas--RNBP) of México counts with a total of 6, 100 libraries. (3) That is 1 public library per each 16, 000 inhabitants.
- The 2001 budget for the RNBP is 115 million of pesos (\$ 12, 234, 042.55 US dollars, at a 9.40 pesos per one dollar). (4) That is, \$ 19, 000.00 pesos per library (\$ 2, 000.00 US dollars). While only in the state of New York, the 2001-2002 library budget is 95 million of US dollars, where 20 million are to build new public libraries. (5)
- The percentage of people who has Internet access in México is 3 %. That is, the digital divide (brecha digital) is: 3 % of people have Internet access and 97 % have not. (6) On the other hand, in the United States 98 % of the public schools have Internet access, where school libraries have access too. (7)

Factors for the development

The development of public libraries like all the libraries in general has to do with the funds they get. That is the main factor, but also with values of the librarians, specially from the ones who play a leading role. These are: social and political commitment, initiative, creativity, dedication to promote and to enrich the poor side of libraries, that is, the public libraries.

- Economic

We do not need to be experts in economy to realize that the economic factor is determinant in the development of a nation; also is determinant for the development of public libraries.

- Political participation

It is very important the political participation of the public librarians who earn 10 to 300 US dollars per month (100 to 3, 000 pesos) and from those who have helped all the time since their creation that public libraries keep alive. Undoubtedly it is plausible the participation of the professional librarians by themselves and associated in the Mexican Library Association (AMBAC--Asociación Mexicana de Bibliotecarios, A.C.), the National Association of Professional Librarians (CNB-- Colegio Nacional de Bibliotecarios) and others that surely with their participation finally achieved to see in writing the first General Law of Libraries (Ley General de Bibliotecas) 1988. (8)

- **Values**

The values of the public librarians are definitively one of the most important factors toward the development of their libraries since they deeply demonstrate:

- Spirit to service community.
- Social commitment.
- Creativity.
- Imagination.

Participants in the development

- The Mexican federal, state and municipal government.
- The librarians as a group.

Agents who stop development

- The social organization of the Mexican public institutions.

The professional librarians (with B.A., or MLS or Ph.D. degrees) are not filling the directing positions. It is the government which decides the policies and standards which must rule the operations in all public libraries, and unfortunately most of the time government lacks of preparation or library training.

- Lack of social and political commitment of the librarians as a social group.

The few librarians who have a B.A., masters or doctorate degree prefer to work in any other milieu except in the public libraries, and this is understandable for the low salaries these offer.

The librarians as a social group is repellent to politics (and we are not talking about to be follower of any political party), there is no tradition of political struggle of the library side, the politics every librarian must be morally willing to participate on if she or he loves to serve information patrons.

- Government officials unaware of the library reality.

The unawareness by the government officials it is understood by the wrong policies they make, for instance the proposal to tax books with the Value Added Tax (IVA--Impuesto al Valor Agregado). (9) If México's population is in the position number 107 in the world as the country where people less read, taxing books will not be a good measure at all to promote reading among people or the development of public libraries. (10)

Although there have been lately good intentions in the municipal government of Monterrey, Nuevo León, México, for example the major Felipe de Jesús Cantú, who is in charge of the management of all the public libraries of this municipality, has started an important initiative: to introduce Internet access in 72 public libraries thanks to a donation of 72 computers with their respective Internet connection by the Internet provider Terra Lycos de México. (11) This is an interesting proposal, but has to be complemented with other automation activities like the bibliographic catalog that throughout the 6, 100 libraries of the RBNP is still made of cards.

To introduce Internet access would also have sense "if these media would be used to strengthen the civil society, to give vitality to the small communities, the *barrios*, to women, to the sexual minorities, to everything that needs to be developed in Latin America, then, they would be worthwhile and not only to communicate faster." (12)

Private universities non participants

As part of their mystic all universities have a very important function, which is give social service to community. But the public universities, that is, the poor side of the Mexican higher education system, are the ones who really have played a leading library role in the country, examples like Autonomous National University of México (UNAM), Autonomous University of Colima and some others that thanks to their research and applications have maintained cooperation projects with the public libraries.

But... what happen with the private universities leaders in many areas and that nevertheless do not have a serious approach towards the public libraries, neither interest to support them with their technology and knowledge.

Insensible corporate sector

It is needed the cooperation and support of the Mexican corporate sector (i.e. corporations like Telmex, Cemex, Vitro, Cydsa, and other rich ones from Fortune 500) whose owners or presidents or CEOs it is very probable they have attended universities in the United States, therefore they must know of the importance that is given to libraries by the librarians as a group, the government, diverse organizations, and of course by the corporate sector of that country.

It is so evident that the Mexican corporate sector has all the time supported more the creation and development of cultural projects like museums, ballets, etc., but has not given support to really promote the development of public libraries. They do not know or pretend not to know that the public libraries are to education and the social and economical development of people what water is to fish.

Absence of international organisms

Although international organisms like UNESCO have a well know tradition to collaborate in the development of public libraries in the developing countries, it is so evident that they are absent in México.

Let us take a look of a remarkable example. In late 2000 the Organization of the States of the American Continents (OEA--Organización de los Estados Americanos), the Inter American Agency for Cooperation and Development (AICD--Agencia Interamericana para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo), Microsoft Corporation and that Technological Institute of Higher Studies of Monterrey (ITESM --Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, also called Tec de Monterrey) began the creation of an educational portal via the Web of Internet to offer distance education programs in Latin American and speed up the educational development of the countries members of OEA. (13) But it would be interesting to find out who is going to have access to these programs , since if in México only a 3 % of population has Internet access, it is so evident that these projects will only benefit certain types of elite corporations and organizations.

When the international organisms choose private universities non participants in the public library development for their projects of development, simply they are also absent and at the same time they are decisively stating or promoting the widening of the information and digital divides instead of reduce them.

What to do?

These are some initiatives that librarians could carry on:

- Convert AMBAC and/or CNB in a great and unique national union borrowing some features of the American Library Association.

By doing so the scientific people of libraries and information could determine the standards and policies to regulate the Mexican library life, specially the public libraries.

Some of the points to standardize could be:

- a) To secure professional training of all the librarians in the current public libraries and the ones to come.
 - b) To watch for direction and higher positions be filled by professional librarians.
 - c) To look for competitive salaries for all librarians.
 - d) To create awareness of the importance of libraries to the development of México.
 - e) To reform the General Law of Libraries in the part of management of public libraries (chapters 1 through 11).
- To fight for the government at all levels --with a real participation of public, private, corporate sector and international organizations-- under the surveillance of AMBAC and/or CNB or another

library organizations, favor public librarians with some of these initiatives:

- a) To give them scholarships to be members of AMBAC.
 - b) To give them funds to ensure a higher number of public librarians attend the annual conference of AMBAC.
 - c) To create a fixed plan where salaries raise constantly.
- To create or reinforce the chapters of AMBAC or CNB according to the background of librarians in all the 31 states or regions.
 - To create the Mexico's National Day of Library Legislation.

The AMBAC and/or CNB or other library organizations must fight for the creation of the National Day of Library Legislation which would be the legal base in which AMBAC and/or CNB or others should determine the budget to be spent on public libraries, based on scientific library studies and international standards. By doing so the library development would be ruled by data extracted from reality and not from divagations.

Only in this way, the professional librarians as a social group will take care of a real and sustained library development.

- To adopt a social and political commitment.

Librarians should restate our library mission, which should have always in mind to serve library patrons and the welfare of ourselves too. This could only be achieved by adopting a renovated social and political commitment.

Part of the political library agenda should include:

- a) To know the senators and congressmen or congresswomen of our electoral districts at a local and federal levels that resulted elected.
 - b) To write them letters and invitations to the libraries on the importance that they support the public libraries under their jurisdiction on charge.
 - c) To do the same with majors, governors and the president of the republic himself, on an individual basis as well as in a union.
 - d) This could be a progressive politics of librarians: to demand for our rights as workers of libraries and for a real development of libraries.
- The professional librarians as a group (AMBAC and/or CNB or others) should unite efforts with the academic library sector and to create more library science programs in all states of México where librarians could get the adequate education.
 - The professional librarians as a social group (AMBAC and/or CNB or others) should look after for the General Library Law to be respected in the part of the National Library System and really promote that the corporate sector really cooperate in the integration of their bibliographic systems in the aforementioned system. (See chapters 12 through 16).

Appendix: Mexican Associations:

Mexican Library Association

(AMBAC: Asociación Mexicana de Bibliotecarios, A.C.)

President: Nahúm Pérez, MLS

Physical Address:

Angel Urraza 817-A,
Col. Del Valle
México, D.F.
03100 México

Postal Address:

Apartado postal 27-651
Administración de correos 27
México, D.F.
06760 México

Telephones:

Voice (51) 55-75-33-96

Voice /fax: (51)55-75-11-35

ambac@solar.sar.net

<http://www.ambac.org.mx/>

National Association of Professional Librarians

(CNB: Colegio Nacional de Bibliotecarios)

President: Lina Escalona Ríos, MLS

Postal Address:

Apartado Postal 70-160

México, D.F.

04510 México

Telephone: 52-04-02-90 Fax 55-55-22- 92

E-mail: cnb@servidor.unam.mx

<http://www.unam.mx/cnb/>

American Library Association

50 E. Huron

Chicago, IL 60611

Email: ala@ala.org

<http://www.ala.org>

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