Information access for the poor and the role of libraries in the reduction of poverty

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Introduction

To provide an overview of the situation of the general population of Mexico, this article will discuss some basic and recent socio economic statistical information including official statistics on library infrastructure and the use of Communication and Information Technologies (ICTs) - specifically, the use of Internet inside and outside of homes.

Some significant results of a survey on reading habits of the residents of Mexico City Metropolitan Area are included - e.g. citizens' reading habits and preferred places to read compared to their personal income level. This article will also discuss an analysis of national programmes on poverty reduction, and the role of libraries and information professionals in the reduction of poverty. However, in relation to the reduction of poverty in Mexico, there exist no studies analyzing this role. Consequently, there are many challenges to meet, topics to analyze, and research to do to fully measure the possible impact of libraries in the future.

National background

Mexico has an area of 1,964,375 square kilometres; an annual census conducted in 2005 reported a total Mexican population of 103,088,021 of which 52,963,660 are females and 50,124,361 are males. The population is basically located in five of the 31 federal districts: Mexico State (13.7%), Federal District (8.4%), Veracruz (6.8%), Jalisco (6.5%) and Puebla (5.2%). As a whole, the population of the five districts amounts 40.7% of the total population of the country equivalent to 41, 954,777 people. (INEGI 2006b) The latest data on population generated by the National Health System report that until 2004 only 47,772,500 individuals had a health insurance which is less than half of the total population.

The Economically Active Population (PEA) or people able to work amounts 75,229,300. In Mexico, it is considered that from the age of 14 residents are able to work in a salaried position - however, only 58.3% of this part of the population is employed, while another 41.7% is unemployed or otherwise inactive. Almost

two thirds of the employees work in the commercial and utilities sector, whereas the remaining one third work in the industrial sector or in the farming, forestry, hunting and fishing sector (Table 1) (INEGI 2006e).

Table 1: 2005 Indicators: Indicators as per the 4th quarters of 2005

Concept	Measure unit	Reference
Population 14 years and over	Thousands	75 229.3
Economically Active Population (PEA)	Percentage of population 14 years and over	58.3
Average schooling of PEA	Years	8.6
Population employed in farming, forestry, hunting and fishing	Percentage of total employed population	15.0
Population employed in the industrial sector	Percentage of total employed population	25.4
Population employed in commercial and utilities sector	Percentage of total employed population	58.9
Subordinated and salaried workers	Percentage of total employed population	64.6
Self-employed workers	Percentage of total employed population	23.4
Population employed earning a minimum of two salaries	Percentage of total employed population	35.5
Population employed not earning a salary	Percentage of total employed population	9.5
Population employed in micro-businesses	Percentage of total employed population	40.7
Not Economically Active Population (PNEA)	Percentage of population 14 years and over	41.7
Minimum general daily salary (January 1, 2006 to present)	Pesos (Currency)	47.05

To further explain the living conditions in Mexico, it should be noted that the minimum salary amounts an average of 4 USD per day. However, the World Bank has estimated that 15 % of the population survives with less than 2 USD per day (Figure 1) (WB 2004: 104)

Figure 1: Share of Population living on less than 2 USD a day
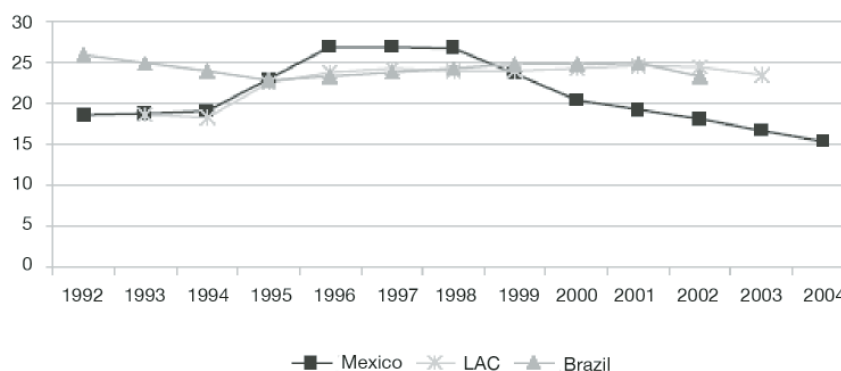
Source: WB staff estimates based on household surveys

Definition of poverty

There seems to be no official definition or uniformed criterion on how to define the concept of poverty, however the World Bank states:

> "Poverty has many dimensions such as human abilities - especially the education and health situation - the access to infrastructure, income, vulnerability, and social inclusion. The recognition of those multiple dimensions can be conceived as an imperfect approach to the analysis made by Amartya Sen of the wellbeing in terms of freedom (or ability) of someone to choose their life. It depends on their human skills and their ability to turn them into "beings and doers." This ability is mainly determined by the economic context - overall, the opportunities of a productive job - and by the political and social context in which people live". (World Bank 2004: cvi)

This article will not discuss possible definitions, or analyse other categorizations of poverty, moderate poverty, and extreme poverty that might justify or lighten the impact of the term. Hypothetically speaking, if all people on this planet had a free choice they would choose a state of life that safeguard their wellbeing and provide the best life conditions possible. In general terms, this is impossible, and moreover, the special geographical limits such as natural resources and specific regions constitute the different climatic and geopolitical life conditions of mankind.

Basically, poverty relates to the income of people and to the possibility of satisfying their primary needs: food, housing, and health but also the conditions that prepare one for work such as education is of great importance. Examining the statistics of Mexico, the average education level of the Economically Active Population amounts 8.6 years - a little over the secondary school level. As research of the reasons for poverty in Mexico would imply an analysis of another type, this article will outline the impact of poverty and establish a relation between the use of the information and libraries.

Based on the documentary infrastructure (libraries, documentary centres, archives, bookstores, publishers, and the written press, just to mention some), Meneses identified in 2003 the following relation of negative effects and their impact on poor countries (Meneses 2003):

- Social (unemployment, extreme poverty, social disintegration, violence, impunity)
- Cultural (illiteracy, poor schooling)
- Political (wars, coup d'état, and state crimes)
- Economic (external debt, low income, currency devaluation)
- Morals (corruption, illegal enrichment, censorship)
- Health (epidemics, high infant mortality rate, various diseases).

At present, the following factors affect the possibility of creating a functional infrastructure in Mexico: low generation of jobs, salaries, social security affiliation, access to education, and health conditions. As will be later discussed, this situation affects both the establishing of libraries and the creation of conditions for a wider use of information through Communication and Information Technologies (ICTs) - specifically, access to the Internet as a new platform of work for information professionals and their users.

Table 2 Libraries by type, 1990 - 2005

Year	Libraries	Public	Specialized	School
1990	6 964	3 287	131	3 546
1991	7 142	3 455	130	3 557
1992	8 245	4 263	144	3 838
1993	9 151	4 895	169	4 087
1994	9 728	5 471	174	4 083
1995	9 840	5 521	186	4 133
1996	9 622	5 631	177	3 814
1997	9 970	5 686	184	4 100
1998	10 382	5 737	177	4 468
1999	10 492	5 802	176	4 514
2000	10 841	6 109	175	4 557
2001	11 493	6 263	212	5 018
2002	11 723	6 413	222	5 088
2003	11 952	6 610	224	5 118
2004 [E]	12 215	6 810	224	5 181
2005 [E]	12 542	7 010	231	5 301

NOTE: Reached goals, January - December.
[E] Estimated figures

Availability of libraries and access to ICTs

According to official data covering the period 1990-2005, there are 12,542 libraries in Mexico, including public libraries, specialized and school libraries but excluding academic libraries. From 1990-2005 the number of libraries almost doubled from 6,964 in 1990 till 12,542 registered in 2005 - a growth of 5,578 libraries. (Table 2) (INEGa)

In total, the 12,542 libraries hold a collection of 62.2 million volumes (books, periodicals, thesis, documents, technical reports, manuals, records, slides, films, micro-films, maps, globes, and didactic games). A total of 109.800,000 enquiries were registered in 2005. (INEGId)

In Mexico, the use of ICTs is not registered as part of library service statistics. Official reports for 2005, however, indicate that the main use of ICTs continues to be ranked as follows: television (92.7%), followed by stationary phones (48.8%) and cell phones (42.0%, cable TV (19.3%), computers (18.4%), and finally, Internet use (9%) (INEGIc). Official data do not report on the number of people accessing the Internet outside their homes but Stuart Hamilton (2006) indicates that only 14.3% of the total Mexican population has access to the Internet.

Table 3: Households with ICT equipment by type of equipment, 2001 - 2005

Type	2001 [a]		2002 a		2004 b		2005 c	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Households with computers	2 743 749	11.7	3 742 824	15.2	4 744 184	18.0	4 765 669	18.4
Internet connection	1 440 399	6.1	1 833 504	7.4	2 301 720	8.7	2 318 243	9.0
Television	21 602 234	91.8	23 092 909	93.6	24 131 830	91.7	23 919 829	92.7
Cable TV	3 181 370	13.5	3 785 962	15.3	5 064 252	19.2	4 992 830	19.3
Stationary phones d	9 419 825	40.0	11 171 798	45.3	12 614 295	47.9	12 603 633	48.8
Cell phones e	ND	NA	ND	NA	9 285 284	35.3	10 843 428	42.0

NOTE: Proportion per total of homes. · a Figures for the month of December. · b Figures for the month of June.
c Estimated figures for the month of July. · d After 2004, includes homes with cell phones and stationary phones.
e After 2004, includes homes with stationary phones and cell phones · NA No applicable. · ND   No available.
SOURCE: INEGI. National Survey of Availability and Use of Information Technologies in Households.

It should be stated that information and the use of it, either via information units or ICTs - specifically the Internet, do not tackle primary needs such as: food, health, and housing. Information does, however, help people engage in economic activities, and development of a better life for individuals, families, local communities, municipalities, institutions, nations and the population worldwide. In Mexico, though, such results are still to be seen. Neither higher levels of education nor cultural activities are politically prioritised issues on national level. Information programmes are not followed up, and information of the population is not part of the culture of Mexican authorities.

NOTE: Annual goals, January -December. Includes public, specialized, and school libraries.
E Estimated figures.
SOURCE: PR. Quinto Informe de Gobierno, 2005. Anexo. México, D.F., 2005

Table 4 (INEGId), presents the increase in the number of libraries from 1990 to 2005. To compare with, there was a decline in volumes of the bibliographic collections in 1993 and 2001, 1.1 million volumes and 3.3 million volumes, respectively. Also, a decline in inquiries was registered for the same period, especially the figures of 1995, 1997-1999, and 2004 should be noted.

Studying the structure of the Mexican library system with a total of 12, 542 libraries (5,301 school libraries, 231 specialized, and 7,010 public) it is to be assumed that, for various reasons, public libraries have the more impact on the population: They are larger in number; they are not equally placed within the national territory, and in theory, they offer services for a longer period of time. The extension of opening hours is a decision taken by the authorities on states or municipality level. National statistics on the use of libraries only register visits to libraries and do not include information about the socio economic profile of users, information inquiries, or satisfaction of users. However, a survey on reading habits from 2005 would be a good starting point for further examination. The survey was conducted by the Federal Consumer Comptroller (PROFECO) that is in charge of the General Management of Consumer Studies. The following characteristics of the survey should be noted:

Table 4: Selected indicators: National net of libraries, 1990 - 2005

Year	Number of libraries	Bibliographic collection (Mill. of volumes)	Average registered inquiries
1990	6 964	24.9	89.5
1991	7 142	29.2	102.9
1992	8 245	35.4	109.3
1993	9 151	34.3	123.7
1994	9 728	39.7	127.9
1995	9 840	41.2	116.3
1996	9 622	42.2	124.0
1997	9 970	45.1	123.8
1998	10 382	48.9	119.1
1999	10 492	55.2	116.7
2000	10 841	58.4	117.2
2001	11 493	55.1	123.5
2002	11 723	55.4	132.8
2003	11 952	56.4	134.1
2004 E	12 215	60.6	107.8
2005 E	12 542	62.2	109.8

Size of the sample:
- A total of 1,133 people of 17 years and older, representing the general population, and living in Mexico City Metropolitan Area (AMCM) were interviewed

Schedule:
- April 13-21, 2005

Reliability:
- Level of reliability 95%
- Margin of error +-1.8%

The survey does not examine the reading habits of the entire population, it provides, however, a reliable picture of the habits of people living in the Federal District and the nearby municipalities - that is Mexico City Metropolitan Area, which has an overcrowding 20 million residents representing almost a quarter of the total population of the country. The survey, basically, shows results on the use of libraries, how often people read and which type of materials they prefer, and most importantly who, compared to income level, is reading. The results of the survey read as follows (PROFECO 2005):
- People who like to read have a monthly income of $863 USD (1 USD= 11 pesos)
- People who read more often are between 33 and 47 years old, and 62 years and older.
- The higher the education level, the more people read; covering education level from secondary to post grade.
- The majority of people with a monthly income up to $370 USD read fewer books by their own initiative.
- The majority of people read at home, only 2% read

in libraries.
- More than 80% of the interviewed had never visited a library.

As stated by Silvia C. Vattimo (2004:1): "*Among the obstacles to foster reading habits is poverty, stopping people of accessing books, schools, and libraries.*"

Analyzing the results of the survey, it must be questioned if the investment in library infrastructure had been sufficient - as has been the case in other parts of the cultural sector; libraries also need to focus on the formation of users. Traditionally, Mexican libraries have copied the model of North American libraries that is characterised by cultural and geographic differences, as well as the economic limitations typical of library systems not subjected to national library legislation. Despite the differences, it is expected that public libraries function as "*the University of the People,*" safeguarding equal access opportunities for all. In this regard, libraries have an important role to play to further access to information systems for the poor.
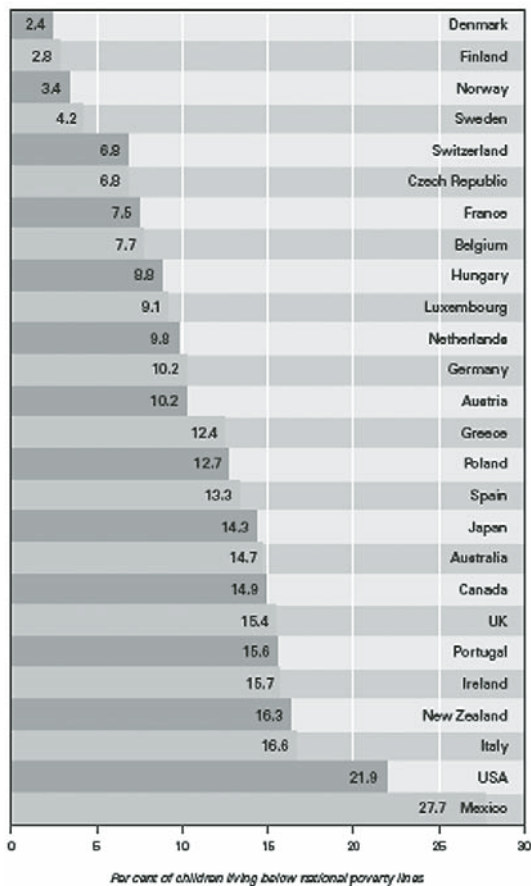
A possible answer to the obligatory question, why do children and young people not visit the library could be that they only consider public libraries as places where one does one's homework. Another explanation could be that the profile of Mexican libraries is different from that stated in the IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 1994: "*The public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision- making and cultural development of the individual and social groups.*" (IFLA 1994) Moreover, if reading is considered unfamiliar or distant from the immediate context of family or social activities for the major-

ity of the poor, how can we expect access and use of information to become an important factor in the reduction of poverty?

Poverty is not exclusive

There is no concrete evidence suggesting that use

Figure 2: Child Poverty in Rich Countries*

Country	Value
Denmark	2,4
Finland	2,8
Norway	3,4
Sweden	4,2
Switzerland	6,8
Czech Republic	6,8
France	7,5
Belgium	7,7
Hungary	8,8
Luxembourg	9,1
Netherlands	9,8
Germany	10,2
Austria	10,2
Greece	12,4
Poland	12,7
Spain	13,3
Japan	14,3
Australia	14,7
Canada	14,9
UK	15,4
Portugal	15,6
Ireland	15,7
New Zealand	16,3
Italy	16,6
USA	21,9
Mexico	27,7

Per cent of children living below national poverty lines

*The bars show the percentage of children living in 'relative,' poverty defined as households with an income below 50 % of the national median income. Source: UNICEF (2005): Child Poverty in Rich Countries.

of libraries and access to information through the Internet could reduce poverty in Mexico. Furthermore, figure 2 below suggests that despite well-established infrastructures and investments in resources to further develop these structures, rich countries have not yet reached the stage of total reduction of poverty. In countries such as United States of America, New Zealand, Ireland, Portugal, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, among others, 10 to 20 % of children are still living "*in relative poverty*" that is below the national poverty level, thus poverty is not exclusive of emergent countries. (Figure 2) (UNICEF 2005)

Opportunities to reduce poverty

No literature exists discussing the participation of libraries to the reduction of poverty in Mexico - this includes literature about the participation of information professionals as individuals, or group, or as subjects of investigations and research by institutions or universities. The official definition of the function of libraries does not go beyond considering libraries as,

> "All organised collections of documents beyond five hundred titles, including either books or periodicals, graphic materials and audiovisuals that employees offer to customers so they use resources for research, educative, informational, and recreational purposes."

In a wider sense, the state has implemented programmes that "*combine conditioned transferences*" (of economic resources) so low income households send their children to school and visit health clinics. "*Opportunities*" is the most representative programme of these transferences (BM 2004: xviii). Another example of supporting the reduction of poverty is subsidies for specific services and food products.

Beyond limited statistic data on the number of libraries and access to data, there exists no national system that provides information or indicators about the situation of libraries and their services. However, in the survey mentioned above, the low effectiveness and impact of access to public libraries - at least among the population in Mexico City Metropolitan Area (AMCM) was documented. Likewise the goal of libraries was tested:
the "*purpose to provide information, materials, and educative, cultural, and recreational activities to all the residents in their community, and offer free services to people from all employment levels and all ages*" (INEGI).

The results of the survey present a very concerning scenario: more than three quarters of the population *have never visited a library.*

As Cháidez states:
"The reduction of poverty is more than a process to find resources, it is also a process of increasing liberties, possibilities of conscious choices, accessibility to information and not only to the use of it but to be able to transform it" (Cháidez 2005). Since no specialized studies exist on poverty and the impact of libraries and access to information, information professionals are challenged to engage in research projects investigating economic investments related to infrastructures, materials and human resources. The results of such projects would provide a platform for a fruitful professional debate on the future role of libraries.

Information professionals must take on a social role, helping users to advance their lives through projects on participation in the information and knowledge society, and through the building of cognitive networks. It is important and necessary to restate that despite possible improvements of information services, information professionals will not reduce poverty as such. The population of Mexico - and of other countries - must find immediate answers to its primary needs such as food, health, and housing. Indirectly, information professionals can however influence the process by help improving the conditions of the civic, educational, health, and social solidarity sectors.

Furthermore, information professionals must engage in the following activities:
- Influence those in charge of the planning, evaluation, and implementation of national public policies to impact the decision-making processes so libraries become agents of social improvement and economic equity;
- Participate in the implementation of an information system that can generate knowledge about poverty reduction programmes (Videla 2004);
- Increase the political, civic, and institutional sectors' participating in library circuits (users, librarians, authorities, and government); and,
- Promote reading and the use of information systems amongst library users

Conclusion

Library services and information access through the Internet do not directly reduce poverty. The population of any country requires that in the first place, its primary needs: food, housing, and health be taken care of.

The number of public libraries does not guarantee an increase in visits to libraries. In Mexico, more than three quarters of the population living in Mexico City Metropolitan Area (AMCM) have never visited a library. Therefore, the number of visits to libraries and use of their services in the rest of the country is likely to be on the same level or even below.

People who read the more have an income higher than the formally considered subsistence salary. Young people visit libraries but read less than adults. A possible explanation is the number of distractions and pastimes such as electronic games and audiovisual media - that are at their disposal as well as their economic situation.

The population prefers the use of the following Communication and Information Technologies (TIC's) - ranked according to importance: television, stationary phones, cell phones, cable TV, computers and finally, the Internet which is generally used as an immediate mean of communication and a virtual entertainment space, and more seldom as a knowledge tool.

No national system exists that can measure the efficiency of public library services or the performances of libraries in relation to the different social substratum levels - income, education, cultural, geographic location, gender, and religious participation. Likewise, there are no indicators to measure the satisfaction of library users in relation to reading practices which seems to explain the lack of success of federal programmes such as *Towards a Reading Country* and *Libraries as Classrooms*.

Poverty is not exclusive of emergent countries. Therefore, we must work together and create programmes on how best to use and manage information that can advance productive micro economic processes and the expectations of users with regards to knowledge economy and different working practices.

Information professionals must participate in the decision making process and contribute to development in relation to politics, legislation, national planning, and the implementation of information systems that support the various levels of society.

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