Towards an Assessment of Public Library Value: Statistics on the Policy Makers’ Agenda

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents methodology, early findings, possible applications of results and lessons learnt from the research study “Public libraries: value, trust and satisfaction”. The study was conducted in Latvia as the part of the impact assessment plan within the public library development project “Third Father’s Son”. The project’s goal was to improve people’s quality of life by strengthening the capacities of public libraries to facilitate better and proactive use of resources offered by free access to information technology and the Internet. In this paper, the author introduces practical results from measurement of use-oriented value of public libraries by using information from the ecology approach and identifying the role of the public library within a context of other information sources used by the public.

Keywords: Information Ecology, Information Needs, Public Libraries, Satisfaction, Trust, Value

INTRODUCTION

Research on trust and value of public libraries has never been done before in Latvia. The research study “Public libraries: value, trust and satisfaction” has been conducted in Latvia as the part of the impact assessment plan within the public library development project “Third Father’s Son”. The project is co-financed by the government of Latvia and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation within the Global Libraries program. All local government authorities with their 874 public libraries are participating in the project the main goal of which is to improve people’s quality of life by strengthening and using the capacities of public libraries to facilitate better and proactive use of resources offered by free access to IT and the Internet.

It is expected that the project “Third Father’s Son” will raise the prestige and image of public libraries in society in general and value of public libraries in local communities. The project is beneficial to many people in Latvia, especially the rural population, in self-education, boosting the effectiveness of their working lives, developing social communication and getting better access to variety of services. The project also aims to motivate existing and to attract new library users that could benefit socially and economically from the new technologies and free Internet access in public libraries.

Since all public libraries receive government funding, librarians must advocate for...
support to provide and sustain services to their changing communities. Data and evidence on library value is a powerful tool for changing attitudes and actions towards libraries. Results from the study will help librarians in their advocacy efforts to demonstrate the value of libraries within their communities to their government bodies, funders and decision makers.

**CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

An “impact assessment” concept and measurement of social and economic impact of library services on local community and individual library user was novelty in Latvia at the beginning of the project implementation in 2006. An application of developed impact assessment model in Latvia was the first step in measuring the value of IT related public library services and have led to substantial improvement of national statistics in the library field. An implementation of impact assessment plan has started with the baseline study in 2007 and will continue in longitudinal study till 2010 that will result in the final report on main social and economic benefits and impacts of library services and activities. After impact assessment that will be done by the project implementation organization all the meaningful and important indicators will be incorporated into national statistics and data will be collected on the annual basis. Besides main impact assessment studies several in-depth studies are planned that will supplement main studies with more specific in-depth data and evidence (Figure 1).

After public procurement by project implementation organization the State Agency “Culture Information Systems” the research study “Public libraries: value, trust and satisfaction” has been carried out by the Advanced Social and Political Research Institute as the separate in-depth study that supplements other studies planned within impact assessment plan (Figure 1).

**APPROACH TO THE STUDY**

The theory and practice shows that various terms – impact assessment, outcomes measurement, value assessment, social and economic benefits, and social impacts a.o. – have been used by writers and researchers to explore the question of how important are libraries in the lives of library users or what is the role of library in community empowerment or personal development of community members (Wavell et al., 2002). The recent research on the value of public library within a community can be broadly grouped into studies of economic impact and studies of social impact. Economic effects of public library services can be assessed by using different methods that can include economic impact analysis, cost benefit analysis, measurement of return on investment or time allocation.

![Figure 1. Impact assessment plan](image-url)
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