

## Library services for immigrants and refugees: actions and principles from a global perspective

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### Abstract:

*The concept of “multicultural library” presented in the Multicultural Library Manifesto, endorsed by IFLA in 2006 and UNESCO in 2009, lays out interesting principles for offering culturally and linguistically relevant, appropriate, and accessible library services in the culturally diverse societies shaped partly by immigrants and refugees. It paves a smooth path for social inclusion and coherence in a world that is becoming more heterogeneous with an increasingly number of immigrants and refugees. Libraries have a long tradition of providing sanctuary to all people who seek information, space and services to understand and adapt to the changing and globalizing environment. In IFLA’s manifesto, “cultural diversity” or “multiculturalism” refers to the harmonious co-existence and interaction of different cultures. It acts as the foundation of our collective strength in our local communities and in our global society. Building on these values, libraries of all types should reflect, support and promote cultural and linguistic diversity at the international, national, and local levels, and thus work for cross-cultural dialogue and active citizenship. In this paper, I summarize the principles presented in the manifesto and the guidelines published by IFLA. From literature review and survey of library services, I discuss actions and implementation of the concept of multicultural library around the world in the last decade responding to users consisting of more and more immigrants and refugees.*

**Keywords:** library service, immigrant, refugee, diversity, multicultural library.

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### Introduction

In a world that is becoming more heterogeneous with an increasingly number of immigrants and refugees, the concept of multicultural library appears to be more important than ever. In 2015, people lived outside their original countries reached 244 million (UNFPA n.d.). Libraries have a long tradition of providing sanctuary to all people who seek information, space and services to understand and adapt to the changing and globalizing environment. The concept of “multicultural library” presented in the *Multicultural Library Manifesto*, endorsed by IFLA in 2006 and UNESCO in 2009, lays out interesting principles for offering culturally and linguistically relevant, appropriate, and accessible library services in the culturally diverse societies shaped partly by immigrants and refugees.

The concept of multicultural library paves a smooth path for social inclusion and coherence. In IFLA's manifesto, "cultural diversity" or "multiculturalism" refers to the harmonious co-existence and interaction of different cultures. It acts as the foundation of our collective strength in our local communities and in our global society. Building on these values, libraries of all types should reflect, support and promote cultural and linguistic diversity at the international, national, and local levels, and thus work for cross-cultural dialogue and active citizenship. As learning, cultural and information centres, libraries indeed play a significant role as a welcoming space and gateway for immigrants and refugees to the cultural diverse society (IFLA Library Services to Multicultural Populations Section 2015). In this paper, I summarize the principles presented in the manifesto and the guidelines published by IFLA. From literature review and survey of library services, I discuss actions and implementation of the concept of multicultural library around the world in the last decade responding to users consisting of more and more immigrants and refugees.

### **Principles**

The guiding principle of the multicultural library manifesto is that "each individual in our global society has the right to a full range of library and information services." In the interest of supporting this principle and to address cultural and linguistic diversity, libraries should

- serve all members of the community without discrimination based on cultural and linguistic heritage;
- provide information in appropriate languages and scripts;
- give access to a broad range of materials and services reflecting all communities and needs;
- employ staff to reflect the diversity of the community, who are trained to work with and serve diverse communities.

The manifesto further notes that special attention should be paid to groups which are often marginalized in culturally diverse societies: minorities, asylum seekers and refugees, residents with a temporary residence permit, migrant workers, and indigenous communities (IFLA Library Services to Multicultural Populations Section 2015).

### **Challenges for implementing the multicultural library principles**

Following the publication of the manifesto, IFLA Library Services to Multicultural Populations Section released the guidelines for implementing the principles and values set forward in the manifesto (IFLA Library Services to Multicultural Populations Section 2009). This document emphasizes that that library services to multicultural communities should be seen as an integral part of any library's full range of library and information services, rather than in isolation or as an addition to traditional library services. Realizing the difficulties of realizing this manifesto, some challenges that libraries may face in delivering equitable service in practice are discussed:

- scarcity of published resources in minority languages, especially where orality is strong, may make it difficult or impossible to provide library materials to the same standard as for majority languages
- The demand for library services is a crucial and variable factor. For a variety of reasons, demand may not correspond to the proportion of the population in a particular multicultural community.
- Low demand may reflect inadequate provision, poor or inappropriate services, low expectations of the users, inadequate publicity or unfamiliarity with library services.

- Decisions on service level provision need to be based upon community analysis and needs assessment, which includes research into the reasons for the lack or low level of demand.
- In contrast, people from a highly literate multicultural community may make a disproportionate demand on the library service, which may be unable to be met without compromising the equity of service provision.

### **Strategies for achieving a robust multicultural library service model**

Recognizing values of multiculturalism, fulfilling international responsibilities and assisting with the immigration policy, governments and other decision-making bodies are motivated to establish and adequately fund libraries and library systems to offer free library and information services to culturally diverse communities. It is a responsibility of all library authorities to meet the needs of their multicultural communities, particularly for new immigrants and refugees, whose former information search and use experience may become inadequate (Loyd 2013).

The library should cater for its administrative functions in a way that assures best practices are followed in order provide equitable service to all members of the community. The success of library services to a culturally diverse community is largely dependent on the staff delivering them. The roles of staff should be determined by the objectives of the multicultural library service plan. While it is important to have staff with the language skills that mirror those spoken in the community, it is equally important for staff with good communication skills to work with the community, establishing and maintaining contacts to ensure effective service delivery.

A collection management policy for multilingual and multicultural resources should form an integral part of the library's overall collection management policy. The content of the policy should be developed through consultation with multicultural communities. According to a Sweden study on immigrant's use of libraries, for example, there is a need for multicultural libraries with larger stocks of foreign literature on the library shelves for direct access to visitors with immigrant background. This study also finds that school books for primary and secondary school in immigrants' first languages facilitate understanding of concepts and contexts. Multicultural libraries can reconsider and purchase more non-fiction and school books, in subjects such as natural sciences, in as many languages as possible (Atlestam etc. 2011).

In some cases, libraries may participate in the development of multilingual/multicultural resources with input from the communities that they serve. Today, many interesting resources are available in the Internet for free. Making use of these resources seems necessary in view of limited collection funding. This has particular relevance to multicultural communities that lack printed publications, audio-visual resources or web content in their own languages, as well as to geographically dispersed communities. Libraries provide an ideal environment for individuals and communities to create their own web content by utilising and customising Web 2.0 and 3.0 technologies to meet their own needs. Libraries can facilitate the use of these technologies by providing the hardware, software and training for their communities.

Understanding the needs of library users appears to be a prerequisite for the success of a multicultural library. We can achieve that by performing a community analysis in consideration of the characteristics of population and by conducting needs assessment to study the information required and used by the community. This understanding can help us

be informed in collection development and library promotion. From Lloyd's studies on the information literacy practices of refugees, new comers prefers getting relevant information in oral, social and visual format rather than written materials (2013). Immigrants and refugees desire basic information relating to their settlement, such as health, housing, employment, education and food. For new settlers, information from their home country and information that connects them to their new lives are equally important. Refugees may require additional support in building trust because of the trauma caused by the circumstances of their home country (Lloyd 2013).

Libraries should participate in the life and welfare of the community. This may include providing multicultural communities with information to address their self-determined goals, and involvement and taking initiative in local events such as cultural activities, festivals, and the commemorative events of the multicultural groups in the area. Encouragement and support of literacy, including digital literacy, is an appropriate function for libraries. Libraries can implement literacy programmes in the national language/s and in other languages for immigrants and refugees who have literacy challenges.

There may be many small populations within a multicultural community. As a result, it may prove difficult to find resources to provide equitable information resources in so many languages. Sharing with different library systems, and among public and academic and other libraries, in order to meet linguistic and information needs of the community can help libraries to tackle this challenge. Partnering with multicultural communities provide many advantages. For example, there will be more points of information and there is greater likelihood that they'll know of the existence of the library's multicultural and multilingual services.

### **Actions and services all over the world**

Most major urban public library systems in developed countries have partnerships with the government's immigration department to develop resources and programming for immigrants. Toronto Public Library, Vancouver Public Library, Stockholm Public Library Los Angeles Public Library, Queens Public Library, Oslo Public Library, Norway Copenhagen Public Libraries and Hartford Public Library provide good examples. They partner with settlement counselors and offer language classes. Collaborating with government units or non-profit organizations, libraries serve as an hub for newcomer settlement services, which include providing information and support about legal, childcare, housing, health, education; providing support with applications for citizenship, visa renewal, subsidized housing and other government benefits (IFLA Library Services to Multicultural Populations Section 2009).

In response to the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, public libraries all over the world take up the responsibilities to welcome and provide information and services for refugees to their new home. IFLA Public Library Section's website provides many important updates and examples about these services (IFLA Public Library Section 2015). The European Bureau of Library, Information, and Documentation Associations issued a press release on the topic "Public Libraries in Europe Welcome Refugees" and its website provides a comprehensive list of related activities across Europe (EBLIDA n.d.).

Health information is a recurring theme in the discussion of information needs for immigrants and refugees. The Refugee Health Information Network (RHIN - <http://www.rhin.org>) is an electronic resource designed to address this need. It makes accessible culturally and

linguistically appropriate health and medical information in order to improve health services for refugees and asylum seekers. Much of this information will clearly be of value to immigrants as well. The core of RHIN is a database of culturally appropriate, multilingual health information materials that a health care provider could use with, or give to, a refugee or immigrant patient at or after a visit to a clinic. This Web site is freely available on the Internet so anyone, including the patients themselves, can access the information. Approximately 1,800 items are included in the database with over 70 different languages represented. Many of the documents are available in multiple languages (Dutcher etc. 2008).

Arizona Public Libraries' services to Spanish speakers demonstrate a library's openness to serving immigrants, particularly Mexican and Latin American immigrants. In order to provide library staff who can provide services for immigrants, the University of Arizona's School of Information Resources and Library Science developed the Knowledge River program, specifically designed to get Latino and Native American students involved in the profession. The program offers scholarships to Latino and Native American students, but also incorporates diversity and cultural perspectives into the study of information and communication behaviors. In addition to financial aid and curricular reform, the program focuses on ensuring students form supportive cohorts, take advantage of mentoring, and participate in work experience. The Institute of Museum and Library Services and other local stakeholders have provided significant funding for the Knowledge River program, making its existence a visible marker of professional support for Latino librarianship in Arizona (Adkins 2013).

The Library System of the Municipality of Milan has implemented the project called "Come! I'll see you in the library." This project involves five branch libraries and it will be extended to the whole Milan library system. By means of four initiatives, namely Living Library, Animateca, Let's surf together, Babel's feast, the Milan libraries organize various social and cultural activities together with private partners, cultural associations and social cooperatives. Using a variety of media, such as theatre, visual art and storytelling, libraries become a special place where immigrant and refugee users can also become promoters of unknown cultures, to spur dialogues, becoming a vehicle of social integration. This group of users are invited to tell stories that are part of their own culture to be transformed occasionally into plays to be performed in theatres and recorded in audio and video clips (Vimercati etc. 2011).

The Danish Central Library for South Schleswig (DCLS), headquartered in Flensburg, Germany, demonstrates an interesting example of multicultural libraries. It primarily serves "the informational and cultural needs of the approximately 50,000 ethnic Danes residing on the German side of the Danish-German frontier. The library is one of the world's best examples of how a national minority population can receive robust educational and cultural services about its ethnic homeland, while actively promoting civic engagement in its adopted country" (Hancks 2011). This library "has a special responsibility to promote Danish and Nordic culture to its users. To that end, it schedules a wide spectrum of classes, workshops, study circles, and other educational opportunities which give participants rich opportunities to connect with, and relate to, their Danish and Nordic heritage" (ibid).

The website MyLanguage (<http://mylanguage.gov.au/>) developed by Australian libraries enables people to find information in their first language. In addition to providing access to Australia's multilingual collection online and print, there is a multilingual glossary facilitates the generation of professional signage tool for libraries. The glossary contains common

library phrases such as book sale, storytime, borrow books here, in 49 languages (Steed 2011).

Libraries without Borders brings multicultural libraries (Ideas Box) to refugee camps in 20 countries, including camps in Lebanon and Jordan for refugees fleeing from the Syrian conflict, Australia where it will be used in Indigenous communities, and low-income or immigrant neighbourhoods in New York City. Each box of library contains “50 e-readers loaded with 5,000 books and 250 hard copies of books. A TV and projection screen can be used to watch a collection of about 100 films. Five HD cameras permit participatory journalism and film-making. Laptops are loaded with educational content such as videos from the Khan Academy and MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). The equipment also allows for workshops on coding and computer programming” (Glazer 2015).

There are many more examples all over world as libraries carry on the tradition to serve people who need information and library services regardless of their background. The multicultural library concept will continue to evolve for providing an adequate model for libraries to serve the increasingly heterogeneous and diverse users.

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