Gathering and using systematic evidence of public library service outcomes and of public perceptions of libraries to secure sustainability: the Global Libraries experience

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Abstract:

This paper introduces the Global Libraries initiative (GL) of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and their focus on applying evidence of change, through a process of impact planning and assessment leading to advocacy. The authors describe the evolution of the GL approach to impact planning and assessment from the early stages of work with country grantees that focused primarily on performance measurement, through an increasing focus on assessing the impact of the program interventions on users and their lives, to the more recent work which has introduced a common impact measurement system (known as CIMS). They then describe the purpose and nature of CIMS and introduce the required and optional indicators across seven categories: digital inclusion, health, education, economic development, communication, culture & leisure, and government & governance. This part of the paper draws of the shared learning of the country teams engaged in the GL work and particularly the Impact Specialists who are an integral part of each of these teams.

The authors then explain the reasons for commissioning a major Cross-Europe survey of 17 EU-countries that arose from discussions between the GL team and country-team members of the five Grantee countries which are part of the European Union. GL commissioned TNS (an international market survey organisation) to conduct a survey of perceptions of public libraries drawn from the general public, library users and users of public access computers in libraries, concentrating on questions that would provide evidence of whether there is scope for public libraries to enhance their role by offering services that are attuned to EU policies.

Finally, some headline results of this survey are presented and the subsequent work on using the results in advocacy at the EU level, led by the Reading and Writing Foundation, is outlined.

Global Libraries country grants and impact evaluation: the beginnings

The Global Libraries initiative (GL) of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (referred to from here on as the Foundation) provides access to information through technology in public libraries across entire countries and focuses on developing and transitioning countries. GL awards multi-year grants to support efforts to understand local information needs, purchase equipment for libraries that can help meet these needs, train library staff, and help libraries build public support for long-term funding.

The international public library development work of the Foundation began with two grants to Chile and Mexico commencing in 2002. When the **Mexico** programme began, only 2% of their public libraries had computers. By March 2008, 2,728 of Mexico's public libraries (38%) were connected to the internet through 15,000 computers. Although their evaluation concentrated on performance measurement the program was able to show substantial change, with libraries in all 31 states and the Federal District participating in the program, providing 450,000 hours of computer training of library users.

The Programme in **Chile** began in 2002 and since then three grants have been received from the Foundation, leading to three impact assessment studies being conducted. For the first grant from 2002 to 2005 the team undertook a panel longitudinal study to establish a baseline and then to allow monitoring of users and non-users of public libraries throughout this period. To achieve this, they monitored the same public library users and non-users, or people with similar characteristics, to see the main changes or effects in their lives. They looked at differences between users and non-users of public libraries, such as differences in internet access at home, skills and use of ICT (differentiating by gender, age, ethnicity and rural or urban location). During this period, internet access by users in public libraries increased from 33 to 75%, whereas the rate of increase in home internet access by non-library users advanced by only 7% (to 16%).

However, by 2009 the Internet access situation had changed as a result of a mass increase in computers at home, use of smart phones and greater connectivity in the country. The problem became more complex and the focus shifted from bridging the internet gap to digital inclusion; the corresponding evaluation focus moved towards use of social networks and web promotion of economic activities. These demonstrated that the program was very significant in rural and, especially, isolated areas, and also that public libraries were the only place with free internet access.

Thanks to this work and the associated active dissemination of findings, the program has been fully funded by the State of Chile since 2005.

From performance measurement to changing people's lives

The next group of Foundation country grants (to Botswana, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Ukraine and Vietnam) was funded under the umbrella of the Global Libraries initiative. Although evaluation of the impact of the country programmes on people's lives was not a core feature of the initial country grant proposals, by 2007 it was clear that such an element was needed, doubly so because country teams charged with implementing the programmes were encouraged to recruit evaluation specialists to take this work forward. It is not surprising that there is variation in how the country teams (if not the evaluation specialists) saw the overall significance of this work. Other factors also came into play: for example, where country teams were embedded within the national public library structure (e.g. Latvia and Lithuania) there were usually fewer problems in sustaining the work (and its evaluation) after the expiry of the country grant. In other countries (such as Bulgaria,

Romania and Ukraine) sustainability of the performance measurement and evaluation work became a significant preoccupation.

In the case of **Poland,** planning for impact was based on extensive research: an in-depth needs assessment was carried out during the planning phase of the program in 2008, leading to an impact assessment framework to guide on-going evaluation and then an ex-post evaluation after each of the three rounds of the program (a new batch of libraries was added each time). This allowed not only for constant refining and improvement of team activities, but also gave initial input of data for assessing impact. (For an earlier report on evaluation work in this programme, see Kochanowicz, 2012.)

Until 2008, when an 'Impact Planning and Assessment Roadmap' was introduced, country grantees were not given specific guidance on how to evaluate the impact of their programmes on people's lives. This is hardly surprising, since the first book that dealt systematically with evaluating impact in public libraries was not published until two years earlier (Markless and Streatfield, 2006). Although the Roadmap prescribed a number of performance measures that public libraries were expected to collect as well as the approved methods for doing this (all derived from the relevant international standards)[1] there were no mandatory requirements for impact evaluation at this stage. Instead, the impact specialists (as the country-level evaluators were increasingly called) were encouraged to adopt country-specific impact indicators and collection methods in line with their country grant priorities.

Towards common impact measurement

However, the impact specialists were soon ready to take on the challenge of further standardization across countries in order to be able to tell a compelling international impact story, encouraged in this by the central Global Libraries team who wanted to see a more coherent outcomes-focused approach to programme delivery. The result of significant effort in this area was the **Common Impact Measurement System** (CIMS) which was developed throughout most of 2012 and launched in 2013. CIMS is intended to enable countries to compare their progress with that of other grantees and provide the programme as a whole with evidence of the effects of this major international intervention. Data collected through CIMS enables public libraries to shift their focus from the services they provide to the outcomes they help individuals and communities to realize.

The CIMS framework includes required and optional indicators across seven categories where public libraries are known to be capable of making a difference to their users: digital inclusion, health, education, economic development, communication, culture & leisure, and government & governance. Each of these areas is broken down into (a total of 42) required impact indicators; by careful grouping, relevant data for all of these can be collected through a mere 20 survey questions (eleven content questions and nine common demographics questions). There are a further 53 optional indicators which allow country teams to be systematic when extending their attention beyond the required core. Collecting the data calls for a combination of surveying library visitors and using pop-up surveys where these have been incorporated into the country programme data collection. The guidelines also encourage proper sampling (and estimating, when necessary) to avoid extensive

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[1] ISO 2789:2013, International library statistics, https://www.iso.org/obp/ui/#iso:std:iso:2789:ed-5:v1:en and ISO 11620:2008, Library Performance Indicators, www.iso.org/iso/iso_catalogue/catalogue_tc/catalogue_detail.htm?csnumber=37853

measurement costs and disproportionate levels of effort. Since accurate translation into relevant languages is important for comparison of responses across countries, country teams are required to employ a professional translator and the impact specialist is then expected to review the translation for accuracy in the library context and adjust the text where necessary. Grantees collect the CIMS data annually. They may schedule data collection to meet their needs and their reporting periods. (A fuller description of CIMS can be found in Cottrill *et al.*, in press, 2015A).

An important challenge for the future beyond GL is how to effectively combine CIMS data (which rely upon self-assessment of impact by library users), with systematic collection and analysis of individual stories of change.

Recent country-level evaluation

To pick up the GL impact evaluation narrative, from 2013 onwards the countries listed above that were already nearing the end of their programmes were asked to commission CIMS surveys in addition to their existing evaluation work. New grantees involved with pilot projects or country-level programme implementation (Colombia, Indonesia, Jamaica, Moldova, South Africa, Turkey, as well as Lithuania, which has a follow-on grant) are expected to build CIMS into their evaluation work. However, the idea of localization (measuring local impact in addition to what is required across GL) is still encouraged, as is collecting qualitative evidence of impact (a new Impact Planning and Assessment Guide was produced to aid new impact specialists in all this work). To help complete the picture of continuing change, in 2014 GL commissioned the research firm TNS Global to conduct a CIMS study in four countries where grant programmes have ended: Bulgaria, Lithuania, Botswana, and Mexico. The results of all this and other country-level evaluation work are now being captured in the **GL Data Atlas**, which will be described in a later paper in this session (Schrag *et al.,* 2015)

Whatever their skills and experience before joining their GL country teams, there is a common pattern to how the impact specialists go about the work. All of them have a huge task at the outset in learning about the GL approach to impact planning and assessment, their colleagues, their program and their public library system. They then have a heavy workload in organising needs assessments, baseline surveys and follow-on studies. However, when they reach the stage of having institutionalized the team's approach to impact assessment they start to look at other ways of assessing impact and streamlining performance measurement. This has resulted in a series of innovations (for large-scale public library evaluation) including country-wide return on investment studies (in Latvia and Ukraine), a simplified data processing and an online reporting system for public library managers (both Ukraine), a study of print media depictions of public libraries, assessment of planning efforts undertaken by library managers, and involving non-profit organizations in conducting library research (all in Poland). Other innovations included an approach to securing sustainable impact assessment beyond the GL programme (see Chiranov, 2014), and use of pop-up surveys (see Chiranov, 2011), both in Romania, application of modified Delphi forecasting to assess the changing perceptions of library managers in Lithuania, and studies focused on the nature of the changing digital information world in which libraries function (in Chile). (More detail on all these innovations can be found in Streatfield *et al*. (in press, 2015); more detailed progress reports from the countries mentioned here can be found in Al *et al.* in press, 2015.)

International perceptions of public libraries

One of the main reasons for focusing on the impact of GL country grants is to provide evidence for advocacy as part of the strategy for sustainability of programmes after their GL funding period. (See, for example, the case study of using agricultural subsidies support data in advocacy in Romania in Streatfield *et al.* 2012.)

The GL programme has also addressed the link between impact and advocacy at international level, through the Cross-Europe survey of 17 EU-countries which was commissioned as a result of discussions between the GL team and country-team members of the five Grantee countries that are part of the European Union. Although several of the earlier EU initiatives envisaged significant roles for public libraries, they have not usually featured as identified players in more recent policy initiatives. Growing GL experience in using impact assessment evidence to advocate for sustainable public libraries suggested that any efforts to encourage EU policy makers to see public libraries as potentially significant contributors to implementation of their policies would require robust evidence from beyond the five GL countries to make an effective and convincing case.

In 2010, the European Commission (the executive body of the European Union) put forward its Europe 2020 Growth Strategy (EU 2020), which set a series of ambitious objectives in many development areas related to how individuals access information. Significant areas where the EC set targets included employment, innovation, lifelong learning, and social inclusion. EU2020 called for EU member states to meet milestones in these and other areas by 2020, with the help of local partners.

In late 2012, with funding decisions about EU 2020 objectives on the horizon, GL commissioned a study of 17 EU countries to measure the impact of public library services on social and economic priorities identified in the strategy. The study (the largest interview-based library perceptions study ever conducted) was based on quantitative surveys among public library users (sample size 12,537), library computer users (sample size 11,716), and the general public (sample size 17,816), backed up by interviews with public library users and staff (four group discussions with library computer users and five in-depth interviews with library managers and senior managers in each country).

TNS, an independent global research company, conducted the study in Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and the United Kingdom. These countries were selected to ensure broad regional representation. Together, the participating countries covered more than 90 per cent of the EU population at the time of the study; therefore the results could be generally considered as the EU-wide average.

Since the study was designed with a coordinated advocacy effort in mind, the goal was to collect impact data that would be compelling to EU decision makers. To achieve this GL Advocacy and Impact Specialists in the EU worked together to identify focus areas for the study that would be most applicable to advocacy. They discussed how public libraries as institutions can help meet specific EU 2020 policy objectives, and three priority areas emerged:
- Non-formal and informal learning: new skills and knowledge gained through learning experiences such as organized group trainings and one-on-one consultations with librarians
- Social inclusion: access to public services, such as resources for employment, training, housing, and health among disadvantaged and socially excluded members of society
- Digital inclusion: access and skills to take advantage of the benefits of digital technology
- Researchers aligned the survey questions with how the EU2020 priorities were described and how EU social and economic data were defined in official sources, so the results could be compared with existing public data.
- GL grantees reviewed the survey instrument to ensure that it captured the impact measurements most likely to be useful in their advocacy efforts.

The study found clear evidence of the social and economic impact of public libraries and library services, including impacts in the priority areas identified:

- Nearly 100 million EU adults had used a public library in the last year, and 14 million had used a computer at the library to access the Internet.
- For 1.5 million adults (most frequently Roma, the disabled, the elderly, and the unemployed), public libraries were the only option for accessing the Internet; another 1.9 million people had no other free source of Internet access.
- 24 million adults (1 in 4 public library users) had participated in learning activities at the public library in the last year (particularly senior citizens, ethnic minorities, and the unemployed) including 2.3 million who took a computer training course at the library. In the last year, 1.5 million adults in the EU had used public library computers to apply for jobs and a quarter of a million secured jobs this way.
- 83 per cent of those using Internet in the public library reported a positive benefit across a range of areas, including helping them save time and money, improving their skills, providing access to government services, and increasing their access to employment and health related resources.
- More than 70 per cent of public library users believed that libraries are effective at meeting the needs of their local communities, and more than half said that public libraries deserve more financial support than they receive now.[2]

From impact to advocacy

In early 2013, TNS and GL hosted a meeting of GL grantees and partners throughout the European public library community, including representatives from every country involved in the impact study. At the meeting TNS presented the study findings in depth, and GL facilitated discussions among participants about strategies for packaging and using the findings in their own advocacy activities. This resulted in advocacy activities, conferences, preparation of development guidelines and publications in various countries (examples are shown in Cottrill *et al*., in press 2015B).

GL grantee Civic Agenda led an international advocacy campaign in support of European Parliament Written Declaration 0016/2013 "on the impact of public libraries in European communities." The objective of the campaign was to mobilize and empower advocates in the EU to raise awareness amongst Members of EU Parliament (MEPs) of the economic and social impact of European public libraries. During its three-month campaign window, the Written Declaration received 214 MEP signatures (28% of the European Parliament), representing all 28 EU Member States. The campaign engaged a large online audience through social media. Posts on the Written Declaration Facebook campaign page reached an average of 5,000 people per week, and high profile library advocates shared campaign messages with more than 2 million followers on Twitter. In addition to the 214 MEPs who demonstrated support for public libraries by signing the Written Declaration, the campaign identified a number of especially vocal Parliamentary supporters who can be tapped to help drive future advocacy.

The need for a coordinated advocacy effort at the EU level was by now obvious. GL issued a new grant to organize the individual efforts of its country grantees and partners into a single coordinated advocacy effort at the EU level, called Public Libraries 2020 (PL2020).

PL2020 was established in January 2014, led by the Reading & Writing Foundation, which was founded by Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands. The specific goals of PL2020 were that:

- By 2020 there will be an increase of EU policies supporting the work of public libraries.

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[2] A full report of the study findings can be found here: http://tascha.uw.edu/publications/cross-european-surveyto-measure-users-perceptions-of-the-benefits-of-ict-in-public-libraries/
Individual country reports can be found here: http://tascha.uw.edu/publications-resources/

- By 2016 there will be an increase in the capacity (knowledge and attitudes) of national and regional coalitions/associations to advocate for public libraries at the EU level.

To support these goals, PL2020 is using the impact data in a wide range of advocacy materials and activities. PL2020 has also created a number of advocacy tools using the evidence from the cross-European impact study, including infographics to share impact data with MEPs and EC officials, as well as issuing small advocacy grants.

Conclusion

Over the past decade and more, GL has increasingly encouraged an outcomes-focused approach to evaluation, in which the impact of GL interventions on people's lives is paramount. They have encouraged more consistent evidence collection at country level and have empowered impact specialists in country teams to take on more effective and strategic approaches to performance measurement and impact evaluation and to apply innovative methods to public library evaluation at country level. The impact specialists have shown great willingness to learn from each other and to share their learning with the library evaluation community around the world. Viewing GL as a whole, their approach to learning about and developing practical approaches to impact evaluation and their contribution to the field as exemplified through the Common Impact Measurement System and the advocacy strategy leading to the 17-Country Survey of perceptions of public libraries, constitute an important legacy for the library world and one which should help in the development and transformation of public libraries.

Acknowledgement

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