Commentary

Renewing Albania's Libraries

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We reproduce below the document *New national strategy for Albanian public library development in information society*, by Ramazan Vozga of the National Library of Albania.

The *Journal of Documentation* has, over a period of decades, covered issues of the renovation and renewal of European library systems, following periods of conflict and of isolation. Marianna Tax Choldin (2005), in one of the contributions to the *JDoc at 60* series, reviewed several papers dating from the 1940s, describing initiatives to support European libraries after the 1939-45 war, and contrasting these with similar initiatives in the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. She finds "fascinating similarities in the mood of the eras"; we may say that this mood extends, in some degree to situation of Albanian libraries today.

Vozga reminds us that Albania has been able to "rejoin the international community after decades of self-imposed isolation". For Albanian libraries, as his strategy document shows, some of the issues are new. The pressing need for libraries in the Europe of the 1940s was for renewal of books stocks, and for the rebuilding of war-damaged libraries (Choldin 2005, Danilewicz 1945). For Albania today, as Vozga states, it is more a question of adapting unsuitable buildings, improving IT infrastructure and capacities, and preparing to contribute to the development of an Information Society. In addition, whereas in earlier times the perceived need was particularly for English language material, Vozga points out the need for an enriched content of Albanian language material, particularly in digital form.

Other issues are, perhaps surprisingly unchanged over the years. Both Danilewicz in 1945 and Vozga in 2010 write of the need for new ideas in library systems which have been isolated from the mainstream of professional thought. And both emphaise the need for training: though for Danilewicz this is needed for "union catalogues.., readers' advisory work, microphotography, special library methods, etc.", while Vozga emphasises the need for training in management and in ICTs and Internet.

As public libraries support the development of societies in transition, by both their information-providing and their cultural activities, we may expect to see both the continuation of perennial issues, problems and solutions, and the emergence of new ones; and we see both in this new Albanian strategy. We wish Ramazan Vozga and his colleagues well in developing this. We hope the international library community will be as supportive of their efforts as it has been of libraries in other parts of Europe emerging from periods of isolation.

References

Choldin, M.T. (2005), Libraries in continental Europe: the 40s and the 90s, *Journal of Documentation*, 61(3), 356-361

Danilewicz, M. (1945), The post-war problems of continental libraries, *Journal of Documentation*, 1(2), 81-88

New national strategy for Albanian public library development in information society

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Albania has a relatively extensive network of public libraries. They were originally organised for closed-access use, with users having access only through the catalogues. Though there remains a lack of space, they have now organised their collections on an open access basis.

Public libraries are accountable to both the Ministry of Culture and to the local authorities (municipalities) of the regions in which they carry out their activities. Library services to the users are free of charge. They serve all categories of users. In most of them children are served in separate sections. The collections have a general character, though quite often their character is dictated by the economic, commercial and social development of their respective districts. Some of the principal public libraries have also rare collections of Albanological value. Apart from books, periodicals, and microfilms,- electronic materials such as CD-ROMs etc. have started to enter these libraries.

These libraries have not yet been automated completely. Most of them have been equipped with PCs, which cater for the creation of their database, based on the WIN/ISIS program, given free of charge by UNESCO. There is not Internet access in all public libraries.

The National Library is a professional and methodical center for all of the country's library system, including public libraries.

Albania has made important democratic reforms to rejoin the international community after decades of self-imposed isolation. In the field of libraries, isolation from access to professional training and support from the rest of the world has serious consequences for the level of up-to-date knowledge and management skills among library staff. Librarianship in general, and in particular the problem of improving the availability of documents and information - one of the main concern of library network in Albania as a whole - is facing a number of difficulties. Public libraries too are encountering several barriers in accomplishing their basic functions.

In order to overcome these difficulties and barriers, a national strategy and policy is needed. It is a necessity if we are to prepare a good starting position for a successful change. Certainly a firm policy and strategy in this field are fundamental to strengthening the present situation. Until now, Albanian public libraries have worked without a clear supportive national policy framework. No programme in the context of national policy exists in the country to encourage their development. No study or project exists relating to their future.

The importance of a benign political and organisational framework in this field now is accepted. This strategy seeks to develop a national approach to development of public libraries. It is necessary, through a concrete study, to look at the challenges in establishing their role in the new conditions of Information Society. This will identify the objectives and goals it is aiming at, and will seek to identify what services should be offered, and what changes should take place; in other words, what is the vision of their future role. Its main goal is to develop a well argued visionary strategy for libraries and to make recommendations to the Ministry of Culture for actions in support of their modernisation.

The main objective of the strategy is providing the use of books, and other library materials, by all strata of Albanian society, taking into the consideration the varied socio-cultural categories of the users. To build a national strategy in this field, and to identify its objectives, it is necessary at the beginning to diagnose the present situation of libraries. This diagnosing might include the existing mechanism of public library development, public library network and services, promotion of reading etc.

The data of this diagnosis will help to identify clearly the difficulties, barriers and obstacles. But the diagnosis itself is not a synonym for the strategy itself. It is just a prelude or a preparatory stage. So it is important to identify the priority issues which are facing Albanian public libraries. In this respect the many obstacles to their development include the lack of a national strategy for Albanian public library network as a whole, poor political support, the need for improving their social status and image, financial problems, unsuitable buildings, lack of promotion and public relations etc.

Albanian public libraries play an important role as democratic institutions offering access to mainly written heritage and published information for everybody. They also consider themselves cultural institutions, often hosting cultural manifestations. Their level, scope and capacity vary from small book collections with limited access and services in each local administrative division, to big libraries in the main cities of the country, all of them trying to support the identity and social life of their local communities.

These libraries are offering access to written national and foreign heritage, library lending, cultural events, and a place for meetings, exhibitions and other activities. It is why they used to be considered a kind of national treasure, whose main function is to promote culture, both local and national, as a basis of national identity. With the advance of the new age of Information Society, they may be forced to face the challenges and reconsider their role in the life of Albanian society. This is one of the reasons why it is necessary to make efforts to define a clear national strategy for their development.

One or more projects need to be carried out, to establish this strategy and to undertake reviews which may become important tools for change. Some main objectives of these projects might be the identification of public libraries roles, tasks and functions, because it is very important to know how they will respond to social and technological changes, as well as how to make their

transition from "bureaucratic" organisations to learning organisations. Other important objectives could be the emphasis of their role as a gateway to the resources of interest to their users, offering not only books and other printed materials, but also all kinds of information and access to new media, going toward the multimedia library. The goal is the overcoming of the main barriers to public library development; economic, technical, professional, social etc. To reach this, in addition to the automation of libraries through use of IT for housekeeping functions (circulation, acquisition, cataloguing, stock control etc.), it is very important to be conscientious of the need of a new concept for public libraries as institutions that provide free and unlimited access to information, working in close links with the memory institutions as museums and archives.

In order to meet the requirements of the Information Society, Albanian librarians must also adopt new patterns of behaviour and acquire new skills, such as dealing with IT, introducing new services, promotion and marketing, project work, searching for new financial sources etc. But of great importance is the need for a modern concept amongst decision makers of the potential of libraries; the attitudes of politicians, administrators and funding bodies towards them must change. There is also the issue of relevant competences for central and local authorities for public libraries. I would like to stress the importance of establishing relations with the European library community, to provide technical assistance to the Albanian public libraries, aiming at their integration into contemporary developments.

Among the key general objectives of the project for this strategy are:
- the development and promotion of a new concept and strategy for public libraries among national and local decision-makers
- clear identification of competences and responsibilities among the respective local and national authorities
- provision of new and diversified services by public libraries including on-line information services and access to digital cultural content, including support for tourism
- increased use of ICTs and the Internet for access to multimedia services and for automation
- demonstration of the benefits of investment in public libraries
- professional development of public library managers and staff in order to enable the delivery of new services
- the creation of a range of digitised Albanian language content of interest to the citizens, for delivery through public libraries via the Internet
- increased and more effective attention to fund-raising and financial planning
- wider links and assistance where needed with European library community and international bodies, Council of Europe, European Commission, IFLA etc
- inclusion of Albanian libraries and librarians in joint regional or European projects.

The tasks of this project are as below:

1 Strategy and priorities
- to establish priorities, strategy and an action plan for the development of Albanian public libraries in support of national policies.
- to address the infrastructural issues (e.g. bandwidth provision) necessary to enable the delivery of high priority public library services to as wide an audience as possible.

2 Piloting New Library services and monitoring take-up
- to stimulate interest and belief in the capability of public libraries to provide useful and important new services for Albanian citizens, especially focusing on access to the Internet and 'digital literacy' training.
- to establish new pilot IT-based public library services in different regions of Albania, enabling others to emulate successful approaches).

3 Development of Albanian digital information content and a public library portal to Albanian language information for citizens
- to install, in pilot form, 'portal' software which will allow Albanian language information sources available to the citizen to be searched 'seamlessly'.
- to enhance and enrich the amount of useful information content in the Albanian language available to citizens and to enable it to be found easily on the Internet.

4 Management and skills Training
- to increase the number of public library managers exposed to good regional practice in the provision of public library services, in order that they can manage the delivery of effective services in Albania.
- to license, adapt, translate and make available for use in Albania an international distance learning skills training package focusing on the effective use of ICT and the Internet in a public library context, to be delivered at the National Library or at other venues.