GLOBAL LIBRARY STATISTICS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the background to the collaboration between IFLA, UNESCO Institute for Statistics and ISO to develop new library statistics. It outlines the inadequacies of currently available data and the principles underlying the data elements selected for inclusion in the new questionnaire.

One of the significant achievements of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) in recent years has been the role it has played in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in advocating the contribution libraries make to society. Before the first meeting, in Geneva in 2003, IFLA commissioned from Teresa Hackett a study Global Library Statistics 1990 – 2000 (http://www.ifla.org/III/wsis/wsis-stats4pub_v.pdf accessed 23 February 2008). This relied on two major sources of data, the UNESCO statistics and Libecon. Libecon was a European Commission-funded project to collect library statistics for Europe (http://www.libecon2000.org. Unfortunately the project was time limited and was funded only until 2004. The material remains available via an updated version from 2004, using data up to 2001, on the Libecon site (http://www.libecon.org/pdf/InternationalLibraryStatistic.pdf, accessed 6 July 2008).


What Teresa Hackett’s study revealed was the paucity and unsatisfactory nature of the global statistics available. At the IFLA conference in Buenos Aires in 2004 the IFLA President Kay Raseroka and Vice-President Alex Byrne discussed with IFLA’s Statistics and Evaluation Section how this might be addressed. What resources would be needed to compile a set of global statistics suitable for the twenty-first century, reflecting the activities of libraries and their contribution to society? The Section went away and did its homework and produced the answer. It framed a likely set of statistics, pointed to the best sources or methodologies to acquire them (gathering by a specialist institution in a pilot study followed by a full survey) and indicated the likely cost of up to 100,000. This was well beyond IFLA’s own resources and, given the rapid time frame needed to produce results before the WSIS meeting in Tunis in 2005, IFLA felt unable to proceed.
The Statistics and Evaluation Section took a step back to look at the roots of the problem. The only body regularly to attempt to collect statistics at the global level, UNESCO, had not done so for five years. Moreover, the basis of the statistics was the Recommendation concerning the International Standardization of Library Statistics adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in 1970, following upon an IFLA conference in 1968. This was before the development of the internet, the web and only at the very beginning of automation in libraries. The data elements identified in the 1970 Recommendation are:

**Background**
(a) Number of libraries  
(b) Population served

**Library materials**
(c) Collections  
(d) Additions  
(e) Number of current periodical titles

**Usage**
(f) Number of registered borrowers  
(g) Number of works loaned out  
(h) Inter-library lending within the country  
(i) Inter-library lending at the international level:  
(j) Photo and other copies

**Finance**
(k) Ordinary expenditure  
(l) Capital expenditure  
(m) Library employees

This is a fairly minimal set of figures concentrating on collections and basic usage. The pervasiveness of electronic sources of information today has reduced the ability of the traditional statistics to reflect the provision of information to the world’s citizens. Nor are the traditional statistics well suited to demonstrating impact and outcome.

IFLA’s Statistics and Evaluation Section decided the best course would be to talk to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. The Section appointed a project group consisting of Michael Heaney (the then Section Chair), Roswitha Poll (the then Section Secretary and also chair of ISO Technical Committee 46 Subcommittee 8, Quality – Statistics and performance evaluation), and Pierre Meunier (also a member of both Section committee and ISO TC46/SC8). The initial aim of the project was to seek to embark on a three-year collaborative programme with UIS and ISO TC46/SC8 to:
- Review the 1970 recommendations;
- Advise on the adoption of measures facilitating the demonstration of impact and outcome;
- Advise on appropriate measures to reflect the use of electronic information sources;
- Advise on the use of appropriate non-library demographic and socio-economic measures;
- Advise on the construction of appropriate indicators using the recommended statistics;
- Advise on additional and supplementary avenues to strengthen the collection of data.

We, the project group, were fortunate in that one of our number (Pierre Meunier) is based in Montreal, and had already undertaken exploratory discussions on our behalf. An initial formal meeting was arranged for February 2006 in Montreal with Simon Ellis (Head of UIS Science Culture and Communications Statistics) and his colleagues.

While the library community is concerned nowadays with impact, the focus of UNESCO’s revised programme for gathering data will be ‘access to information’, with particular attention to cultural diversity. In discussion we translated these different approaches into the distinction between ‘passive capabilities for people to access information’ (collections, libraries etc. – ‘enabling’) and ‘active access to information’ (loans, pages downloaded, etc. – ‘use’). We agreed that any figures promulgated should be able to reflect one or the other of these aspects.

We also agreed that the needs of developing countries must be taken into account, and noted some of the practical difficulties in data collection that UIS experiences in some parts of the world. The library is one institution whose role and function is relatively well understood and defined even in rural areas of developing countries, and so the proposal on counting ‘events’ was noted with interest; this could demonstrate the community role of libraries in small communities. Other ISO data elements, such as interlibrary-loan and photocopying transactions, reflected more particular way of achieving aims in relatively developed economies, and were less relevant in demonstrating the impact of libraries.

We agreed that the ISO committee would look at the standard at its May 2006 meeting bearing these considerations in mind, in order to identify those statistics most likely to provide figures with broad comparability across the globe.

Library statistics in a vacuum are of limited usefulness. There several major international household surveys which present detailed socio-demographic information and which could be correlated with library data. Such household surveys bypass the difficulties of data collection by library bodies, and are the only potential source of data of non-users of library services. It is, however, difficult to influence the content of such surveys.

Relevant surveys include:
the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) (U.S. Agency for International Development)
• the Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) (World Bank), and
• the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) (UNICEF)

In addition international skills assessments which take place within schools present information on reading and numeracy skills. One of the most successful is the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD), but similar programmes exist for other regions eg the Southern African Consortium for the Measurement of Educational Quality (SACMEQ).

Many surveys bodies are participants in the International Household Survey Network, established to foster better use of survey data for policy making and monitoring.

UIS itself has recently developed the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP) with an improved concept of what constitutes ‘literacy’. It includes background questions on education, family, ICT skill levels, use of computers in a public library, etc.

Information on non-users may be relevant. UIS adduced the example of non-attendance at school, where it appears that one of the main reasons for non-attendance is lack of transport. Similar factors could be identified affecting the use of libraries. This information could be linked to GIS mappings.

One benefit IFLA could bring was its widespread contacts with libraries and librarians across the globe. We agreed to compile a database of contacts for library statistics, and to seek to identify a suitable pilot area in which to try out the survey. To this end project members talked the IFLA regional committees at the Seoul meeting in August 2006, towards the end of the year engaged Tatiana White of Oxford University Library Services to compile the data. In the meantime ISO had produced a subset of the ISO 2789 standard and this was published as a draft in the IFLA Statistics and Evaluation Section’s newsletter in July 2006. (‘ISO Preliminary set of possible data for global library statistics’, IFLA Statistics and Evaluation Section Newsletter, July 2006, p.8: http://www.ifla.org/VII/s22/newslet/statNewsletter072006.pdf)

We agreed to pilot the survey in Latin America and the Caribbean in the second half of 2007, would analyse the results as they came in; review them at the beginning of 2008 and publish during 2008. We also undertook to enlist the help of library schools in Montreal in the analysis of the data.

The January 2007 meeting also finalised the dataset. I am not going to go into the dataset in detail because the following speakers will say more about them. They are given in Annex 1 to this book. Note that a supplementary question, outside the ISO indicators, was requested by UIS, on the ‘top ten libraries’ for each sector.

There may be some surprise that the questionnaire does not ask in more detail about electronic resources. The determining factor is the degree to which a question can be answered in a variety of countries across the world, in different stages of economic development and with different cultural and social conditions; and answered in a way which allows us to draw meaningful comparisons.

The questionnaire was distributed to Latin American and Caribbean countries during the second half of 2007. We’ll be hearing in the following papers and sessions about the progress of and outcomes from the survey.