GLOBAL LIBRARY STATISTICS – WHAT NEXT FOR IFLA?

Michael Heaney, Secretary, IFLA Statistics and Evaluation Section; Executive Secretary, Oxford University Library Services

We have been encouraged by the progress made so far in re-invigorating the approach to the collection of library statistics at the global level. The papers presented at this conference have shown what is possible, and have highlighted a variety of initiatives and approaches. So what should the next steps be in developing global library statistics?

Nobody collects statistics just because they like numbers. We collect library statistics for a purpose. One obvious purpose is to attract resources to the libraries, and we do this by trying to demonstrate that libraries are a valuable element in society. Collecting data does not in itself demonstrate value. The same statistic – for example number of visits per 1,000 inhabitants – can been seen as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ depending upon who is assessing the figure.

There is a syllogistic chain which lets us attach value to library statistics, derived from axiomatic first principles:

1. Axiom: Being able to do things is good (value statement)
2. Axiom: The more we know, the more we can do (factual statement)
3. Conclusion: THEREFORE Acquiring knowledge is good (value statement, from 1 and 2)
4. Axiom: Dissemination increases the acquisition of knowledge by a greater number of people (factual statement)
5. Conclusion: THEREFORE Dissemination of knowledge is good (value statement, from 3 and 4)
6. Axiom: Libraries help to disseminate knowledge (factual statement)
7. Conclusion: THEREFORE Libraries are good (value statement, from 5 and 6)

(I do not intend at this stage to prove here all of the statements presented here as axiomatic! But provided they are all true, then all the value judgements derive from the first axiom. And it is the particular job of library statistics to provide the evidence for statement 6.

One of the conclusions we can draw from this first trial of the statistics is that it is obvious that disparities in size between countries make it difficult to draw meaningful comparisons in every case. Comparing the library statistics from the small island state of Monserrat with those from Mexico does not tell us very much. More importantly, it does not give the policy makers in those countries any information which they can use to assess the contribution libraries make, or could make if given the resources to do so.

Another conclusion is that the use of multiple channels of communication helps. National agencies, professional and research bodies, and international partners can
each use their own strengths to support different aspects of the collection and col-
lation of statistics.

We can also use a variety of methods in the compilation of data, from desk re-
search at one end of the spectrum, through direct questionnaires (as in the present
trial), to field research. However, the most productive approach will surely be to
build capacity in each country so that there are people available who know both
how to collect statistics and why, and how, they can be used to put libraries on the
agenda.

Libraries will only be visible on the political agenda if the data we collect is
placed in its general cultural framework. As I suggested above, the value of librar-
ies derives from our perception that they contribute to the general cultural good.
To that end, we should seek to embed the collection of library statistics within the
framework of the evaluation and promotion of culture. The draft *UNESCO
Framework for Cultural Statistics* (2009) seeks to place all the elements of culture
within a unifying structure which embraces the creation, production, dissemination,
reception and consumption of cultural wealth. Libraries have their place within
this framework. At the same time preliminary discussions are taking place between
the International Publishers’ Association, the International Booksellers’ Federa-
tion, UNESCO and IFLA about the possibilities for international agreement on a
range of statistics related to the book, being described as a ‘Pisa study for book
culture’, and attempting to characterise the vitality of book production, distribu-
tion and dissemination. A separate European initiative seeks to harmonise book
and library statistics.

In the wider cultural sphere we have heard in this conference about the LAMP
initiative to measure information literacy and the role which libraries can play in
that.

I see IFLA’s role as being to participate in and contribute to all these initiatives
because they help to place libraries on the agenda. To do that we must have good
data with clear relevance to demonstrating value. Good data in turn requires not
just the ability to ask the right questions, but the ability of people to answer them.
Phase II of our project must therefore be a twin-pronged approach by IFLA, work-
ing with UNESCO Institute for Statistics and other partners, to build local capacity
and to engage in advocacy at the highest level to promote the value of libraries.