Public libraries addressing social inclusion: how we may think…

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Abstract

The paper addresses the concepts of social exclusion and social inclusion, as well as a selection of issues on which public librarians could reflect. These include the urgency to ensure social inclusion, its complexity, the spectrum of socially excluded people and the identification of target groups, achieving success, dealing with failure, exploring reasons for non-use of library services, services and initiatives required, research skills and monitoring the subject literature, self-knowledge and further issues for literature surveys and research.

1   INTRODUCTION

The urgency for public librarians to ensure social inclusion to their services, as well as for them to contribute to society's efforts to address social exclusion, cannot be questioned. It is a global problem of enormous proportions often associated with poverty and unequal access to health and educational opportunities. But there is more to it.

Many projects and successes have been reported. True success, however, requires action and planning as well as the ability to assess the complexity of the problem and how our way of thinking − our perceptions, our visions, our emotions, our priorities, our motives, our rationale and our understanding of underlying issues − will affect success. We need to move beyond traditional Library and Information Science thinking to draw on all resources we can access – including our own abilities.

We can decide how we look at a problem and how critical we are of our own efforts (e.g. admitting to weaknesses in efforts and what we can learn from failures and successes). Efforts by public libraries have sometimes been referred to as weak, voluntary and "take it or leave it

approaches". Libraries should not just be superficially "open to all". They should really address all primary needs that can be linked to information needs and access to information. The enormity of the problem requires us to move way beyond our expertise, abilities and resources (e.g. in terms of time, funding, energy, and even enthusiasm).

This paper will address only a small selection of aspects public librarians could consider with regard to social inclusion and their way of thinking about the problem. It is an academic paper and does not intend to offer a comprehensive list of aspects to consider or a comprehensive review of a very complex problem. It also needs to be acknowledged from the start that it is much easier to comment from the side-line and to reflect on what need to be done, than actually addressing the complexities in praxis.

The following aspects will be explored in this paper:
- Clarification of concepts.
- Suggestions for issues for reflection by public librarians.
- Recommendations for further literature surveys and small scale research projects in praxis (a selection only).

2   CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

In defining social inclusion we need to work from social exclusion. Social exclusion is often linked to poverty, but entails much more: it happens when people or places suffer from a series of problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, poor housing, poor health conditions, etc. Combinations of such problems often mark the *circumstances* of socially excluded people. These circumstances often also mean exclusion from information and access to information. Although social exclusion can affect anyone, some people are more at risk e.g. disabled people, ex-prisoners, and people from ethnic minorities. Individuals as well as groups can make up the *categories* of excluded people, often falling into more than one risk category, e.g. an aged, disabled, lesbian, ex-prisoner from a minority group. A library e.g. may need to address the social exclusion of a few individuals in their library community or a community that is considered to be largely or in total excluded from information and access to information.

Social inclusion refers to all efforts and policies to promote equality of opportunity to people from all circumstances and from all socially excluded categories. The circumstances and the categories of people mostly linked to social exclusion are therefore the circumstances and categories to be addressed by efforts to enhance inclusion.
Although there are many interpretations of both social exclusion and social inclusion, it is not the intention of this paper to fully explore these. Each public library attempting social inclusion should formulate their own working definition so that there is clarity on what they are attempting (social inclusion) and what they are trying to solve (social exclusion). The subject literature and government guidelines offer sufficient guidelines to formulate your own clear understanding – an essential point of departure.

3   SELECTED ISSUES FOR REFLECTION BY PUBLIC LIBRARIANS

Although libraries as institutions take up the responsibility and challenge of addressing social inclusion, either as a country or as individual libraries, the librarians and especially library management, are the people who need to complete the actions. They are also the people who need to reflect on the problems and issues of social inclusion. The following have been selected for discussion in this paper:

- Urgency for public libraries to ensure social inclusion.
- Complexity of social inclusion.
- Identifying the spectrum of socially excluded people and selecting target groups.
- Achieving success.
- Preparing and dealing with failure.
- Exploring reasons for non-use of library services.
- Services and initiatives required.
- Research skills and monitoring the subject literature.
- Self-knowledge.

There are also many other issues that will not be addressed here. These are listed at the end of this section.

3.1   Urgency for public libraries to ensure social inclusion

The urgency to ensure social inclusion is acknowledged by different sectors, e.g. education, transport, and health, as well as the subject literature of a variety of disciplines as diverse as Education, Health Sciences, Politics and Library and Information Science. Concerns also feature widely in the popular media.

In trying to understand the full scope of the urgency, we need to consider the effect social inclusion may have on the quality of life of people, the decisions they take and the opportunities they are missing if excluded form library services. Without access to information and without skills in accessing and using information, it may be difficult to get jobs, gain an education, or to use government and health services.

We for example require
- Statistical evidence on social exclusion.
- Insurance of Government's acceptance of the urgency of social inclusion and their commitment to address it.
- Government and other funding agencies' acceptance of the contribution public libraries can make in addressing such an urgent issue.
- Guidelines on the priority social inclusion will take (e.g. as a mainstream aim versus an add-on, linked to other priorities e.g. increasing user numbers).

In-spite of the urgency there may, however, also be some (expressed as well as unexpressed) concerns about whether social inclusion really makes a difference, and whether we can justify

the time, energy and resources. How urgent is inclusion to information access e.g. in comparison to inclusion to healthcare and housing? How can these perhaps be interlinked?

It might be useful to mark the above-mentioned and other issues (to be identified) against a checklist.

3.2 Enormity and complexity of social inclusion

Social exclusion requires social inclusion as a solution to a problem of immense proportions. There are many causes of social exclusion and many underlying issues of which we should try to note the full scope before acknowledging what our focus will be in enhancing inclusion. Doing so will also force us to acknowledge the aspects we will be neglecting. Acknowledging the aspects we will not address will at least enable us to address these at a later stage or to be aware of possible problems/shortcomings in our efforts. If you for example include books in a minority language as part of your collection, you may still face the issues of disabled people not being able to use the sources or people being illiterate. If you address illiteracy, the available sources may not meet with the interests of a marginalized group. And then there may still be computer literacy.

Another question: what should public librarians for example read to prepare them to deal with the complexities of social inclusion? Should it be literature from the Political Sciences, Sociology, Psychology, or the Learning Sciences or are there other more relevant disciplines?

In reflecting on the complexity, it is important to for example bear in mind that:
- People can fall in more than one category or circumstance of exclusion (these are explained in more detail in Section 3.3).
- Circumstances and political developments can change and need to be monitored on an on-going basis (e.g. the status of minority groups). A "solution" at a particular point in time, may therefore not be a lasting solution (e.g. teaching email skills, while there is a trend towards using mobile devices for interpersonal communication).
- Needs and information needs (which are often secondary needs) should be an essential point of departure in libraries' efforts to address social inclusion. Determining these are, however, complex issues in their own right – as has often been explained in the literature on Human Information Behaviour.
- Even when considering valid solutions to social inclusion there may be many factors that may have a negative impact (e.g. the socially excluded not trusting librarians or not realising that information may make a difference to their lives).

3.3 Identifying the spectrum of socially excluded people and selecting target groups

A number of at-risk categories have been identified for example minority groups, certain races or language groups, disabled people, women, the very young or the very old, the unemployed, lower income groups, people from poor communities, people from high crime areas, people who are immobile, people with health problems, and people from geographically isolated areas.

We first need to determine what distinguishes these people from those who are "included" in library services and what is keeping them from using library and information services? (E.g. a lack of experience in using libraries, a lack of sources in their mother tongue, or the inability to read may keep them from using library sources and not the fact that they are Hispanic or Black or poor or sex workers or lesbian.) Secondly we need to reflect on what we know about these characteristics in general if seen in isolation and how to address these in library services (e.g. what do we know about the information behaviour of visually disabled people?). A next step would be to consider the fact that there will often be a combination of characteristics to deal with, and that we require empirical evidence on the information needs and information behaviour of our specific target group. A matrix checklist can for example be used to mark known characteristics for the group targeted for inclusion.

Although research has been reported on attempts at social inclusion for specific groups, libraries need to address the full spectrum of potentially excluded groups in more than just a superficial manner (e.g. offering books in Braille). Although such a service is extremely important it addresses only one facet of the information needs of visually disabled people. Substantially more research is required on the complexities of groups showing overlapping characteristics.

A next issue would to be how to involve the potential target group (e.g. the youth) in participation, e.g. through participatory, action research, and to include people who are in a position to act as mediators e.g. healthcare workers, social workers and councilors.

3.4 Success stories and reasons for achieving success

We need to understand what we consider to be success in addressing social exclusion, and what we are attempting to achieve, e.g. complete inclusion, partial inclusion, or progress towards increased inclusiveness? Although we should be proud of all (including partial successes it should not keep us from being critical of how and where we need to improve).

To understand successes, we also need to understand failure. It is therefore also essential that both are reported in the subject literature to broaden our understanding. Further: how much time, effort and commitment are we prepared to invest to ensure success and are we willing to work on our personal skills and knowledge that may make a difference in our efforts? Are our successes *real* successes, and what are the reasons for such successes?

Although many success stories and initiatives have been reported in the subject literature, we need to scrutinize these to formulate our own aims and criteria set for success. Questions to consider include: how can success be measured, what should be our criteria and where and how can we report our experiences?

3.5 Dealing with failure

Although we should not be inhibited or our enthusiasm be dampened by the possibility of failure, we need to understand reasons for failure, and what role our personal viewpoints, approaches, frame of mind and lack of insight into the problem can play in such failure. We should realize

that we are dealing with a very complex issue in which attempts to insure social inclusion are often met with at least partial failure (i.e. not being able to address all facets and issues).

This brings us to a next question: How harsh should we be on ourselves or should we accept that we are dealing with a problem of enormous proportions that will take much time, energy, perseverance and self-criticism to solve, and that elements of failure is unavoidable? Foreseeing problems may at least put us in the position to address some of these, to side-step them as far as possible (e.g. inadequate government support), or to assess our "success" in a realistic light. (This is a further reason for reporting both successes and lessons learned in the subject literature).

Such understanding may help to foresee pitfalls. Examples of issues that may impact on success/failure include:
- The policy of the government of the day and public pressure (or lack thereof) to address social exclusion.
- Inadequate funding and infrastructures.
- Inadequate support for sustainability.
- Inadequate support and commitment from advocacy groups.
- Governments' perception on the role libraries can play.
- Unwillingness of "excluded" groups to participate in efforts to ensure social inclusion from a library perspective (e.g. not willing to accept that access to information may make a difference in their lives).
- Lack of relevant empirical research data on primary needs (e.g. housing, employment), information needs and information behaviour that can be used in efforts to address social exclusion.

3.6 Exploring reasons for non-use of library services

We know much less about why people are using libraries than about their reasons for not using libraries. A good point of departure would be to ask:
- Are they not using libraries because we are making it difficult/impossible for them to use (e.g. excluding certain racial groups from services)?
- Are there personal reasons for not using libraries (e.g. not realizing a need for information or literature)?
- How can we identify reasons for not using libraries?

There may be many reasons why people are not using libraries e.g. specific groups being barged from using library services, services not being offered (e.g. literacy classes), people not being able to come to the library (e.g. from remote areas or people who are housebound), people not being able to read or use computers, people not understanding the language in which sources are published, etc. We, however, need to identify the reasons applying to a *particular community* which a library is trying to include.

Each of the issues mentioned is complex in their own right and requires librarians to draw on a wide spectrum of other fields to enhance their insight and to find solutions. How should we then address each of these issues individually and how should we address these as combinations of

issues at work? Also: is the key aim of social inclusion to increase the use of the library, or is it about meeting people's desire for support and information, and in the process increasing their use of the library as a key resource and centre of support?

3.7 Services and initiatives required

A number of initiatives have been reported in the subject literature for example unique library locations such as pubs, internet cafes and the outdoors, multilingual retrieval and access tools, information kiosks, etc. To ensure the use of such initiatives a spectrum of courses may often be required, for example in basic literacy (reading, writing, numeracy), information literacy, computer usage, Internet usage, and the ability to express information needs.

Services and initiatives should build on the real needs of the target group – bearing in mind that there are expressed needs, unexpressed needs and dormant information needs, and that one of the most difficult things with regard to information needs for example is determining what we really need. A first issue would thus be to collect empirical evidence, or if time and other resources do not allow this, to at least admit that you are working on assumptions or your gut feeling. (One should then also be more alert to shortcomings in your services.)

Before planning services and initiatives, the rationale and the theoretical grounding should also be considered, for example courses in literacy and Internet usage that builds on studies of human information behaviour, learning styles, etc. Not only should public libraries have the facilities to offer such training, but librarians should also have the necessary skills. A question is then: do we have the skills to address all of these, and if not, how can we gain such skills?

In developing services, partnerships have often proofed very valuable. Identifying suitable partners and building such partnerships is, however, a specialized skill in its own right. The challenges faced in terms of negotiation, personal management of time and energy and enthusiasm should not be underestimated. The ability to act in unsure waters without exact guidelines is also important.

3.8 Research skills and monitoring the subject literature

Successfully addressing social inclusion requires awareness of what has been published in the Library and Information Science literature, access to such literature and the ability for ongoing monitoring of information. In addition to actual attempts to insure social inclusion, this should include studies on information behaviour (especially everyday life information seeking), information needs, and information literacy projects, and local studies.

Apart from monitoring the subject literature, there is also a need for sensitivity to changes in the community and its needs. Observation, exploratory case studies and action research (especially participatory action research) may offer useful ways of collecting data.

Questions that come to mind, however, are whether librarians
- have the expertise in research methodology for user studies/user needs as well as non-user studies?

- have access to literature on research methodology?
- have access to results reported in the subject literature? (Bearing in mind the importance of social inclusion, literature in this field should probably be available through open access, or freely on the Internet e.g. similar to *Information Research* (http://informationr.net/ir/)).

3.9 Self-knowledge

Self-knowledge and an understanding of the impact of one's own world view, motivation, insight into the problem and abilities are essential requirements when attempting social inclusion. This include your
- ability to deal with people
- ability to work with partners
- ability to communicate with people
- ability to negotiate funding and support
- ability to deal with failure and frustrations
- ability to appreciate the impact of diversity
- cognitive framework (what you know and what you don't know and the impact of this)
- affective behaviour and attitude

4 ISSUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND LITERATURE SURVEYS

Although much has been published on social inclusion *per se*, as well as from a library perspective, comprehensive literature surveys may offer a sound basis to librarians who wish to address the practical realities, as well as to those who wish to get involved in small scale (and obviously larger) research projects.

The following is a selection of further issues requiring reflection as well as research support:
- Reasons for addressing social exclusion (e.g. because of a social consciousness, legal requirements, public pressure, enabling all citizens to participate at various levels of social life, or to keep the library's doors open (i.e. for reasons of survival)).
- Aim of strategies for social inclusion (e.g. to increase quality of life and democratic possibilities by providing free and equal access to high-quality information).
- Strategies to enhance social inclusion (e.g. involving stakeholders, short-term versus long-term planning).
- Policy formulation – especially policies that link to national government policies and global trends.
- Learning from countries with similar circumstances and problems (one cannot merely transfer experience form one country without considering diversity in circumstances). Such countries first need to be identified.
- Need for empirical evidence of needs and the impact from social inclusion efforts by libraries and information services, including methods for measuring the impact.
- Need for awareness and understanding of initiatives by government as well as non-government organizations (e.g. using a selection of current awareness services [CAS] to stay up-to-date with developments).

- Reflection on the role of literacy and education in breaking the vicious cycle of social inclusion.
- Reflection on finding a balance in the snowball effect (e.g. if you lack literacy and numeracy skills, it would not be possible to use computers and the Internet as well as information kiosks and portals for job hunting).
- Cooperation with other stakeholders.
- Campaigning for financial and other resources.
- Increasing credibility with government and other influential parties that public libraries can contribute to social inclusion.
- Training and professional development for public librarians.
- Enhancing awareness of the history of the country and library and information services in the particular country, as well as how this links to social exclusion.
- Establishing networking infrastructures.
- Tailoring services to local needs bearing in mind theories of learning and teaching, as well as the increasing interest in collaborative learning and work.
- Reviews of international perspectives.

Each of these can be formulated as small scale (as point of departure) research projects. Although projects addressing some of these issues have been reported, these are dynamic issues requiring ongoing research efforts.

5   CONCLUSION

Although public librarians have reported successes in libraries' role in enhancing social inclusion, it should be acknowledged as a very complex issue. For true success we need to reflect on a wide variety of issues, of which each may impact on our efforts to counter social exclusion. Some of these have been mentioned in this paper. There are, however, many more. Most important is the need to acknowledge the impact our own views and insight will have on our efforts. Further although we need to be proud of all successes, (even partial success), we especially need to be very honest about the shortcomings in our efforts and issues we may be neglecting (regardless of how valid our reasons are for doing so).

Being qualified in the disciplines of Library and Information Science, a first step would be to do extensive literature surveys on issues mentioned in this paper, to make it widely available to all public librarians, and to ensure comprehensive alerting services on all facets relevant to libraries' efforts to address social inclusion.