

Beyond Access

Perceptions of libraries as development partners

TECHNOLOGY & SOCIAL CHANGE GROUP

UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON
Information School

RESEARCH BRIEF

PUBLIC LIBRARIES | GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

Public access to information and the Internet is recognized as an important contributor to development. Can development agencies benefit by partnering with successful public libraries—institutions with deep community ties, knowledgeable staff, and physical and social infrastructures built to support public technology use? This brief reports on attitudes of development and library leaders to understand how they align and partnership possibilities.

Background

Access to information plays an important role in development. Communities benefit when people can learn about health, jobs, education, leisure activities, or whatever inspires them. In many countries, public libraries deliver this core service. With 230,000 public libraries worldwide—including 73% located in the developing world—opportunities for collaboration between libraries and development agencies are significant.

Yet, libraries are frequently overlooked as partners in development even when development projects directly relate to library expertise. For example, many countries have launched computer and Internet training programs in remote and underserved communities. While a few countries have enlisted public libraries, most have elected to implement programs through alternative infrastructure—such as telecenters and Internet kiosks. Some of these programs have proved successful, however strategic partnerships with public libraries may yield greater gains.

This brief is based on research produced on behalf of Beyond Access, a global campaign formed to draw attention to this phenomenon. The full report is available at tascha.uw.edu.

Research design

The study examined the question: *What do key decision makers around the world think about public libraries and their potential to play a more prominent role in development initiatives?*

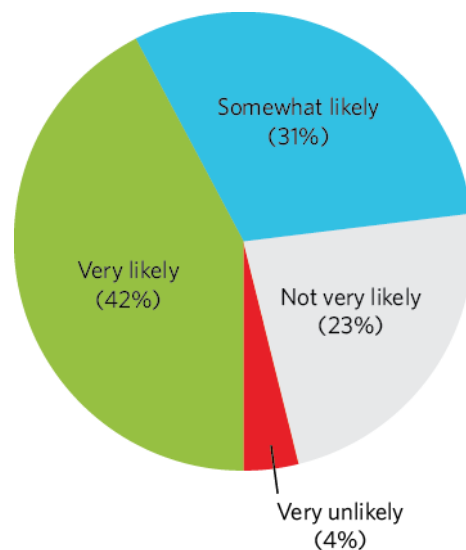
Researchers interviewed 51 development leaders (government officials, international non-governmental organizations) and library leaders (government officials, library administrators) to uncover their perceptions regarding libraries in development. Of the participants, 41 live in Bangladesh, Brazil, Costa Rica, Macedonia (FYR), Namibia, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, Thailand, or Zambia. The remainder are based in the US, UK, or Canada.

After the interviews were conducted, transcribed, coded, and analyzed, researchers compared the perceptions of both groups.

Findings

Development leaders are open to partnerships with public libraries. Almost three-quarters of development leaders reported that they were “somewhat” or “very likely” to work with libraries in the future. Only a 4% ruled out a partnership.

Figure 1 Perceived likelihood by development leaders that their agency would partner with a public library?



Willingness to partner, however, does not imply blind faith. Most development leaders have not worked closely with libraries; they expressed a number of questions about public libraries and the nature of partnerships.

Libraries have strong community ties, but do they serve the same populations?

Development leaders and library leaders both describe the connections libraries have with their local communities as the strongest asset that libraries bring to development partnerships. This includes knowledge of the needs of a service population, relationships with local organizations, and their policies of inclusiveness. Yet development leaders question whether libraries serve the same areas and populations that their programs do. Most do not think people in rural areas have access to libraries or that libraries serve people of all ages.

Do libraries and development agencies share the same development goals?

Development leaders see value in working with library staff. They believe library staff has (or could develop) information skills, training capacity, willingness to help users, and other abilities to effectively implement development programs. However, they question the institutional orientation of libraries. How might “development goals” be different from traditional library missions? How do library leaders see libraries evolving in the future? Is library leadership committed to proactively providing information or do they see libraries as user-driven information repositories?

Are library public access and training capacities robust enough? Development and library leaders agree on the importance

of public access venues. Also, that the importance has increased over the last five years. However, development leaders perceive that large numbers of people still lack basic skills and affordable access. Development leaders do not perceive that libraries provide significant access to computers and the Internet. Among participants who believe libraries do provide access, there is perception that the quality and/or reliability of services is not sufficient to meet user needs.

How extensive are library networks of allies and partners? Development leaders expressed concern around implementation and scale. They perceive that libraries are connected to citizens, but question how connected they are to other organizations, which are critical to implementation and scale. Libraries with strong ties to private business, community organizations, and

“Given the sheer volume of information available on healthcare, the existence of job sites, and the presence of advice on how to improve one’s life, it is hard to imagine that libraries have not become more important. Having a trained person to help people navigate towards trusted content would be an important element, so I could imagine libraries occupying a unique place in the growth of the global Internet.”

-Development leader

government offices (including those involved with digital inclusion initiatives) were seen as more opportune and effective partners.

Recommendations

Align development goals and library missions. Development leaders and library leaders are both interested in projects that make critical information more purposeful, engaging, and easily accessible to all people.

Practice realism. When designing programs, both sets of leaders should be mindful of challenges created by each other’s capacity, mission, and infrastructure constraints. Public libraries and development agencies both operate according to their own institutional logics; alignment will take time and effort.

Seek strategic opportunities for partnerships: pilot projects and test cases. Development partners can advance their own goals while working together. For example, development agencies can introduce library-services in rural areas, while libraries can help distribute relevant local materials, increase the impact and efficiency of technology and Internet tools, and help train and recruit staff to boost targeted services (such as development goals).

Start a virtuous cycle. Partnerships can increase capacity and efficiency of both institutions, thereby drawing greater attention and buy-in from governments and local organizations. Success can change perceptions of the library’s role among staff, partners, and community members, enhancing legitimacy, and promoting future partnerships. Successful partnerships can strengthen libraries and development agencies alike.

Future of Libraries Research

This brief, and the accompanying report, are part of a larger Technology & Social Change group research initiative on the role of public libraries in development. Learn more at tascha.uw.edu.

Research sponsors

This study is supported by IREX. Learn more at irex.org.

Source

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