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Policy Brief

Strengthen Librarians' Social Role

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Policy Brief

Strengthen Librarians' Social Role

Introduction

The authors of this policy brief are contributors to the research project Infrastructuring Libraries in Transformation (ILIT). ILIT's objective is to examine public libraries' role in this era beset by social challenges such as segregation, discrimination, austerity measures, and unemployment. ILIT began conducting research in three urban communities in 2022: Malmö, Sweden; Rotterdam, the Netherlands; and Vienna, Austria. The project will conclude in 2025.

ILIT's research explores three principal themes: community librarianship, the politics of the library, and local involvement. This policy brief addresses the theme related to ILIT's study of community librarianship.

The central thrust of our study comprises an attempt to understand libraries as *social infrastructures*. Infrastructure is defined as a fundamental structure that plays an important role in maintaining a well-functioning society. The term is often used to refer to physical infrastructure, such as conduits for electricity, water, and Internet cables, and transportation networks for cars, trains, bicycles, and pedestrians. Publicly funded libraries are an infrastructure providing access to information and culture. In Sweden, the *Swedish Library Act* stipulates that each municipality must provide public libraries for its residents.

By describing public libraries as *social infrastructures* we emphasize their social function, in which library staff play a key role. Libraries contribute to a community's well-being through the support they provide to individuals in their everyday lives, which includes serving as meeting places. Notwithstanding, we observe that this social function of libraries is currently under threat due to cutbacks and austerity policies. In light of these developments, we wish to draw attention to the value of libraries and their staff as an asset in maintaining a well-functioning, sustainable, and robust society.

This policy brief presents recommendations aimed at strengthening librarians' social role. These can be used to advocate in favor of granting public libraries greater resources to use in support of their cities and local residents.

The ILIT research project

Brief overview of the project:

- ILIT began in 2022 and is scheduled to conclude in 2025.
- Research conducted as part of the project is being carried out in a total of three public library organizations in Sweden, the Netherlands, and Austria respectively.
- The project's research group consists of seven researchers and one designer working in the field of social design.
- In Sweden, regional administrative body Region Skåne is involved in the project as a professional partner.
- ILIT receives funding from the EU via the framework program ERA-NET Cofund Urban Transformation Capacities (ENUTC). The Swedish contribution to the project is funded by Formas, the Swedish research council for sustainable development, and the Swedish Energy Agency.
- ILIT's research group is multidisciplinary in nature.
- The project makes use of a combination of qualitative research methods, including interviews, participant observation, and critical policy analysis.
- ILIT has developed a participatory research method it calls "zine-making workshops." This method involves organizing workshops in which participants create simple publications called "zines." Librarians, library management, library users, decision-makers, and other stakeholders were invited to take part in ILIT's zine-making workshops. Participants were tasked with jointly investigating how libraries can function as social infrastructures and also further develop their role in this respect.

Aims of this policy brief

ILIT considers that the potential exists to further strengthen public libraries' role as social infrastructure in their local communities. This policy brief presents ILIT's recommendations regarding what is required to enable librarians to perform their daily task of fulfilling the library's role as a social infrastructure to the greatest possible effect. These recommendations are based on 1) the fieldwork conducted by the Swedish members of ILIT during the fall of 2022 and spring of 2023 at two public libraries managed by local municipal department Malmö Public Libraries and 2) discussions and reflections that eventuated in subsequent dialogs with library staff and representatives from the offices of the regional administration, Region Skåne.

Terminology

Public library

Sweden's public libraries are funded by its respective municipal governments, which have a statutory obligation under the *Swedish Library Act* to provide access to library services. Public libraries in Sweden must be universally accessible, and the Act stipulates that libraries must give individuals with functional impairments, national minorities, persons with a native language other than Swedish, and children and youths special consideration as prioritized groups of library users.

(*Swedish Library Act, 2013:801*)

Social infrastructure

Infrastructures are basic structures that support important public services. Physical structures such as roads, power grids, water mains, and Internet communication systems have long been described as “infrastructures.” When ILIT refers to libraries as “social infrastructures,” this designation includes physical elements such as the library space, but also the nonphysical connections and networks that a library's operations facilitate.

Librarian

In Sweden, librarians are trained in library and information studies. They can perform a number of different tasks as part of a library's operations, including serving various specific user groups. Sweden's professional librarians follow international ethical guidelines such as the *IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto*, and the provisions contained in the *Swedish Library Act* and local policy documents.

On-desk & off-desk duties

A librarian's work is divided into shifts comprised of “on-desk” and “off-desk” duties. On-desk duties involve direct contact with library visitors in the library space. Off-desk duties are the “backroom” tasks performed by librarians that enable the library to function. These include ordering and managing media and materials, planning and preparing for library events and activities, competitive intelligence research, and initiating and maintaining contact with internal and external stakeholders. Librarians' off-desk shifts can involve work both within and outside of the library's premises.

Issues and challenges

We wish to call attention to four key challenges that must be overcome if librarians are to realize their full potential in their social role.

- 1) **Building connections.** Librarians with whom ILIT's researchers have met characterize the library as a place where both staff and users must cooperate in sharing physical spaces, materials, and other resources. Librarians organize the library and create the conditions needed to allow it to be used to its fullest potential by planning the library space and its activities. Such tasks help build and maintain interpersonal connections, both among library users and between a library's staff and its users. Connection-building activities can sometimes give rise to interpersonal conflict, however, and a librarian's professional role includes managing such conflicts. Efforts to build interpersonal connections are observed both in the library space and in librarians' planning and organization of the library's activities as part of their off-desk tasks. A reduction in the time available for both on-desk and off-desk work makes it difficult for librarians to find the time to support connection-building.
- 2) **Continuous maintenance work.** Libraries are not static institutions. On the contrary, they are produced through librarians' day-to-day work and through interactions with their users, physical elements, and materials. Neither are libraries government agencies, and their users display great trust in both the institutions themselves and in librarians. However, librarians must be given the opportunity to make themselves available and visible within the library space for this trust to be maintained and strengthened. Having too few staff in the library space prevents this important maintenance work from being carried out to best effect, thus eroding users' trust. The success of such maintenance work in an ever-changing organization depends on continuing professional development.
- 3) **Sustainable librarianship's boundaries.** Sweden's libraries provide a number of important public services. For example, someone who needs help contacting a government agency, is not adept at using computers, is looking for an exciting book to read, or wants to practice their Swedish can turn to a library for assistance. All such examples serve to illustrate the library's important role in society. In recent times, many public services have been relocated from physical urban spaces to various digital platforms. This trend has led to an expansion in the types of inquiries handled by libraries. It has also given rise to new and problematic gray zones concerning the protection of personal privacy when library users request technical assistance from library staff to carry out personal errands. Such legal dilemmas reawaken debate about what a library's purview should be expanded to include when other public-service providers close their physical offices.

“ We can’t fill out the form [from their unemployment insurance fund] for them, though. That’s where we draw the line. We’d create an utterly impossible situation if we started doing that. ”

- 4) **Which librarians’ tasks are acknowledged and which are obscured?** The fourth challenge concerns which librarians’ activities are valued and which are taken for granted or even obscured, especially in connection with the evaluation system used to report on a library’s operations. Presently, any contribution not readily quantifiable within figures reporting the number of a library’s loans, visits, or activities risks being obscured when library staff submit an account of their work. Activities such as helping a visitor find material they can use in a discussion about source criticism, and collaborating with local associations, for example, are essential to building the connections that allow a library to function as a social infrastructure. Such work is difficult to quantify in simple figures, however.

“ ... it’s not possible to record tasks that are part of the day-to-day running of the library [in the reporting system]. Any activities we log must be linked to development goals and the library’s core objectives, lend themselves to evaluation, and provide a clear benefit to Malmö’s residents. ”

Values: best practices

Public libraries already function as social infrastructures. Their social role was thrown into sharp relief when Malmö's public libraries kept their doors open during the COVID-19 pandemic, which proved to be an important public service for many. ILIT's researchers observed many other examples of these same libraries operating as social infrastructures during our study. In this section, we intend to present examples that serve as clear illustrations of the challenges we identified earlier. These examples were noted during the observations we undertook as part of ILIT's research.

One librarian relates that the public library is a place many people visit, including those who might be viewed as living “on the margins” of society. It provides access to the Internet and computers, and many people visit the library to ask for guidance and help. This same librarian further explains that one reason why people seek help from the library is that libraries are not government agencies. “People trust us,” the librarian says.

The library also has an air of stability and permanency about it. The librarian quoted earlier concludes that the library has been here for a long time, and that it will always exist. They also highlight the fact that the library is a tranquil environment where people feel safe and secure, and that it acts as a kind of figurative “cement,” uniting different people within the community. In this same vein, the librarian goes on to explain that the library works actively to bring different groups, individuals, and organizations together, and concludes by confirming that it is, indeed, a social infrastructure: “It really is! The problem is that not everyone views it that way.”

After conducting a day's research in the library, ILIT's researcher records the following reflection regarding how librarians perform the daily task of maintaining the library's function as a social infrastructure:

It's about care. About being kind and friendly. About greeting everyone who comes into the library and helping them out, if possible. For example, by adjusting the reservations list so a borrower can borrow a specific book, or allowing a fourth loan renewal, even though the limit is actually three. It's about letting a library user take photocopies home with them even though they can't pay for them. It's a matter of yielding place to a sense of humanity, rather than letting bureaucratization govern the whole organization.

Proposed solutions

One important conclusion drawn from the ILIT project is that public libraries already function as social infrastructures in urban communities. People come to libraries to get help, to take part in social and cultural events, to borrow a book or read a newspaper, or simply for the chance to sit down and relax for a while. The social role played by the library in connection with these activities requires sustained effort to maintain. Sufficient resources

in the form of funds, time, and opportunities for continuing professional development for its staff are required to produce it. The challenges we described in the *Issues & challenges* section of this policy brief help identify important focus areas for strengthening the library's role as a social infrastructure and for effectively facilitating librarians' work to promote increased social sustainability. These focus areas are as follows:

- Provide the time and resources needed to foster connection-building at libraries, including an adequate budget. Connection-building serves as the foundation for the library's role as a social infrastructure, and every kind of connection built contributes to producing it: connections among library staff, between staff and visitors, and between staff and external stakeholders and organizations.
- Librarians and other library staff must be present, available, and visible in the library, since the library's role as a social infrastructure requires continuous effort to sustain. Such effort involves maintaining and adapting libraries to meet the needs and wishes of the local community; work that library staff undertake in cooperation with library users.
- A library's budget must include sufficient funds to allow librarians to fulfill the diversified role that modern society requires them to play. Among its many other facets, this role involves providing library users with civic information, guidance, and cultural experiences, and promoting reading. Also, library staff must be given room and opportunity to conduct a professional discourse that will enable them collectively to set boundaries and to prioritize among their many duties.
- Invest in organizational reporting and evaluation systems that use visitors' and librarians' reflections and experiences as their basis rather than figures. Display confidence in librarians' professionalism.

THE ILIT RESEARCH PROJECT

Social infrastruktur som gör skillnad: Folkbibliotekens transformativa kapacitet i ett åtstramat stadsliv is the name given to the ILIT project in Sweden.

Infrastructuring Libraries in Transformation (ILIT) is the project's name in English.

Infrastructuring the Social: Public Libraries and Their Transformative Capacity in Austerity Urbanism

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