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CHAPTER 5

DEVELOPMENT AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION 2019

QUALITY EDUCATION • DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH • REDUCED INEQUALITIES • CLIMATE ACTION • PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

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Chapter 5
Inequalities: libraries and knowledge sharing

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This essay explores the role of libraries in knowledge sharing, focusing especially on their digital expression and ways through which they can contribute to poverty reduction. It begins by setting the context in terms of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the distinction between "open/public" and "closed/private" knowledge. The next section explores important issues around the meanings and use of "information" and "knowledge," the needs that poor and marginalised people have for knowledge, and the importance of gaining more evidence about how libraries, both virtual and real, can be used to influence poverty reduction. The penultimate part of the essay then examines the diverse ways through which libraries can be used to reduce inequalities, and includes two contrasting case studies, the Indian Public Library Movement and Portuguese micro-libraries. The essay concludes with recommendations on how the obstacles facing more extensive use of libraries for reducing inequality can be overcome.

Context: open and public, or closed and private?

Knowledge is powerful. It has therefore tended to be used by the rich and powerful throughout history to maintain their status and perpetuate inequalities in their favour. However, there have also always been those who have tried to share knowledge more widely, often on the moral grounds that knowledge is indeed empowering, and can transform social and political structures. This is as true today, when formal knowledge is increasingly being mediated through digital technologies, as it has been in the distant past, when knowledge was largely shared through books. SDG 10, which focuses on reducing inequalities, provides an important lever through which such agendas can be promoted in the decade ahead.

SDG 10: the troublesome goal

Recent efforts to reduce poverty have generally focused mainly on economic growth, rather than reducing inequalities. Agenda 2030 and the SDGs (UN, 2015) thus largely continue the focus on economic growth that lay at the heart of the United Nations' previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2000. However, the SDGs are many more in number, and seek to combine the largely economic growth interests of the MDGs with concerns about environmental change and sustainability. They also include an important tension, represented by the apparently out-of-place SDG 10: to reduce inequality within and among countries. These focuses on increasing growth and reducing inequality compete with each other, because economic growth has almost always been associated historically with increasing inequality, unless very considerable attention is paid specifically to sharing the benefits of that growth widely throughout society (Oxfam, 2019). The processes giving rise to these inequalities have been dramatically increased by the design and spread of ever more rapidly evolving digital technologies (Unwin, 2018). Yet, the 10 targets of SDG 10 make no direct mention of ways through which knowledge can be used to reduce inequality, nor of the use of digital technologies to do so.

To understand this tension between growth and inequality, it is essential to address the distinction between relative and absolute poverty (Unwin, 2007). In essence those advocating an absolute measure of poverty, as embedded within the MDGs and most of the SDGs, do so based on the positive notion of individuality and competition, whereas those advocating

a relative standard do so in the normative belief that people are also communal and should organise economic activities co-operatively (O'Boyle, 1999). The overwhelming dominance of notions of "individual" rather than "communal" human rights (Unwin, 2014) in the UN system and beyond, and the power of major global corporations in contemporary international governance, have fuelled this emphasis on maximising growth rather than minimising inequality. Absolute poverty can indeed be reduced by economic growth alone, but relative poverty cannot. The SDGs and the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) have failed to sufficiently recognise this tension, and have thus also failed to provide mechanisms through which damaging inequalities can be reduced.

Private and public knowledge

The holding of knowledge by individuals or communities is central to the power relations associated with this balance of emphasis between absolute and relative poverty. Historically, in societies with literate traditions, the written word has been an important means for recording and sharing information and ideas by those who could read and had access to texts. Fixed libraries therefore played a crucial role as repositories of knowledge. Societies with oral traditions in contrast transmitted knowledge through the more accessible spoken word of sagas, poetry and storytelling. Both traditions nevertheless had significant structures of power: libraries helped maintain power in literate traditions; initiation rights and hereditary structures served oral traditions. Both sought to balance secrecy and openness, but in different ways. There does, though, seem to be a useful distinction that can be made here between literacy and individualism on the one hand, and oral and communal traditions on the other. The means of sharing within both types of society differ, and more research needs to be undertaken on the extent to which these are each related to inequality.

The development of access to information and knowledge in literate societies is reasonably well documented. Early books had to be copied laboriously by hand, and were thus expensive. Since knowledge is power, they were usually kept in the "private" libraries of elites. New forms of printing in Europe began to democratise knowledge sharing from the 15th century onward, but the idea of "public" libraries only really began to take shape in Europe in the 19th century (Harris, 1999), as a result of both moral and economic pressures to improve the lives of the poor. It is salient to note, though, that other much earlier traditions had also sought to share knowledge within literate societies. In Cairo in the early 11th century, for example, الله الحاكم بأمر (al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, also known as Abu Ali Mansur), the sixth Fatimid caliph, founded the دار العلم (Dar al-Alem, House of Knowledge), which was specifically designed to enable the public to acquire knowledge.

Information, knowledge and inequality

There are strong arguments that the creation of public libraries, rather than just private ones, can play a role in enabling everyone to access information, and process it to shape their own knowledges. However, for this to happen people have to be literate and able to access the content therein; such arguments also tend to privilege literate traditions over oral ones. The advent of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has also provided a valuable opportunity to extend the notions of communal public knowledge sharing, especially through the use of free and open source software and open educational resources, and by creating virtual, or digital, libraries (IFLA & UNESCO, 2011). Such distinctions between public and private closely parallel the difference between communal and individual approaches to poverty reduction (Table 1). In practice, these concepts, shown as binary opposites in Table 1, usually blur into each other and are at either end of spectra, but they are shown here in this way because they reflect fundamentally different conceptualisations of poverty, the role of libraries, content, digital technologies and development.

UNESCO, in particular, has for a long time played a strong role in advocating that more support should be given to the creation of knowledge societies in which all citizens are able to access and use the information that they require to live fulfilled lives (Mansell & Wehn, 1998; UNESCO, 2005). As Souter (2010, p.11) has summarised, "By

Table 1: Binary oppositions: poverty, libraries and content

Concept of poverty	Solutions for poverty reduction	Libraries	Society Type	Content	Software	Direction
Absolute	Individual (economic growth)	Private	Mainly literate	Proprietary content	Proprietary/ closed	Mainly top-down
Relative	Communal (reducing inequality)	Public	Mainly oral	Open access (especially open educational resources)	Free and open source	Encourages bottom-up

Knowledge Societies, UNESCO means societies in which people have the capabilities not just to acquire information but also to transform it into knowledge and understanding, which empowers them to enhance their livelihoods and contribute to the social and economic development of their societies." Such ideas reinforce the notion that information and knowledge are essential for effective development, and therefore that overcoming information poverty and inequality is an important part of any global development agenda (Haider & Bawden, 2007). However, there are considerable challenges in delivering such a vision, some of the most important of which are explored further below.

Marginal and elite knowledges

Traditionally, librarians have served as the gatekeepers to knowledge by deciding what should be in a library and what should be excluded. This has meant that libraries have generally provided access to elite knowledges. Almost by definition, they have also been the preserve of literate knowledge rather than oral knowledge. Poor and marginalised people and communities nevertheless also have immense knowledge resources. Passing down information through oral traditions, they know, for example, how to eke out an existence in environments where a "well-educated" literate banker, academic or politician would not even be able to survive for a few days.

ICTs have, though, begun to be used to subvert traditional concepts, in two main ways: through the use of audio and video that no longer require traditional literacy skills to access them; and through allowing anyone with access to the internet and an input device to upload multimedia content. Some librarians and institutions have long been actively engaged in democratising knowledge. The BBC Sound Archive in the U.K., for example, founded in 1936, contains hundreds of thousands of audio recordings dating back to the 19th century. More recently, Ryerson University in Canada has developed initiatives to incorporate indigenous knowledges into its practices (Sloan, 2018), and Horrigan (2015) has also highlighted the ways in which libraries in the U.S. are changing in response to people's desire to use them to provide new services As the examples in the next section also emphasise, many initiatives are focusing especially on the ways through which new kinds of libraries can serve marginalised communities.

It must never be forgotten that marginalised people with few resources still have very powerful knowledge. It is just a different kind of knowledge from the knowledge that the rich deem to be important. This essay suggests that both types of knowledge should be regarded as equally "valuable" in any type of development discourse.

Inequalities: seeing and hearing the poor and marginalised

In contrast to the MDGs, SDG 10 provides a much clearer framework in which to consider inequality, and in recent years there has been some evidence that UN agencies and some governments are recognising the need to balance economic growth with attention to inequality, if only because of the realisation that growing inequalities themselves hamper growth (Cingano, 2014; UNESCO, 2018). There is thus a healthy and growing understanding that poverty and inequality should not just be seen in economic terms. The ways that different human characteristics and dimensions of life intersect and reinforce poverty have drawn renewed interest, highlighting how certain groups of people tend to be consistently marginalised. The processes associated with economic growth, particularly as a result of the emergence of new digital technologies, work to keep them in poverty. These people include persons with disabilities, out-of-school youth (children at risk of living and working on the streets), girls and women (especially in traditional patriarchal societies), ethnic minorities, and refugees.

It is very important that the voices of these marginalised individuals and communities are heard, not only within the countries where they live, but also globally in the formulation of policies and initiatives such as the SDG process itself. Their stories need to be in the libraries of officials, and policymakers, who in turn need to start

developing strategies with rather than for the most marginalised.

Needs, access, experience and use

The presence of a library, either real or virtual, does not necessarily mean that it will benefit the marginalised and reduce inequalities. At the very simplest level, if people do not know how to access a library, they cannot benefit from its content; if they cannot read the text, they are unable to learn from it; if there is nothing relevant to their needs, they will not be empowered. Far too often, library initiatives and online learning solutions have been developed for poor people in the hope that the content therein will change lives for the better, but because these efforts have not understood the key principles of need, access, experience and use, they have failed to provide the intended outcomes. This has led to a resurgence of interest in the meanings of literacy, and recognition that it must now go far beyond just the ability to read text on a page so as to include digital literacy, or the skills required to access content online and make sense of it (Wagner, 2011, 2017). If people cannot access digital technologies and then find the content or information that might be useful to them, they are likewise never going to benefit from the potential that has been created.

Libraries as places

Digital technologies have transformed understandings of place and space. Traditionally, public libraries were physical places where people went to read, study, gain information, or borrow books. They were places where communities could be formed, and reading or learning groups fostered. Increasingly, as digital technologies have become more popular and local councils cut back on expenditures, many such libraries are in crisis. In the U.K., for example, it was reported in 2016 that nearly 350 libraries had closed in the past six years with a loss of 8,000 jobs (The Guardian, 2016; but see also Horrigan, 2015). While the rapid expansion of virtual and digital libraries since their origin in the mid-1990s has had many benefits, such as not occupying much physical space (there remains a necessity for servers to host the content), being available all the time, facilitating searching, enabling the preservation of texts and images, and providing multimedia resources, many questions still remain about how these should be funded, the balance between open and proprietary content, the extent to which they enable community interaction, and ultimately whether they increase or reduce inequalities. While some libraries are being transformed into digital hubs, it is often the already privileged who benefit most from these, rather than the poorest and most marginalised.

The need for evidence and data

The challenges of evidence in the previous section highlight the important need for more data and evidence upon which to reach decisions about the relative impact of different kinds of library solutions for reducing inequality. As Garrido and Fellows (2017) note, it is remarkable that the SDGs do not actually mention access to information as a specific

The Indian Public Library Movement (IPLM)

Access to relevant and useful information has long been a challenge for poor people and marginalised communities in India. Traditionally, access to information was skewed in favour of the elites, and public libraries have therefore played an important role in democratising such access. Library provision is, though, variable spatially, with 80-90 percent of public libraries being situated in only six states, mainly in the south; many of these also have limited access for users and often only provide a reference and traditional lending service. The IPLM has therefore been formed to revitalise India's public libraries and bring them back into the mainstream as inclusive knowledge and information centres. Experiences from other multimedia service centres elsewhere in the world indicate that they have the potential to provide many different services, and ongoing IPLM programmes provide health awareness sessions, educational content and career guidance both online and for the locations in which they are situated. Particular attention is also paid to providing relevant training for librarians so that they have the skills necessary to support users in benefiting from their resources and information. However, costs involved are high, and much of their early work was funded by external agencies, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

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factor in reducing inequality. There therefore needs to be much more exploration and research on the ways through which such access, especially through both physical and virtual libraries, can enable the most marginalised and vulnerable people and communities to benefit. Much more data is also required on the use of "libraries" and digital repositories by marginalised people, and the extent to which such usage may reduce inequalities, so that better knowledge-based development policies can be shaped.

Libraries addressing inequalities

The boundaries between the virtual and the real, and indeed between humans and machines more generally, are becoming increasingly blurred. Yet these concepts retain value and are particularly useful in helping to understand how libraries can address inequalities.

The virtual...

The explosion of information and learning resources online over the last decade has been remarkable, and many people now literally have the world's knowledge at their fingertips through the internet. However, just under half (48.8 percent) of the world's population is still not using the internet (ITU, 2018). Digital technologies primarily continue to serve the needs and interests of richer rather than poorer people. Hence, to reduce inequalities, it is essential to increase access, to enable people to be able to use such information resources, and for content to be relevant to their needs. All three of these require very considerable effort, and a change in the mindsets of those advocating the use of ICTs to deliver the SDGs away from an emphasis on economic growth and toward the reduction of inequalities.

Mobile technologies provide a very important means of communication and knowledge sharing, and there are now more mobile subscriptions than there are people on the planet. However, such usage is spatially very variable, with African countries and other least developed states still having much lower rates. While such technologies can be used to increase relevant knowledge sharing among the most marginalised, much more needs to be done to support and implement policies and initiatives that will focus on this.

... and the real

Multi-purpose telecentres have been widely criticised, and may well be but a transitional feature of the move away from communal to individual models of human activity. However, they have shown considerable resilience (as in this illustration of a telecentre in Bario, an isolated community in Sarawak), and still provide a valuable means through which more marginalised people can indeed access and use digital technologies and resources. When these are truly multi-purpose and multimedia, they can indeed serve as places where people in isolated areas are able to access health, educational, cultural and economic knowledge, and share their own experiences online should they wish. They nevertheless need to be appropriately planned and resourced, and measures must be put in place to mitigate the numerous negative aspects of digital use, especially for children (UNICEF, 2017).

Libraries, though, are much more than just places where information and knowledge are transacted. They also serve important social, cultural and indeed political roles. In an increasingly individualised digital world, dominated by economic exchange, they remain places where the soul of a society can be found and shaped.

Addressing the obstacles

If we ignore the poor in our midst, we have lost our humanity and our souls. For those who think it

is wrong that 26 people, mainly men (n=25) from the U.S. (n=15), at least 10 of whom have made their fortunes from the technology sector, should own the same as the 3.8 billion poorest people in the world (Oxfam, 2019), the obstacles preventing progress toward SDG 10 must be identified and overcome. Three initial steps are essential:

- Recognising that reducing inequalities is about the will to do so, and not the money. If the UN system as a whole as well as the leaders of specific governments are to begin to reduce inequalities in their states, then they need to focus on this objective above the recent emphasis that has been placed on economic growth. Failure to do so is not only morally wrong, but it will have very significant impact on the global economic system, social cohesion and political stability.
- Achieving affordable universal access to high-quality digital connectivity. In a world that is increasingly dominated by information sharing through digital technologies, it is essential for these to be affordable, reliable and of sufficient speed everywhere, so that poor and marginalised people and communities can potentially benefit from the knowledge acquisition that they enable.
- Serving the interests of the poor and marginalised. Access alone, though, is insufficient. The information and communication opportunities enabled by technology must be relevant to the needs of the most marginalised, who in turn must be able to use them for their own empowerment. It is here that librarians and libraries, virtual and real, continue to have such a crucial role in shaping societies for the better.

Micro-libraries: an example from Portugal

In contrast to the problems faced by large traditional libraries, the micro-library movement reflects a more bottom-up and communal approach to knowledge sharing. In many instances, as in Portugal and the U.K., this has been supported by telecommunication company foundations, offering old telephone boxes for use as micro-libraries, thus once again reinforcing the connection between ICTs and knowledge sharing, albeit in a very different idiom. In Portugal, for example, the PT Foundation (2018) "reuses the old telephone boxes and establishes partnerships with local councils and others, for the adaptation, placement and promotion of micro libraries that aim to strengthen community ties, promote citizenship, encourage reading and promote the love for books in a totally unexpected space." Since the late-2000s, such initiatives have blossomed globally, with the Little Free Library movement claiming to have reached some 75,000 registered libraries in 85 countries by 2018, and other initiatives such as The Book Stop Project in the Philippines creating networks of mobile spaces for pop-up library networks in urban areas (Rhodes, 2018).

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