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# **Public library and information services and democratic development : an outline for a comparative research programme between Sweden and Indonesia.**

*A public library is an organization established, supported and funded by the community, either through local, regional or national government or through some other form of community organization. It provides access to knowledge, information and works of the imagination through a range of resources and services and is equally available to all members of the community regardless of race, nationality, age, gender, religion, language, disability, economic and employment status and educational attainment. – IFLA / UNESCO*

## **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to present the conceptual background of a collaborative research programme that is currently under development as a joint venture between the Swedish School of Library and Information Science (SSLIS) in Borås, Sweden and the Department of Library Science at Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The programme, entitled *Public Library and Information Services and Democratic Development* (PLISADD), is comparative and contains outlines for several studies on the role of public libraries in local democratic processes in Sweden and Indonesia. Although the programme is comparative, this particular paper will emphasise the prerequisites for Indonesian institutional conditions regarding librarianship and library education.

The two departments sharing responsibility for the programme are in themselves as different as can be, thus creating specific points of departures for collaboration. SSLIS is one of the largest LIS institutions in Europe with approximately 1500 students and a full post-graduate programme. SSLIS has a long tradition of international collaboration on both an undergraduate level and in different research settings. Countries that have been partners are, among others, Vietnam and Moldova. The department of Library Science at UGM was established in 1992. Due to lack of funding, no research has, so far, been carried out, although most of the staff are required to engage in research as part of their duties. International

collaboration such as the PLISADD programme is a way to help inaugurate research and thus increase the quality of the department's activities.

### **Programme background**

Public libraries and public information services are important features in the institutional structure of democratic societies around the world. Democracy is dependent on citizens that are well educated and well informed. The democratic society has a responsibility to provide equal opportunities for its citizens to take part in its decision-making processes on local, regional and national levels. It has also a responsibility to provide education and culture on equal terms for all, regardless of ethnicity, religious faith, gender or economic ability.

Today the traditional democracies built on the national state, as, for example in western Europe, are challenged by the emergence of a new form of social construction, by many referred to as the "information society" (Webster 1995). Information and knowledge are seen as keys to social participation and political influence, in many ways comparable to the use of money in industrial society and estate in rural society. As information and information flows are not tied up by geographical boundaries, the notion of the nation state is less emphasised than in previous social forms. Instead there is a more direct connection between global communication and the daily life of people in local communities. This development places high demands on citizens to be information literate and it requires of society that public information is distributed to all of its members equally.

There is a widespread trust in that information and communication technologies (ICT) will bring different parts of the world closer together in a way that has not been possible before. An interesting feature in this development is that the potential of ICT lies beyond the reach of governmental control. This means that, for example, movements of different political, moral and religious standpoints are enabled to work globally with less risk of interruption by public officials or censorship. Herein lies a potential for subversiveness and a redistribution of power that shapes in ways we have yet to formulate. We have seen several examples of the inherent power of ICT during the last decade e.g. in the Balkan war, during the political turbulences in Sri Lanka and East Timor, where resistance movements spread information over the Internet, and most recently in the war following the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, where

military intelligence found new ways to organize and disseminate huge amounts of information of the utmost delicacy.

ICTs provide not only opportunities for new relations and contacts between people and groupings around the world, they also constitute threats to the institutionalised order that has been developed in liberal democracies around the world during the last two hundred years. It is therefore time now to re-establish, and act upon, the new prerequisites that are under rapid development so that democratic ideals are not undermined to such extent that they pose an actual threat to basic human rights and the active political participation of citizens in social development in countries all over the world. In many countries, for example, within the European Union this is being made at present (Thorhauge et al. 1997), but in many other areas work has still to be commenced. Herein lies a large opportunity for many countries to combine a political development towards more democratic systems through using the possibilities of ICT in creating locally viable and participatory environments. In this, the establishment of stable and widespread public library structures are of central concern.

### **Democracy, literacy and libraries in Indonesia**

In new, emerging democracies, the establishment of relevant public institutional structures that can support the democratic system is crucial (Held 1996). In the face of the increased significance of information and literacy, one of the features that must be institutionalised is public (and free) library and information service. There are however, in many countries, obstacles to this though our knowledge of them is in many respects scanty. Very few studies has focused on the barriers which need to be overcome in the establishment of library systems and public information infrastructures. (Yilmaz 1999).

In Indonesia, the fourth biggest country in the world, about 15% (almost 21 million people) of the population is regarded as illiterate by UNESCO (1999). There are a vast number of ethnic groups and some 300 languages are spoken on a daily basis beside the official Bahasa Indonesian. Not only do these conditions lead to consequences for the general democratic development in Indonesia, they also stress many of the issues that make public library and information services a potentially viable part of this development. Unlike Sweden, with its small homogenous population and high literacy rates, where democratic processes are to a high degree decentralised to regional and local levels, Indonesian governmental policies have

been characterised by a strong centralisation aiming at simply keeping this huge and diverse country together. It is only recently that political decision making, e.g. such that concerns public libraries has been decentralised to regional levels in an attempt to create a more sustainable and stable democratic participation of citizens in their immediate local environments (*Indonesia*, 2000). One of the main efforts of the Indonesian government has been to implement a more accessible general educational system based on a nine year compulsory school program for all children. This is seen as the main key to decrease and, in the long run, erase illiteracy. In the official descriptions of this process, however, school libraries and other forms of public libraries are practically invisible (*Indonesia*, 2000, 166f).

Although Wilfred Plumbe (1987) has described Indonesia as the “land of libraries”, very little is known about the conditions for librarianship and public library and information services in Indonesia, at least from a scientific point of view. The development of these institutions and services have, surprisingly enough, taken place a little apart from the general discussion of library and information development in developing countries, even when this has focussed on South East Asia. Extremely few studies even touch upon the conditions in Indonesia (Retno Prabandari 1993, Anuar 1985).

Today Indonesia has some 8600 publicly funded libraries. Public libraries are organised under 304 regional library systems, there are 25 “national libraries” on provincial levels and one National Library of Indonesia, located in Jakarta. Furthermore there are about 930 publicly funded special libraries. There are 13 departments that offer programmes in Library and Information Science at university level. However, all the way up to 1998, many librarians were not educated as such. Instead the Indonesian library sector allowed civil servants that had been working in libraries funded by the government for at least two years to be credited as librarians, *pustakawan*. As stated in a decree from the Minister of Civil Servant Empowerment in 1988, the only prerequisite was that they had a formal education to at least senior high school level (*Kepmenpan...* 1988). In 1998 this was changed as new governmental decrees emphasised the professionalism of librarianship (*Keputusan...* 1998). To become a *pustakawan* today, one has to hold a diploma (2 years) in Library and Information Science. This has meant that a distinction has been made between those who have a diploma (*pustakawan*), and those who work in libraries but have no such qualification. The latter group is today called *asisten pustakawan*, or library assistant. Research activity within LIS at

Indonesian universities is scarce. In 1998 there were 52 publications in Southeast Asian journals on librarianship and LIS by Indonesian researchers, all of them written in the official Bahasa Indonesian language (Jaffe Yee Yeow-fei 1999).

### **Research in Library and Information Science**

The relation between librarianship and political development is well known and research has been carried out in settings in many, mostly developed and industrial, countries (Roberts 1992). However, studies on the prerequisites and possibilities for public library and information services in more unstable political conditions such as those in young, developing democracies are less known to us. Because of this researchers have often failed to explain and be a part of the development of library and information services and librarianship in developing countries, not least when it comes to issues of equality and multiculturalism (Byrne 1999).

In LIS a number of areas have been highlighted as specifically important in the analyses and development of librarianship in developing countries (Ruhig du Mont, Butlar & Caynon 1994):

- Library use studies
- Barriers to service
- Special services for culturally diverse users
- Information literacy and gender equality
- Ethnic / minority group research

The PLISADD research programme directs its interest to these issues. In establishing research and educational collaboration between LIS institutions in Sweden and Indonesia, issues of public library and information services may be focussed in analyses relating to the general development of information and cultural infrastructures supporting democracy in one of the largest countries of the world.

## **Research objective and general themes of PLISADD**

The prime objective of PLISADD is to analyse the relation between public library and information resources and services and democratic development in two distinctly different political contexts, Indonesia and Sweden. Special emphasis is put on issues regarding gender and ethnic equality in access to these resources and services. In this manner it is of importance to stress that both countries are regarded as equally interesting. The comparative analyses are directed in both ways, thus creating a point where experiences and practices in both countries are viewed in the light of each other. Scientifically, the programme spans over several problem areas and methodological approaches currently in use within Library and Information Studies. The overall methodological strategy of the programme is a model for naturalistic case study inquiry with emphasis on qualitative analyses in local and regional settings (Mellon 1990).

The programme will be implemented through empirical studies concentrated around the following three themes:

*1. Institutional prerequisites of public library and information services on local, regional, national and global levels.*

The main issue in this theme is to survey and analyse the publicly funded infrastructure of library and information services in Indonesia and in Sweden. Comparisons will be made in order to assess the potential of these services and resources as aids to schools and other institutions that increase information literacy among the population in a way that is beneficial to the specific prerequisites of Indonesian and Swedish democratic development. The main methodologies will be:

- a) document analyses of gathered statistics and policy statements on different political levels and professional statements within the library and information sector, both on national and international levels.
- b) interviews with agents in relation to the theme, for example, local and national politicians responsible for Library and information issues, librarians in

different kinds of publicly funded libraries and owners of Internet Cafés, among others.

## *2. Availability of public library and information services and resources to marginalised groups in society.*

Democratic development demands equal rights to societal information. This is a general prerequisite for a broad popular engagement in society's decision making processes. Equal access to information through public library and information services is, however, not obvious in most societies. Sweden and Indonesia represent two different democratic settings in which marginalised groups must be treated in different ways. The aim of this part of the programme is to identify such marginalised groups and analyse the relation between their position in society and the availability of public library and information resources. Beside the various groups that will be identified in the course of the programme, special focus will be put on gender analyses of the availability of and access to public library and information resources. Methods used will, primarily, be interviews with relevant professionals such as librarians, and focus group interviews with representatives for different groups in society. Based on the knowledge gained under theme one a case study setting will be constructed focussing on one chosen city or region in Indonesia and in Sweden.

## *3. Barriers towards equal access to public library and information services and resources.*

This theme will develop the previous two by analysing specific barriers towards equal access to public library and information services in a case study setting in one chosen city or region in Indonesia and in Sweden. Comparisons of how professionals within public library and information services deal with questions of inequality will be made. Methodologically a case study model will be used in order to identify local public library and information resource and service infrastructures and place them in relation to experiences of library and information professionals and representatives for different groups in society. An intervention will be made in a chosen area in Indonesia that elevates the professional practices in relation to women and information access through public libraries. The design of the intervention will depend on the local environment.

## **Scientific and practical value of the programme**

The value of a programme like this can always be discussed. On the one hand one might argue that single studies cannot change the world – a reasonable enough standpoint. On the other hand programmes focussing on essential institutional structures that are active in societal developments on different levels can help inaugurate social and political activities that otherwise might have been forgotten or delayed. The relation between public library and information resources and services and the development of a viable democracy is important to emphasise. Through the comparative imperative of PLISADD we can be able to formulate knowledge from the experiences of the two very different political and demographic contexts of Sweden and Indonesia. This knowledge can be utilised in both Sweden and Indonesia when developing librarianship and adjusting professional practice to 1) the requirements of equal access to information and culture on a local community level, and 2) the participation on an international level within the emergence of a global information society.

Methodologically, the case study setting will be implemented and discussed as a way of developing and refining tools within LIS research and librarianship. This is particularly of value regarding the comparative stance of the programme, where differences due to environmental and contextual factors must be approached adequately. It is our hope and aim that the emphasis on a gender perspective in all issues of the programme will provide knowledge that can be utilised in practical librarianship in Sweden as well as in Indonesia. The planned intervention in Indonesia on gender equality and information access through public libraries will also provide professional tools for professional library practice of value, not just to Indonesia, but young democracies all over the world. The emphasis of the relation between public library and information services and democratic development from an information literacy point of view will allow the programme to develop tools and recommendations for the library profession on how to work with these issues pointing at the potential of the libraries as complementary institutions to schools in the work of increasing literacy in local community settings. Given the potential role of school libraries as active parts in the development of a new educational system in Indonesia, the PLISADD programme might contribute to discussions on issues regarding children's reading and the implementation of information and communication technologies in environments that house coming generations. Be so – in all, a good value.

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